I Can't Be a Magical Girl!! You, a Magical Girl, Say

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Collections: BNHA Child Abuse and Bullying Fics

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by RMXStudio

Summary

Magic.

It's like entropy—inaccessible energy in a system. To have magic is to break the rules of your universe, and to become a magical girl is to take that power and use it for good.

April 10th, Izuku broke the rules of his universe, and now, with the world facing a growing, seemingly indomitable threat, he and his Handyman get ready for the ride of a lifetime.

This story thus details Midoriya Izuku's life as a magical girl in the world of heroes.
This is a "Crack Treated Seriously" story, in which a completely implausible and ridiculous scenario is treated almost as seriously as any other fictional work, save for some cases of humor.

Estimated Update Date: *shrug* Concept art and references are currently on my blog.

Please don’t send constructive criticism unless asked, I finish chapters at 2 am.

Notes

Be prepared, I guess.

See the end of the work for more notes.
“If you really want a quirk so bad, then why don’t you dive off the fucking roof and look for one in your next life!”

That hadn’t been funny, Izuku thought a few minutes before. Had it been anyone else...had he not been who he was as a person, Kacchan could’ve been an instigator for someone’s suicide. That surely would’ve ruined his chances at being a hero. So he’d pushed aside the cruel and heartless jab at his uselessness and pressed on like he always did.

It wasn’t like he would have to face Kacchan’s treatment for too much longer. He just had one more year together with him in middle school. Then Kacchan would go to U.A. and he’d go...somewhere. Izuku liked to think of himself as a realistic person to some extent. As much as he would love to go to U.A. as a hero, he had already realized that probably wouldn’t be something he’d be capable of.

Kacchan, on the other hand, would be in his preferred school in no time. All he had to do was pass the tests. Maybe once he was there, he would mellow out a bit, realize how insignificant his rivalry with him was. That even if Kacchan hadn’t decided that his single, most important opponent in life was a quirkless, freckled loser who muttered too much for his own good and stalked after heroes like he’d die without them, he already had a magnificent quirk.

Still, with the way things were going now, Izuku would’ve wondered if Katsuki had some sort of precognitive addition to his quirk.

He would’ve wondered, except he was too busy trying to breathe.

Green sludge forced its way down his throat, blocking his airways as it settled in his lungs and stomach like liquid cement. No matter how much he clawed and bit at the man trying to force his way into his body, to force out the one trying to wear him like a convenient meat suit, he wasn’t strong enough to fend them off. Instead, his efforts seemed to just tire him out faster, the corners of his eyesight already tinged black at the edges.

He was hit with the realization that he was swiftly being ushered into the afterlife, but by that time, he was already starting to lose feeling in his limbs. He couldn’t quite hear what the sludge villain was saying to him as he forced him to drown, but it didn’t matter when he was losing the ability to kick his legs. The tips of his fingers tingled with the loss of sensation and it quickly extended to his whole arm.

It felt like his lungs were squeezing him from the inside, refusing to let any more air in, killing him.

A villain had him in its grasp, constricting him like a boa with his quirk--such a powerful and ridiculous quirk-- and he had nothing to face off against it, he was so weak and he could not breathe and oh God, he was dying, he didn’t want to die, he'd ignored Kacchan before, so why was it happening to him now, there was no hero, no one was coming to save him and he was dying and he wanted to live dammit, he wanted to live--

...Hm. It looks like he wants to keep living, so it only makes sense that someone gives him the chance.

Izuku’s vision had almost completely blacked out when he saw something flash inside of the villain’s body. For a moment, a thought flashed through his mind that it was the pearly gates opening right on up for him, but it looked too small, like a little circle that glowed a magnificent yellow, a beacon in
the sea of green. It was a sight he couldn’t forget even after his eyes closed.

Despite the cold suffocation that had settled into his stilling body, he reached into the muck, trying to vaguely touch where he had seen the glow just moments before. His arm was weak with the slowing of his blood, but still, he pressed on, trying to exceed the limits of his own body to reach the only hope he had a chance for.

By pure force of will, his chilled fingers managed to stiltedly curl around the glow, and, from his touch, it accepted his strength as his will and testament.

The sludge villain frowned in confusion at the building feeling in his guts where he was sure his suffocated victim floated. He watched with wide eyes as the glow that was in the boy’s right hand extended beyond it, encasing his entire body in a flow of gold. Before he could completely grasp what was happening, that flow expanded inside of him, pushing all different ways as it splattered his body onto the walls of the tunnel, not dead but also no longer conscious.

The golden light completely encasing the boy finally began to settle into a shroud that covered his whole body, altering his clothing to suit the purpose, before finally setting him down once he coughed out the last of the human’s gunk.

There, the boy lay, and there he was found, when a man with a different kind of golden aura arrived.

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To All Might, Musutafu was a new and interesting place. It wasn’t as though he’d never spent time in Japan in his life, that certainly wasn’t it. As it was, he was mix-blooded—Japanese and American. But despite how small Japan was in comparison to the United States, Japan managed to encompass a lot of different traditions and ideas in its various prefectures and cities. Walking into a different area sometimes felt like walking into a similar yet different place each time he did it. So, he was very eager for his first time through Musutafu.

He became even more eager when he witnessed the retreat of the sludge villain, body filled with stolen dollar bills.

Quite frankly, the villain’s quirk was amazing from what he could see. A body seemingly made completely of a viscous liquid—it certainly made thievery easy in some accounts. Still, doing crime was doing crime, and it had to be stopped if he could help it. He still had another 30 odd minutes in him, so he figured he’d cuff—or bottle, in this case—the villain and take him in.

The villain had been a strangely tough one to pursue, especially after he’d dipped down into the sewers. He’d followed without hesitation, of course, but then the villain distracted him with the sounds and emissions of the underground tunnels, losing him temporarily. That, well, hadn’t been good. It was obvious the villain was good with sewers. Still, he wasn’t good enough to escape his grasp. Though, if he were to be honest, he was even more easily found from the bright light that flashed through the manhole he was in.

Upon his arrival, All Might found the villain splattered across the walls, dollar bills of different kinds floating or plopping to the ground. As gruesome as it looked, he saw one of the villain’s eyes, a cartoonish X mark where his pupils would be. The man wasn’t dead, which was good. What he ended up more concerned about was the other human in the tunnel.

All Might wasn’t quite sure how to categorize the quirk of the girl he was looking upon. Was it a glowing power? He’d seen it flashed, so perhaps it had something to do with light energy? Either way, she’d built up enough energy to escape the villain’s grasp, but perhaps not soon enough. Her
body was still glowing lightly, sparks of golden glitter almost seeming to flow off of her, so he was at least certain she was alive...unless her quirk was on its last legs, as it had happened certain other times he’d prefer to not think about.

The chill of a potential death ran through his body, and he used that motivation to gather the villain into two bottles easily. He then rushed over to the girl, gingerly picking up her body. She was light as a feather, it seemed, wearing a cotton softer than anything he’d felt before. She’d probably made it herself, heading to a cosplay cafe or something. Poor girl. Still, faintly, he could feel her heart beating when he felt along her left wrist, the right one covered with what looked to be an important watch.

Knowing now that she still had a chance, he rushed her to the open air, away from the tunnel, before setting her down spread eagle. As lightly as he could, he did CPR on her to ensure she no longer had any of the villain stuck in her lungs. When she didn’t cough, he bent low, listening from her chest to her lungs. He noticed then that he couldn’t hear any obstruction. Perhaps her quirk blew it out of her system somehow...what a convenient quirk! It just meant she’d gone unconscious from the stress of the situation. Seriously, to defeat a villain like that by herself...

She shouldn’t have had to do that if he’d been on top of his game.

He shook his head then, deciding to not go down that road. After all, there was little better a way to greet a young girl than with a smile! With that in mind, he moved to hurriedly pat her cheek, hoping that would wake her. He paused, though, when he distinctly remembered something being on the ground in the tunnel. He turned quickly to find what it was, and surely enough, his memory hadn’t betrayed him.

There was a burnt, soggy notebook on the ground, very eloquently titled “Hero Analysis for the Future: No. 13”, the number underlined twice. Flipping back to the page it had landed on, he found an elaborate, if a tad misguided, design for a surprisingly masculine hero costume. It had no indication of how any quirk would work with the design, but it did have basic protective additions. It was an endearing design.

Was she looking to be a hero? Well then! He’d greet her with a smile and a signature for her troubles! He flipped through the book quickly, trying to not invade her private journal as much as possible, before he found the first set of blank pages. Digging into an empty pocket, he took out his marker and quickly wrote his autograph. It was the least he could do for her, anyway.

He closed the book setting it down on the ground outside of the tunnel and went back over to her still unconscious body.

Hmm...well, if she was looking to be a hero, with a quirk like hers, he was certain she’d be a rising star. He’d have to look for her when the applications for U.A. started rolling in. Sighing deeply, he put on his best smile before he started patting her cheek as he’d planned to beforehand.

“Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey! He--Oh!”

She eventually blinked awake, groaning low in her throat as his sight cleared. He backed up a little, almost blinking with shock from the look of her eyes--where he’d been expecting some color of iris surrounding a pupil, he was met with a bright yellow four-pointed star instead. Must be another part of her quirk. He waited a moment while the stars settled on his form before raising his hand.

“Good!” he said, earnest relief spilling into his tone.

The shock on her face was priceless, if he were honest, even if he’d somewhat expected it from the title of her notebook. After the initial shock wore off, she backpedaled away from him, screaming,
though the stars in her eyes became brighter, sparkling.

He really didn’t deserve that kind of look from her. Rather than letting that be known, he stood up to his full height, one hand on his hip.

“I’m glad you’re okay!” he announced, giving her as much of a show as he could. “Sorry ‘bout getting you involved with my villain fighting. I don’t usually make mistakes like this, but I was in high spirits on my day off in a new place!” He laughed loudly then, pushing down the sick regret in his stomach.

If anything, the laugh made her glow brighter, her cheeks flushed in what he could only assume from her previous responses to him as undeserved adoration. Knowing this, he had to tell her more.

“But, you were a big help. A huge one, in fact! Thanks!” he reported joyously, holding up the bottled, still unconscious villain, “I have captured him safely before he could do harm to anyone else!”

“Th-the-the number one hero...A-All Might...!” she muttered to herself out loud, trembling as the grin spread on her ruddy, sweaty cheeks. Maybe he’d underestimated how much of a fan she was. Could she be a hero otaku? “H-He’s the real thing! ...H-He looks completely different in person!” Ah, definitely an otaku.

He watched with a glowing smile as she searched for something for him to sign, glad that he had predicted her desires accurately before she woke up. The rabbit ears on the big, round clip in her hair bobbed as she searched blindly for something--anything--for him to autograph, before her eyes set on her notebook. Apparently she instinctively knew which page she hadn’t marked yet, because she turned to it a lot swifter than he’d expected. She muttered out another pleased scream when she saw his signature before clutching the notebook to her side, bowing so quickly over and over again that her body was a bit of a blur.

“AHHHH!! Th-thank you very much!!” she said, finally loud enough for him to know he was meant to hear it this time, her head a blur of green and yellow as she bobbed, “It’ll be an heirloom! A family treasure!!”

Wow, he’d only seen this level of otaku in boys. Sure a few girls had gotten quite a bit close, but...she was probably next level or something. Well, there was a first time for everything. He really didn’t have the heart to feel icky about her method of appreciation, so he stuck his thumb up in approval.

“Okay! Well, I need to take this guy to the police,” he said, turning away from her before looking back, a hand raised, “See you soon at U.A.! With a quirk like yours, I’m sure you’ll do splendidly!” He turned back, tuning out the confused noises behind him as he stretched until he recognized one of them as ‘Wait--already?’ “Pros are constantly fighting enemies and time. You’ll know that soon enough,” he explained quickly.

As it was, he only had enough time to make it to the police if he got there in one jump. So, without too much further adieu, he leapt into the air, hoping he could bend time just enough to make it there, not knowing the confusion he left his fan in.

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Meeting All Might was a complete and utter dream! No, even better than that! He was so much more amazing to see in person! It was just...such a shame that their time together was so short. He’d been eager--no--desperate to ask All Might if he could be a hero. To see if his all-time favorite hero could
tell him those words he’d wanted to hear for so long, to push past the doctor, Kacchan, even his own mother! To see if he could get the motivation from the person it mattered most from!

But...All Might had been confusing. Rather, the man had been confused.

While All Might didn’t know about it, Izuku was more than aware that he didn’t have a quirk. Several doctors visits, his crying mother, and ten years of vicious bullying had made sure he was aware of that.

“...Why on earth would All Might think I’d have a quirk?”

Maybe it was because of some way he looked. His legs did feel a little breezier than usual.

“W-well, now that you mention it...” he muttered, looking down at himself.

He froze immediately.

Instead of looking down at his bland, black uniform, he was staring at the pink of a silky yet cotton dress. Its collar fluttered around his neck in a very short Elizabethan collar, the top rim waved like flower petals instead of a solid line, which reached down to the rest of the dress, the cuff sleeves ending at the elbow rather than the wrist. The chest of the dress was white with three yellow buttons lined down each side of his chest until it met with the white wrap of the puffed, frilly, white waist apron, which only partially covered the pink of the skirt of the dress.

The dress’ skirt was the circle kind, which folded and ruffled easily, the underside of the skirt lined with lace. The breeze he’d felt was from the distinct lack of pants, his thigh-high, frilly-topped socks keeping his legs warmer than the space between the socks and the short leg of his boxers. He wore kneepads over his socks at a darker shade of pink than his dress, and his shoes, rather than the usual red, were two shades of pink, the front of the shoe a lighter pink than the main part. On his hands were fingerless, short, frilly white gloves, and around his whole body was a yellow aura he was very much not used to seeing.

Rather, he wasn’t used to seeing any of what he was seeing. It kind of short-circuited his brain.

“Ah...ehh...eh...ha...aaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!)”

Well, not enough to not scream.

He did several things at once. One, he pressed himself against the closet wall he could find. Two, he reached down, pulling his skirt down and stretching--

HEY kid! I worked hard on that dress, don’t you ruin it yet!

The boy jolted, a fresh bout of confused tears trailing from his eyes, “Eh?! What?! EH?!”

I said stop stretching the dress! Do you know how long it took me to make that? No! You don’t. So don’t immediately go on and start stretching out my hard work, okay? Geez.

Midoriya Izuku cried even harder, looking around to see if he could find who was speaking to him. “Wh-what? I--what?? What is-I’m-I don’t-I just--”

Haha, holy crap kid, calm down a bit. I mean, I can’t blame you for freaking out, but seriously. Take a deep breath.

Izuku followed the strange voice’s advice--well, no, he didn’t. He actually looked to be staring into open space, getting more and more confused about what’s going on, so maybe I
should...ah...right...didn’t press ‘off’...ahem. Right. Okay. You listening?

Izuku nodded tearfully, trying not to hyperventilate.

Alright, I mean, it makes sense that you’d only get more confused. I thought I had my mic turned off, but, eh, occasionally I forget to press the ‘off’ button on that. Anyway. You hear me?

He nodded again, faster this time.

Good, cause you’re going to need to hear me quite a bit from here on out. I mean, if you want to stay alive and all.

“S...stay alive?” he asked, the cool numbness of a lack of understanding and a death experience recalibrating his common sense.

Yeah, stay alive. You know. That thing you’re doing right now. With the breathing a toxic oxidizer and all. Why the Big Guy even has you all doing that is beyond me.

“‘Big Guy’?”

Well, I mean, he’s genderless, but hey, he accepts he/him, she/her, they/them, all the pronouns. But you know, it’s all for the sake of convenience.

“Wh...wait a minute...I just...I’m...what is going on?!?” he screamed, his face flushing a rather magnificent shade of red, “W-why am I wearing this? What’s happening?! Where are you?! Wha--”

Eyy, chill with the questions for a second. I’ll answer all of those, but only in the order I want to, okay? Okay, I said, not waiting for him to reply. First thing’s first. ‘Where am I’. Okay. Check your right wrist, kid.

He had to muster the strength to do it, apparently frightened out of his mind. His eyes were closed when he moved his wrist forward, you know, like a dingus, then he slowly peeked them open.

The first thing he noticed was his reflection on the watch there, iris and pupils turned into a yellow four-pointed star in each eye, a big, faceless, white rabbit head clip in his hair on the left side, baby yellow ears sticking out of it, his hair a brighter green than before with an outline of yellow. His entire visage was actually glowing a bit, which was harder to tell in the daytime sun, but easy enough to see.

Once he finally looked past his own face, he saw the face of the clock on his wrist. The minute hand was pointed in the 12 position, the hour hand pointed in the 4 position. But rather than having any numbers on the face of the clock, there was only a black dot in the middle...which twitched in the same direction as Izuku’s eyes to keep eye contact.

Midoriya Izuku pressed himself harder against the wall, terror seeping out of his voice. “Wh...what?” he mustered.

I blinked at him.

You looked into the abyss, kid. Now I’m looking back into you.
Izuku was hyperventilating against the wall, pressed against it as hard as he could be to ground himself. Nothing made sense at all. He was in a dress? His eyes were doing something weird? He kept hearing this voice? *There was an eye staring at him from a watch he didn’t own?*

He turned his arm around without really thinking, head clouded with questions, an immediate one coming to mind. When he turned his right wrist, he found that no, there wasn’t a clasp on the watch for him to take it off. It was a solid ring of black leather with a watch and eyeball clock face on it. An eyeball that was still trailing him.

He eventually managed to swallow down the knot in his gut, his shivering calming down, “Th...th-that’s where y-you are? In th-the watch?”

I’m everywhere and nowhere. And I’m also here.

“E-everywhere and nowhere?” he asked tearfully, his mind jumping on the next thing it could, “I-Is that a S-Schrodinger reference?”

Hah, yes and no, kiddo. Anyway, next question. ‘What’s happening.’ You want me to rip off the bandaid now or give it to you slow?

Despite the flurry of thoughts in his brain, he managed to calm down enough to consider the options. Uncomfortable in his position against the wall, he shifted and sat down against it, still pressing for grounding comfort, but no longer trying to become one with it. After a second thought, he pressed his legs together, embarrassment coloring him rosy.

“Uhm...ah...r-rip it off.”

You died.

All of his thoughts screeched and swerved to a halt like a multiple collision car accident, words upon letters and participles upon nouns, rolling and smashing uselessly in his brain. The stars in his eyes became smaller and pallid, processing the news slower than he usually would. Eventually, his mouth opened, but even then, no word came out until a few seconds later.

“...Died?”

Yeah. You know the whole sludge villain thing and All Might coming in at just the right time? Well, to tell you the truth, he was a few seconds too late. Your heart had stopped before he’d even left the sewer.

Izuku stared at his watch, shocked into silence.
Remember how I also said you stared into the abyss and now I’m staring at you? Well, you used your last wind to call into the immortal void to have someone come save you. I mean, we of the void occasionally get calls, but yours was pretty loud and urgent. Some folks tend to be ungrateful after we save their lives, so the others ignored you, but me? I saw some potential in--ah.

Izuku wasn’t saying anything, but tears had built up in his reddening, stressed eyes and were spilling over his cheeks, droplets falling onto his skirt, the concrete below, and even on the face of the watch. His breath hitched dangerously.

Ahhh, kid, kid, okay, look. Don’t cry, alright? I mean, you asked me to--

His breath hitched further, eyes scrunching up in a soul-deep sorrow, one that dimmed even the glow of magic around his body. He curled in on himself then, hiding his face in his knees as he fought harder to hold back. But in the end he couldn’t.

He let out a heart-breaking wail, low and long, echoing in the empty, abandoned street like an animal’s mournful howl in the cold Arctic. He sobbed loudly into his skirt, not even trying to scrub the tears away, too wracked with despair to think about it.

He’d died. He was dead.

Despite everything he’d wanted to do, he’d died to a villain at the pathetically young age of 14.

He had wanted to do so much. Wanted to eventually prove to Kacchan that he wasn’t useless, wanted to see the boy become a hero from U.A., wanted to finally stop stressing his mother out with his helplessness, wanted to become a hero himself, wanted to save others! But in the end, he hadn’t been able to save himself. And now he was dead. Useless Deku was useless to the end of his days.

What would his mother do when she found out? What would Kacchan even say? He could imagine the two, but he was unable to decide whether his mother would be sobbing on the ground like he currently was, or if she would be beyond grief, an empty shell of sorrow. Despite everything, he couldn’t imagine Kacchan laughing at his funeral. Maybe he’d be scowling at his casket, ready to blow it up and force him to wake back up. Maybe he’d be empty, too, finally absolved of the bane to his existence but unable to rejoice in his mother’s face.

He could only imagine those two there. He’d really lived a pathetic life, huh? In the end he was--okay, okay, kid. I’m going to need you to shut up with that, right now. You died. That doesn’t mean you’re dead.

Izuku shifted where he’d fallen onto his side, his face still buried in his skirt, arms, and legs. He hadn’t stopped crying, but he had stopped his really depressing thought process, unable to be fully curious but unable to keep thinking about his death either.

If you would let me finish… Ahem. I saw you, kid. I heard you and gave you a chance to prove yourself. Even when your soul was leaving your body, you forced your dead fingers to close around the light I was trying to give you. Do you realize how hardcore that is? So cut it with all this ‘useless’ and ‘pathetic’ crap. Sure, All Might didn’t save you, but you saved yourself.

Izuku sniffled roughly and he absolutely had to have gotten some snot on the dress, but he also shifted enough to stare blearily back at the watch. The eye staring at him pulsed with a golden energy.

You have a lot of potential. I saw that in you, and you met--no, exceeded my expectations. You closing your fingers around the light I showed you is what did it. You reached for your own success
even after death. And that, kid, is well worth my assistance.

The boy looked away, morose and depressed, but he couldn’t help but feel a little lighter from the compliment. That light feeling dropped again though, another thought entering his mind as his tears streamed down his heated cheeks.

“I-I--” he hiccuped, “--I still...d-died, though…”

Died. Not dead. C’mon, didn’t you just interact with your favorite hero of all time a few minutes ago?

“I-It could’ve been a-a-a dream...as--hh--tral projection...I-I dunno…”

Well, it wasn’t. You, in your own body, talked with All Might. This is still the real world. You aren’t in Heaven or anything like that.

Izuku stared at the ground a little longer, sighing as he tried to get his breath together. Eventually, he pushed himself up, sitting with his legs to the side, staring at the watch whilst looking just as miserable as he felt.

Yeah, that’s the spirit kiddo. C’mon, I said, giving him a tissue, wipe your face. You look terrible.

He took it without thinking about where it came from and blew his nose. He glanced around before noticing the trash can near him, top open, and tried to throw the snotty paper away. It missed the first time. He crawled over sadly on his hands and knees till he reached it and tried again. It missed again. This happened three more times (one of which he was right by the trash can, how did he miss that) before he just stood up and threw it away with a small toss. He then plopped back down and crawled back to the dampened spot on the concrete, wet from his tears.

Okay, okay. Got it out of your system?

He shook his head.

Well, you’re not crying so much you can’t see, so I’ll consider it good enough.

He wiped at his face with his forearm, smearing his tears on it, before he sniffled and sighed, “...What d-do you mean...I’m...not dead?”

Right. You’re not dead. Yes, you died, heart stopped and loss of sight while your eyes were still open and everything. But because of this power you have about you, you’re not dead.

He stared blearily at his mildly glowing hand, “...Power…”

Yeah, your magic. That’s what all this is. And boy, do you have a lot of it! Seriously, you’re glowing with the stuff.

He frowned, “T-That’s not normal?”

No-puh. That’s all you, kiddo.

Still in his depressed state of mind, another thought came to him and spilled from between his teeth without thought. “Am I a zombie.”

Eh? What, no. No a zombie. Zombies are the living dead, dead creatures that seek out living flesh in order to obtain the previous feeling of life, always hungry and always searching, a nearly eternal curse lest someone destroy their last connection with the living realm. You, on the other hand,
are simply *undead*. Once dead, but then you hit the undo button. Like, usually, one of the guys or I would have to hit it for you, but I showed you the button and you hit it yourself. See what I mean? Hardcore. Anyway, if you’re concerned, you have more in common with a vampire than a zombie. Unless...are you having any hunger pangs?

After a moment of silence, he nodded—*what*—

“I want...katsudon…”

...Yeesh, kid, don’t scare me like that. I can’t blame you though, depression hunger is real. Let me guess, you wouldn’t be against getting a few bowls of ice cream, either.

Izuku nodded, still shrouded in melancholy.

If you have enough money on you, you can get some. Anyway, what’s happening now is I’ve connected with you and have given you access to your magic. What’s magic? Well, dictionary-wise, it’s the power of apparently influencing the course of events by using mysterious or supernatural forces. Which basically covers it, buuuuuut to put it in better terms, magic is more like entropy made available.

The boy breathed heavily, still calming down, but kept listening, his mind already rebooting and going a mile a minute to absorb the information he was given. He paid no mind to the man and woman, hand in hand, passing by him with a confused look on their faces.

Think of magical energy as entropy. Every system—everyone—has the potential for it, but it’s just, well, unavailable. Except, it’s not thermal energy that’s unavailable, it’s kinda like potential itself. Magic is basically potential solidified. And you have a *lot* of it. Seriously, kid. Like, magic levels tend to be wonky because a person can have a lot of potential and never use it so it dies out, or have very little potential and push it to its limits and those limits are just really, really small, or doubt themselves too much and kill their own potential, but you? You had a lot of potential, *but you just couldn’t use any of it*. The way this world works? It wouldn’t have let you use it, not without intervention. That’s where I come in.

The boy nodded as he flushed even brighter, pulling his legs closer to himself, “I...I see… Uhm...who are you, anyway?”

Geez, you really don’t get it about the whole ‘I answer questions in the order I want to’ thing, do you? Eh, whatever. I have many names and I have none. Some call me Point of View. Others, Narrator. Others, The Voice of the World. You, on the other hand, can call me...hm...how about The Handyman?

Izuku nodded, “I’m...uhm...not sure if I have much of a choice in what I’d call you.”

Darn straight you don’t. Alright, next question. ‘Why are you wearing that.’

The boy paused for a moment before his entire face went a startling shade of red, as if all the blood in his body had rushed to his face. Quickly, he pressed down the front and back of his dress, practically sweating bullets.

“Oh God, oh God, oh God oh God oh God--”

Uh...kid?

One of Izuku’s hands were making their trembling way up to his face even as he muttered a mile a minute. “Wh-WHY?? WHY AM I WEARING THIS??! Oh GOD, I’ve been in this for hours,
haven’t I?, people have been passing by, right?, they have to have been passing by, didn’t I see someone earlier?, oh God they saw me in this, did they take a picture?, what would Kacchan do if he saw me in this?, I’d die all over again--OH GOD, I DIED!!”

Let’s not go down that road again, oka--

He turned to the watch swiftly, eyes spilling all over again. “I’M DEAD AND I’M IN A DRESS!! I don’t even have shorts on under this!! I...I...W-What if someone sees my pants?! Wait... Did All Might see my pants? Did the idol of my life and savior of my childhood and more than half the world see my All Might underwear?”

Again, not dead, and you probably shouldn’t say that out loud, kid.

Izuku grasped his right wrist and bowed his head, even the magic around his face glowing a bright red. His body trembled with such embarrassment that one would almost feel pity for him if it weren’t so cute.

“Please...please get this off of me…”

Why don’t you try taking it off?

“B-because! I f-feel like you’d j-just put it on me again, or...or I’d take off my actual clothes and just be naked out here and I can’t--”

Haha, you barely know me but you know me well enough. Alright, alright, I’ll give you a little relief for now. Just press the button at the top of the watch.

Izuku quickly brought his wrist close to himself and inspected the watch, ignoring the eye that gazed at him from it. Surely enough, there was a small button at the top of the watch that could be pushed or possibly pulled. He pressed it quickly, and in a flash of light, the yellow glow receded from his body, and he found himself back in his regular school gakuran. He sighed heavily with relief.

Next time, don’t do it so out in the open. No one saw you this time, but you won’t want to make that mistake again.

The boy gasped, realizing his mistake before he nodded in affirmation, standing to his feet.

“I-I’m sorry.”

It’s nothing to apologize about. It’s for your safety rather than mine. Anyway, how about we take a quick walk around? I’m pretty sure you need to take a breather after all that’s been thrust upon you.

When the boy’s stomach grumbled in agreement, Izuku couldn’t turn any darker, so he just covered his mouth and walked quickly, his body small and packed together as he ran away.

---

He left the ice cream shop near downtown Musutafu with a double dip ice cream cone since he didn’t have enough for katsudon. He took a lick as he passed down the city streets, finding himself infatuated with the sounds and sights of the city. Advertisement lights gleamed and trailed in the air as some moved and changed colors. People wore their work clothes as they headed to the bars, their homes, or their jobs for some extra late-night work. Just listening to the chatter of the people was more satisfying than he could remember.

As he thought about it, he realized it was probably because, just earlier that day, he could’ve very
The world really did look more beautiful after you nearly died. Well, after you actually died, he supposed.

If he were honest with himself, he wasn't over that particular fact. He had died, no matter how temporary that condition had been. Had it not been for...the Handyman, or whoever the voice was, we would still be just as dead. Even worse, his body would've been discovered by his all-time hero rather than saved by him.

He had to think seriously. What was even going on? Even with the explanation, some things still didn't make sense to him. Magic? Not quirks? So this wasn't a quirk. What was the difference? And the voice had conveniently ignored his question about the...dress. He felt himself flush just thinking about it.

The further he walked, the more the bright lights became fewer and further in between as he passed the barrier from nearly downtown to the more suburban area. The darker the streets the became with the setting sun and lack of fluorescent lights, the darker his thoughts did, too.

After all, The Handyman hand never formally said why they saved him. Sure, the voice saw some potential in him, but for what? They explained magic in a very vague sense, too. And if it really was his power, why hadn't he been able to use it before? Why didn't he have a quirk either?

He didn't realize he was mumbling until his lips rubbed the top ice cream off of the cone and onto the ground. He'd gasped in shock, saddened by the turn of events.

He never seemed to pay attention enough. That's what got him killed.

Right. He hadn't simply died. He'd been killed. Suffocated even.

The chill of the ice cream, despite its taste, no longer comforted him. Still, it would've been wasteful to have bought it only to not eat it, so…

He gulped and, trying not to think of the chill of death, scarfed down the rest of his cone as quickly as he could. Of course, that just left him with a really wicked brain freeze, one that had him groaning and squirming, holding a hand to his head and he blindly shuffled over to the nearest trash can to throw away the paper the cone had been held in.

Just as he did though, he felt something strike through his chest.

It was a dark feeling, encompassing and palpable. The feeling spread its tendrils along his back, and he couldn't resist the disgusted, full-body shudder that went through him. He felt his heart jump start in his chest. He couldn't control the way his body started to shake.

Hey, kid.

Izuku didn't gasp or anything drastic. He just looked down at the watch surrounding his wrist, several questions in his eyes.

So, like I said, I’ll answer your questions in the order I want to. Next question: ‘What’s that feeling.’ That feeling is why I helped you. So, transform.

His eyes quickly widened with an embarrassed queasyness, “T-tr-tr-tr-transform?”

Yeah. Push the button again while thinking of changing and transform. It’s the only way you can
learn the next part I’m trying to tell you.

His face scrunched up in mortification, “But why is it a dress?”

Kid, please just--

“N-no! I want you to answer me!” He paused after saying that, looking around. There were a few straggling people making their ways home giving him a weird look for talking to no one. He blushed brightly, covering the watch before he scurried into the nearest alleyway he could find. Once there, he looked around again, and, finding no one, uncovered the watch. Then he froze for a different reason.

The eye’s pupil, he realized when looking closer, actually wasn’t a solid circle. It was a swirl of lines of different lengths that he couldn’t quite understand. Those lines, though, had become vertical and straight in the eye, twelve multi-length pupils clustered together in a mockery of a circle, staring at him. Izuku felt even more like he was being watched. It looked...

No, kid, I’m not pissed. It’s just that these things give me a headache and they could pretty well potentially hurt someone in your universe. I really don’t have a lot of time to explain this part, so go ahead and transform. I’ll explain it to you soon. I promise.

Izuku searched the eye, but he couldn’t find anything face or any nervous ticks about it. It just kept staring at him the whole time. Still, the voice and eye both seemed to be earnest, if very pointedly avoiding the dress question. Besides, didn’t it say whatever the feeling was could hurt someone else? It seemed to be being honest, so, despite the sick, noxious self-consciousness that bubbled up his throat, he focused on the desire to transform. With a trembling finger, he pressed the button.

The twelve pupils flashed golden, and the yellow energy billowed out from it. Izuku squeaked when he felt a strange wind rush at his body, the energy surrounding him in ribbons of solid energy. Even standing still as he was, he could feel the changes that the clothing made, like how his legs suddenly felt more susceptible to the cold, and a part of him just really wanted to stuff his face into a pillow and cry out of humiliation.

He was lucky that it didn’t last long, the ribbons went as quickly as they came, and the boy was once again glowing, irides and pupils changed to yellow, four-pointed stars. And, unfortunately for him, once again in the dress.

Izuku shrank in on himself, eyes watery with distressed tears, “A-after th-this is done...p-please tell me if I can ch-ch-change this.”

You can’t.

“Eh?!”
Izuku stayed in the alleyways as much as he could, trying to stay hidden from view despite the glow around his body. The more into Musutafu’s slums he went, the harder it became to stay hidden. Adults and kids alike tended to dwell around in the poorer areas, so there were actually quite a few silent eyes there. Eyes that were always watching, more present in the back alleys than the main streets. He was almost certain he was spotted once or twice, but the sickly, toxic feeling had only gotten worse once he transformed. Even if a person or two saw him, he couldn’t ignore the terrible feeling that only got worse the closer he came to... whatever it was.

“Y-you said it was this way, right?” he asked, not bothering to look at the watch.

Yeah, just up ahead. You may have to turn another corner or two to get to it, but you’ll definitely know it once you’re there.

He nodded, eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. His hands clutched at the straps of his backpack harder, unsure of what he would encounter. Whatever it was though, he was absolutely sure he wasn’t ready to deal with it. Maybe he could convince The Handyman to give him some more time--

He was just about to run across another back alley when he heard the beginnings of a terrible noise. The boy skidded to a stop, almost tripping over himself, but he managed to not do so. He wanted to cover his ears to escape the growth of the grating din, like the ozone layer ripping constantly in an eternal line, jagged and stabbing against his eardrums, but somehow he knew that wasn’t going to work. Izuku immediately knew though that his enemy was in the alley.

Cautiously, trying to not be seen by whatever was inside, he held onto the wall he was hiding behind and leaned forward to peek around it, trying to ignore the noise. His knees started to tremble at the sight of...the thing.

It wasn’t that it was any taller than a human, but the proportions were just all wrong. Its arms went
past its knees, and its torso was too small, making way for very, very long legs. It didn’t appear to have any feet, walking on pointed stilts, but it did have hands, with long fingers that twitched unnaturally this way and that. It was facing away from him, but he could still see its head bobbing and whirling, jerking around like a glitching video game character. Its entire body was a tad see-through and dark grey, shaded just a tad dark blue. It stood as still as its quivering body could in the middle of the alley.

Sharp spikes of fear ran through Izuku’s heart. “Wh...w-wh-hat is that?”

Hrrmm...how do I put this in a way that’s easy to understand? Eh...you know how I said magic is like entropy, unavailable potential?

“Uhm...yes,” he said, not taking his eyes off of that thing.

Well, that there is some magical residue. It’s basically the escaped magical potential of another being. Except, where your magic is currently being used inside of a body, that residue has been kicked outside of its body by some means. It’s the byproduct of someone’s really, really bad magic use. And, eh, they’re noisy when they’re like this.

Izuku nodded, unsure of how to approach the situation. He glanced past the monster to the street, where he could see a person or two moving along their way.

“Th-those people...they don’t hear this?”

No.

Just as that was said, the monster flinched really hard. Its arm managed to pass through a trash can it was near before its hand became pointedly opaque, knocking the top off of the can. Izuku’s blood felt like it froze.

Not yet, anyway. It’s not quite solid yet, but as you can see, it’s very nearly there. Once that thing has enough energy, it’ll become solid enough to affect your universe. It’s standing still right now, but I can’t say it’ll stay standing there forever--

“How tall is it, about 6 feet, that’s relatively normal, but its body is just so...unnatural, but then again, it’s magic, so I guess I should expect that, still, what hero would be effective against something lik--”

Hero? What’s this ‘hero’ talk you’re doing?

Izuku paused, realizing that he’d been mumbling again. He flushed across his cheeks, trying to blink his embarrassment away.

“I-I was just wondering...wh-what kind of hero could be called against this.”

...Uh, kid. Why do you think I called you here?

Izuku glanced down at his watch, a questioning, confused look on his face. After a second, his eyes widened almost comically, the stars in his eyes becoming smaller out of shock.

“How tall is it, about 6 feet, that’s relatively normal, but its body is just so...unnatural, but then again, it’s magic, so I guess I should expect that, still, what hero would be effective against something lik--”

“W-wait, me? Y-you...you want me to stop that thing?!” he whispered harshly, glancing back up to the strange creature. Panic ran through him when he noticed it looked a bit more solid than before.

Yeah. What better a way to fight magic than with magic? You don’t understand it yet, kid, but you’re the best person for the job.
“Y-yes, of course I don’t understand! You’ve barely explained anything to me! I-I...I just know I
died and I’m back and that magic somehow exists and you’re from the void or something! How am I
supposed to beat that thing?! What even is my magic?!”

As I said before, kid, I answer questions in the order I want to. Still...eh, to be frank, I’m not sure
how your magic works.

“...WHAT.” His heart sped up considerably, watching as he saw less and less through the monster in
the alley.

Like I said, magic levels tend to be wonky, but even magic itself doesn’t exactly follow too many
rules. Magic isn’t supposed to exist here in the first place. It’s entropy. No one’s potential is the exact
same, so it makes sense that magic doesn’t show up the exact same in every person. So basically,
what you need to do is find a way to make the potential you have that’s not supposed to exist
function in an existential plane against a being that’s not supposed to exist.

“That explains absolutely nothing!!” he whisper-screamed, staring into the alley.

That’s when he noticed how silent it was compared to earlier, the static from before changed into a
strange, white noise. And how the monster was no longer standing where it had been.

It felt like bile was rising in his throat, the aura of something sick and wrong to his left. Slowly, he
turned his eyes from down the alley to the head of it, right where he was, a little in front of him.

It stood there, completely still save for the static that made up its face. It had no eyes, but he could
feel it staring straight at him. Izuku’s jaw had already dropped open a bit from before, so he closed
his mouth with the slightest click of his teeth, starry eyes trembling and watering from the thing
before him.

Regardless, kid, you’re gonna need to make it work.

The body in front of him twitched before it rose its hand, and Izuku scrambled back with a cry,
barely avoiding being slammed into the wall he had been hiding behind. He fell straight onto his ass,
tears falling down his cheeks as he watched the creature turn from its hand embedded into the wall to
him. Stiltedly, it pulled its hand out of the wall, its fingers twitching as it let out a crackling, static
noise.

It was in front of him just after he blinked, a little billow of dust puffing up where it had been
standing. It started reaching down toward Izuku, but the boy screamed in terror, rolling over onto his
hands and knees before scrambling to his feet and running away.

The thing straightened up before it seemed to suddenly appear right behind Izuku. It reached out
again, grabbing a fistful of his backpack, making the boy attached to it jolt, pulled off of his feet by
the force of the creature holding him back. Barely moving the lower half of its body, it then turned its
torso sharply to the left, swinging Izuku’s body with it, and it let go, slamming the boy almost face-
first into the concrete wall. It cracked and broke under the force of his body, making a crater in the
side wall.

Izuku gasped in pain as he fell off of the wall and onto his side before he turned onto his front, his
head spinning. His eyesight was wobbly with tears and the threat of a severe concussion, but
somehow the latter seemed to be fading off.

C’mon kid, I know you can do better than this!

Izuku groaned lowly, trying to clear his head as his eye caught sight of the creature turning its lower
half toward him. He had a small inkling of something that could happen then, and before it could move, he got up on his hands and knees and crawled quickly out of the way. He’d predicted one of the potential happenings correctly, as the next moment saw the creature’s foot stuck into the ground right where Izuku had just been moments before.

“I--wha--I--I don’--wh-what am I supposed to do?!”

I mean, using your brain is working much better than fleeing without thought, that’s for sure.

“Quiet! Just be qui-AAAAH!”

He barely managed to roll out of the way of the creature’s attempt to pin him to the ground with its pointed foot again.

Hey, you’re the one who asked.

“Oh, so now you want to answer my questions?!” he screamed, actually managing to look angry despite the tears rolling down his cheeks, “T-then tell me how to defeat it! I don’t know anything! I don’t know how to do anything! Tell me already! If you want me to do this then tell me!!”

I told you, this is a battle of magic and magic. So use it.

“How?!” He cried out when he barely managed to duck below it kicking the wall where his head had been.

It crumbled under the force of its body, and the creature’s leg twitched and quivered as it dragged it out of the hole it made. While it was distracted, Izuku made a quick dive past the alley that the creature had been discovered in, trying with all the gasping energy in him to get away from the creature. Down the way, he could see a few more people than before, some having stopped upon hearing the noises from the attacks—and possibly his own screaming.

The group of people seemed startled as he passed, but he didn’t care. More than anything, he felt a wash of relief roll over his body. If he could run down that way, then the adults could take care of it. They could call the heroes and they would get rid of the villain…

Just as he started to turn to run down the alley, he paused when a sinking thought came to him.

The Handyman had told him to go against the creature without any real knowledge about his powers other than magic should go against magic. The voice never said a single thing about quirks, and despite him being 15, scrawny, and useless, they made it sound ridiculous that he would ever call on adult Pro Heros. ‘You don’t understand it yet, kid, but you’re the best person for the job.’ Izuku was pretty good at reading people sometimes, even if it was just the sound of their voice, and the voice had sounded…earnest.

With that in mind, he rummaged through his brain for reasons, deciding to forgo making his way down the alleyway. Something wasn’t right…so he ignored it when he heard the startled cries of the crowd as he passed, keeping his distance.

When he heard several people shout with the sudden burst of white noise, he jumped to the side, ducking. He just barely avoided another one of the creature’s attacks as it sailed over where his head had just been.

Whoooh, you’ve gotten pretty good at dodging this thing. Considering how beat you were getting before, I’d say that’s a quick improvement. Good goin’! Quick question, though: why’d you run away from the growing crowd? Couldn’t they have helped you?
“M-maybe but--eeeEEK!” he tripped on his own feet, dodging yet another swipe from the monster hissing after him, but he stayed upright as he kept running forward, “but s-something you said!! I-It, uh…”

Okay, keep thinking, but think faster. You’re going to run out of alleys eventually.

“O-okay! Okay!”

The voice wasn’t wrong. He was starting to see yet another one of Musutafu’s streets despite not taking the route with the small crowd. He was getting closer to not being behind people’s buildings and out into civilization and that…that wasn’t good for some reason. Going to the crowd hadn’t been good for some reason. But why?

This time, when the creature appeared, it was directly to his side, arm open in a scooping motion. Izuku hadn’t had time to dodge this time, but he put up his arms without thinking, blocking off his face and the upper half of his torso. The bottom half was left unattended though, and the creature swooped its scooping arm into it, swinging it as it threw him backwards with a hard pressure to his stomach. Izuku ended up thrown off of his feet with a cry, landing on his backpack more than a few paces back.

He coughed, spitting up some saliva, his stomach throbbing. Still, he managed to roll onto his hands and knees, trying his hardest to think. The villain had a ridiculous speed quirk, so--

Wait. No.

He wasn’t dealing with a quirk.

Magic apparently wasn’t meant to exist in his world. It didn’t follow the world’s rules. Men weren’t created equal because of quirks, that was the world’s rule. Quirks were the rules of the world. Magic has been known to break rules, so...

“H-Handyman?” Izuku choked out.

Yeah?

The villain…no, the magical residue started straightening out, getting ready to attack again. The boy’s face was stricken with terror at the implication of both that and his own realization, but he still managed to stutter it out.

“Q-quirks don’t work on magic…do they…”

Bingo. Well, not exactly, but you’ve got the basic gist of it. Trying to face off against a magical being with quirks is, in many cases, like trying to divide a number by zero. Y’know, cause numbers are easily quantifiable, but being able to quantify nothingness is debatable.

Izuku quickly rolled over once the residue moved, punching the ground where he’d just been laying. He quickly clambered onto a relatively upright position, his stomach still in pain. He could practically feel himself bruising.

That’s why numbers face off against other numbers a lot easier than facing off against zero, why something that should exist is better at going against other things that should exist rather than things that shouldn’t, why quirks are good against other quirks but not so much against magic. So no, to face this guy, you don’t need a hero. You need another zero.

“I know you probably meant something really deep with that, but all that did was hurt my self
esteem,” Izuku said, having a temporary lapse in his panic to escape.

Riiight...we’re gonna work on that. Anyway, got any ideas on how to use your magic yet?

“No,” he wheezed, barely avoiding the the monster’s punches. It had him nearly pinned to the wall at the last one before he dodged to the side, its leg coming up to kick him.

Okay, then look at what other magic does. What is it like?

“It’s...it’s like it’s using a quirk...ggh!” He’d almost dodged a swinging kick, but he didn’t bend enough. He was lucky to have an arm up to protect his head, but he could feel the pressure from the kick even after the leg bent for a cool-down.

Yeah, just like zero is a number. It’s just a number that causes a lot of nonsense. I did say magic doesn’t follow all the rules, not that they don’t follow any. So if they kinda have a basis on the world rules--though not by much--what can you do with your magic?

“I...I don’t know…” he panted, blocking another kick that reverberated through his body. The residue nearly had him up against a wall again.

Okay, yikes, fatigue’s kicking in. Look, kid, you used to do it all the time as an even younger kid. Even when you didn’t have a quirk, you acted like you had one, right? So try doing that?

“But--” he muttered, unable to finish his sentence as he faced off against punch after punch, basically pinned.

Y-you! ahem--You imagined you could topple buildings and alter the flows of seas and protect everyone you love, right? Tap back into that imagination, okay? Imagine what it’d be like to just...blow this sucker back with one punch!

Izuku’s blocks were becoming weaker, body jostled and bruising. His eyes were closed as he clenched his teeth, trying to keep standing even though a bone tiredness was seeping through his veins.

Hey, kid? C’mon. Look, I know I don’t know much about your magic yet, but I’m at least trying to--

The monster appeared to be satisfied with its punches, finally slowing the barrage of them. Instead, it paused, seeming to build up the energy for a kick.

That’s what Izuku was waiting for.

His eyes snapped open. The glow surrounding him dimmed in other parts of his body, shifting quickly to glow brighter at his right arm. He clenched his teeth, fighting to keep the energy to move despite the full body throbbing from his bruises, and he shifted into a fighting position. With a cry, he took a wild swing at the monster’s side, his magic flaring.

The punch connected with a solid thud, but the monster didn’t move, save for the slight jostling of its body.

Izuku almost felt like crying, but he was too desperate to think, and, on autopilot, steadied himself before kicking at the creature’s side with his left leg, trying to use even more force than he did with the punch.

Now that had a reaction.
The golden glow from his body didn’t even have to shift. His leg connected with the side of the monster’s body, and a burst of yellow energy flared out from it. A great wind came as a result of the kick, everything not bolted down to the right of their bodies getting blown over by the sheer force of his magic. The creature even let out its own version of a cry, the white noise coming to a crescendo.

Yellow magic from his leg traveled through the residue’s body like lichtenberg figures that bisected its waist and staggered its electric way up before it bled into the static of its face. The static turned progressively more yellow until its face glitched, like a television screen being turned off, and it seemed to freeze in place, no longer twitching, no longer scrabbling.

Izuku moved his foot away from the residue’s side, stumbling on his own feet as he tried to stay upright. It kept standing still, and after a moment, the rest of the color in its body started to fade, including the yellow figures trailing through its form. Once the color was gone, Izuku realized that the creature had solidified into stone, and for a moment, it stood there like a decrepit mannequin. The next, it teetered backwards, unsteady on its own feet, and smashed to dust on the concrete below.

...Kid. That. Was. Awesome.

Izuku panted, staring down at the dust that was once his enemy. Every ache thrummed through his body, but he stayed standing.

Then his breath hitched as tears started to--whoa whoa, wait, kid? Are you okay?

Izuku didn’t say anything, blobs of saline starting to drop off of his cheeks. His knees felt weak, so he let himself tumble a bit as fell onto the wall he’d just been pinned against, and slid down till he was sitting. There, he put his hands on the ground to try to keep holding himself up as he allowed himself to cry.

Oh...geez, kid… Is this about the residue? Cause if it is, don’t worry, I think I know what you did.

As that was said, three bright crystals of energy rose up from the dust. It wasn’t the same shade of gray that the solidified monster had been, rather, it was grayish blue with a speck of white in the middle that pulsed very minutely through the energy, like ribbons of white inside of a blue-gray sea.

The residue has been neutralized, like positive and negative energy colliding. Your magic stabilized the magic of that thing, so now it’s not a raging energy anymore. Here, uh, put me towards it.

Without a single word of protest, Izuku stuck his left arm out toward the crystals. The twelve pupils thrummed with energy before they suddenly opened wide, encompassing the entirety of the watch’s face in an inky blackness that nothing could be seen in. The crystals floated closer to the watch until they were sucked inside, one right after the other, leaving nothing left but the dust of the monster, and the scorch mark from its fall on the ground. Izuku let his arm drop.

Yeah, uh...all absorbed now. The magic is back in the void where it belongs when it’s not attached to its body. Uhm...you okay?

“It hurt…” he muttered, tears falling silently, “Everything hurts...I’m tired...I just...wanna go home.”

Oh. OH, oh yeah, sure! Look, after what you’ve been through today, you absolutely deserve some hardcore snoozing, buddy. You wanna try--

“C-” his breath hitched, “…C-can I...stop being transformed now?”

Not quite yet, kid. You’ve gotta escape before the police get here.
Sighing wetly, he nodded to show that he understood, and he sat up until he didn’t need his hands to support himself.

Okay kid. We don’t have to talk about anything else today. We can just, uh, do that tomorrow. How does that sound? And I hate to be a party pooper, but folks are going to come inspect this. You can’t use your ‘plain boy’ looks of yours to blend in, so we better skedaddle. Your phone’s still working, right? Use it to get a route out of here.

He nodded tiredly, forcing himself to stand. He just...needed to find a way out. The alleyway had several other alleys attached to it, and he could hear the beginnings of curious people heading his way. So, as quietly as he could, he staggered off into another alley, disappearing from view before anyone could spot him.

---

Hashiro stared down at the strange shadow that had been burned into the ground a bit behind a recently evacuated cram school. It was currently surrounded by soot and grey dust as well as yellow police tape. Off to the side, she watched as his coworkers questioned some witnesses, if they could be called that. Considering the destructive nature of the villain, just as she’d thought, no one dared to approach them, even when they were chasing after some “glowing kid”. Said kid was nowhere to be found.

She brushed the brown hair loose from her bun back behind her ear, inspecting the rest of the alleyway. There was more than a little damage to the buildings in the alley, and a significant amount to the ground itself. Four-fifths down the alley, and everything was thrown into chaos. The Gray Man had fought this single person, whoever she was, as seriously as usual.

Then lost.

Quickly, she took out her phone, calling the first police detective she could think of. After a few rings, he answered.

[“Hello?”]

“Tsukauchi-san, I hope I hope I’m not interrupting anything,” she began, peering down at the burnt shadow, “But I’ve recently gotten another lead in your Gray Men case.”

[“...I have a minute or two. What’ve you got?”]

“I can give you more details when I get back, but first things first. It appears that there’s a specific quirk that the Gray Men can’t stand against.”

[“That so?”]

“Yes, I’ll send you the picture.” She blinked her eyes once they focused to the degree she wanted them to, pointedly sending the mental image through her phone.

It took him a second to reply.

[“So that’s the Gray Man this time. What happened to them?”]

“I don’t know, but apparently they were chasing a glowing child. She’d almost ran to safety, someone said, but she kept moving forward to let that thing chase her. I think the kid might have used her quirk to escape it.”
[“Whatever quirk that is, we need to know how it works, fast. Please see if you can get more of a description other than ‘glowing’ from them, and I’ll check the quirk registry.”]

“Yeah, gotcha,” she said, distracted.

[“What is it?”]

“It just…doesn’t make sense. The two we have in custody took 5 to 6 heroes to take down, each, mostly because their quirks didn’t seem to work on them somehow. What kind of quirk could this child have that she’d destroy them by herself?”
I was really busy for the last two days, but things have eased up for me. I also don't have work today :D

So here's an update. The boy is having a bad time, but he's a trooper.

Upon returning home at the oddly late hour of 10 p.m., Izuku was reminded, rather unfortunately, that he hadn’t contacted his mother since he’d left for school that morning. She’d fussed over him because of his tardiness and the morose look on his face, sure, but she’d also grounded him for the weekend--no leaving the house unless he went to the optional school day on Saturday, no video games, and no television or hero videos--which he honestly didn’t mind.

She’d fussed over him even more when she realized he didn’t feel as though being confined to the house was a punishment. Still, she didn’t add anything to his grounding to make it hurt since he seemed to be hurting enough on his own. After all, after the initial fussing session, during which Izuku stood stock still, he’d reached forward and hugged his mother tightly, apologizing stiffly before the apologies spilled out of his mouth like a river, heavy tears quickly following it.

It’d shocked her to her core and she’d fretted over him profusely, but Izuku couldn’t bring himself to care about anything except the warmth of her body against his own, something he could’ve very well never felt again.

---

Izuku awoke slowly, facing the wall with his mother’s hand in his hair, brushing it away from his ear. He didn’t remember getting into bed, and even less remembered falling asleep. He wasn’t sure what time it was or how he’d gotten to where he was, but he didn’t want to care. All he wanted was for her hand to keep soothing him, wanted to ignore the little bit of light filtering in through his blinds.

“Izuku…” His mother’s voice slid through his sleep-cottoned ears like a pleasant melody, even though it quivered with some emotion he couldn’t bother to recognize. “Izuku, baby, don’t you want to go to school today?”

He pulled the cover up a little higher, trying to hide. All he wanted to do was sleep for the day. His body throbbed with healing injuries and his mind was too twisted to really think straight. It had been too much...he just needed some processing time.

“…Can I stay home, please?”

He only felt like curling in and sleeping more at the worried sigh she let out. He knew he’d asked her to stay home a few times before--his attendance record attested for that--and she probably thought it had something to do with school. It didn’t, and he felt guilty for causing her to worry like she was.

“M-my grades are fine,” he muttered, turning toward her a little, “I j-just...I just want to, uhm…”
There was no real way for him to say *I just want to contemplate how I experienced death yesterday and now I'm undead and magic exists and I think I may be the only one who can fight the creepy monsters made of them, don't worry, I'll go back to school on Monday. There just wasn't. “...I'm sorry...”*

“Oh, no, baby, it's okay!” she fussed, cupping his cheek, “It’s alright, Izuku. I’ll call the school and let them know, okay?”

He nodded tiredly in reply. He knew he was being a nuisance, but he really just needed some time. If he had gone to school today, he would’ve most certainly broken down into tears, unable to handle everything. He was so glad he had a mother who tolerated--loved, she actually loved him--so much.

He wasn’t sure what he’d do without her.

So when the hand left his head, he actually, unreasonably, felt panic strike through him.

“Mom…!?” he called out, reaching from under his covers to hold onto his mother’s hand. He regretted it instantly at the startled look on her face.

“Izuku?”

His face immediately started going red in mortification. “I...I just...I....”

It had been reflexive. He wasn’t sure exactly why such a sharp fear ran through him, and now he wanted nothing more than to let go and act like it didn’t actually happen. He didn’t want to bother her anymore, so he wanted to hurry up and let her go. But...he couldn’t. He just...he...there was no other way to put it. He was just selfish.

“D-do you have to g-go now?”

He pushed past the mortification in his chest when her expression became very carefully neutral.

“I was...going to get the phone for now, dear.”

Of course she was. Of course that was the only reason. After all, it would be rude to just let him stay home without letting the school know first. Sure, it was an optional day at school, but it functioned like every other day, and most students didn’t miss it. She needed to give a call, he was bothering her enough already, he needed to let go of her skirt and stop being such a leech--

“When you...g-get back...will you, uhm...please...pat my head...s-some more?”

Her carefully neutral expression softened with worry, and he let go of her skirt, unable to stand the feel of it against his fingers anymore. He’d asked, he’d actually asked, and now she had to answer such a stupid request, God, what was he, five?

She did answer him, but not verbally. She sat carefully back onto the bed near the head of it. He shuffled over to her without thinking too much about it, and she said nothing at first when he pressed his head against her outer thigh, her hand beginning to rub through his hair again.

It took him till the eighth run-through of his hair before he realized she hadn’t gone to get the phone.

“M-mo--”

“Don’t worry, sweetie. I’m getting the phone.”

He peeked one eye open from the blessed darkness behind his eyelids to see her other hand and
fingers over her legs, shifting and pulling something not in the room. He hadn’t known she could do that, that was amazing. She was amazing. She’s always been. That’s why it always hurt when he realized exactly how much she was surrounded by people who didn’t deserve her. Whether it was her absentee husband or the quirkless child he gave her.

“...Izuku, baby...do you want to talk about this?”

A ball of bile rolled in his stomach as he shook his head. He was not ready at all for that conversation, and he was so very selfish.

“N-not...not yet…” he muttered against her outer thigh, “p-please…”

“Okay…”

He didn’t say anything again, didn’t have any real words he could say to make everything better, because really, there wasn’t a way to make everything better. Not yet. And he wasn’t ready to confront everything in the end. He just needed a bit more time, even if it was a terribly selfish wish.

So he stayed silent as her hand carded through his hair, and the darkness started to become darker from his steady decline back into unconsciousness. He was so very tired, a bone tiredness that he couldn’t seem to get rid of. Her hand, more than anything else, helped him at least feel like he was resting.

Besides, he at least wanted this again before he couldn’t anymore, whether he or she--not Mom, never Mom--died.

“Hello? Yes, this is Midoriya. Yes. I’m calling to say my son, Izuku, isn’t feeling well today…”

He couldn’t remember when she’d started dialing. The phone must’ve been closer than he thought...or he was already losing time. It didn’t matter. Not now. Not yet.

His mother’s voice faded as he relaxed further into his pillow, letting it and her hand lull him back into unconsciousness.

---

Most of Saturday was spent with him sleeping or staring at the walls of his room.

The second time he woke up, the light filtering in his closed blinds less white than before--late morning, then. On his desk, his mother had left a note about work and some snacks for him to eat. He almost hadn’t wanted to move to go get them, but he was being selfish as it was, it would’ve been impolite if he didn’t try. Once he managed to get up and nibble on it, he might have cried a bit at the realization he could’ve never been able to taste her food again. That made him tired all over again, and he dragged himself back to the bed for more sleep.

The third time he’d awakened, it was sudden, escaping the binding suffocation of his covers. He gasped and clawed at the sludge that wasn’t there until he’d fallen out of his bed, covered with sweat. He lay there on the floor for a few minutes before he decided he had the energy to get up. He crawled back into the bed and laid there, covers off and eyes wide open. It took him much longer that time to fall back asleep.

The fourth time he woke up, it was for the bathroom. Nothing much.

The fifth time, he’d jolted awake, static ringing in his ears. He hadn’t fallen out of the bed, but his body throbbed with the effects of pain memory and his slowly healing body. He’d groaned, finally
pulling his covers up to his waist, and rolled around on his bed for a bit before he lulled back to sleep.

When he woke up the sixth time, he knew instantly that he wouldn’t be able to go back for a while. His body ached from being too still, and the light between the blinds was low, orange, and faded. One, sleep fatigued glance at his clock told him it was well after school, 7:37. He remembered something then, and glanced down at the watch around his wrist.

The eye greeted him there as usual, as well as a time that never seemed to change.

“Howdyman, why does the watch’s time stay at 4?”

...I’m not sure you want that answer.

His eyes narrowed, not out of irritation, but out of foreboding. “Not sure I want the answer or not sure I can handle the answer?”

Someone has to have told you at some point that you’re really smart, kid.

“I’m not handling anything well,” he muttered, pressing his face into his pillow, “but I don’t think I’ll get any worse as long as it’s referencing something that’s already happened. I can’t take anything new, though. Not yet.”

This references your undead state. Is that okay?

“...Please tell me.”

...Time of death.

Izuku stayed quiet.

I mean, part of my job as the conduit between you and your magic and my job as The Narrator is that I record your life, kid. This, too, is a part of your life.

The boy didn’t move for a little longer before he pushed himself up onto his hands and knees. His eyes were half-closed, expression a mix between slack and neutral. He struggled with himself a bit before he finally made his decision.

Getting up out of his bed, he stumbled over to his desk and rifled through it a bit. Finally, he found a stack of three empty notebooks, all of them currently unused. He usually kept a few spares on hand so he didn’t have to constantly go buy new ones. He picked up a notebook and a marker before he pulled his chair out and sat at the desk, making sure he didn’t turn his computer on accidentally.

Popping the top off of his marker, he moved to write something on the front, but then he paused. Frowning, he contemplated what he should write on it and decidedly changed the title from what he was thinking about before.

After School Activity Book No.1, he wrote.

Hey, I liked the title of your hero analysis book. Why didn’t you write something like that one? You were thinking about it.

“Everyone knows about heroes, so they’d know what it means. No one I know of is aware of magic. It would look weird if I were walking around with a book titled something referencing it. It’s probably best to disguise it. Besides,” he sighed, “as much as you may like the title of my hero
books, I get picked on for that, you know. It’d get worse if Kacchan saw a book about magic analysis of all things.”

Hey, I’m not trying to dissuade you. I actually think it’s smart. I just like asking questions for the sake of asking them sometimes. You know, using a lil Socratic method is all.

A little, muted thrum of humor flushed his blood. “Isn’t the Socratic method used when asking questions to answer the asker’s question, leading them to answer themselves?”

Yep.

“Then what question have I asked that you’re trying to answer?”

Nah, I’m asking questions get you to answer the ones you haven’t asked yet.

“Vague,” he muttered, opening his book to the first page.

He paused his pencil at the first line, not sure what to write first. So he wrote the start of a potential magical essay, then erased it. Then tried writing what his outfit was like, then erased it. Then tried explaining what the book was about before erasing that, too. He barely got a line in each time before he did, and now the paper was wearing just a little thinner at that spot.

He sat for another minute before he decided that only one thing belonged on the very first page.

He tested out how he would write it in his head, rearranged the way he said it, considered it, rearranged it again.

Finally, he tapped his pencil against the middle of the paper.

He wrote the first word. Then the next. Then two more, then the rest of the sentence flowed out easier than the others. He wrote three more following that in the center of the page below it.

Once he was done, he stared at the lines for a good amount of time.

Breathed.

Then flipped the page to start on the rest.

---

By 8:40 p.m., he’d filled six more pages with scrambled, disorganized notes full of arrows and explanations and question marks. He was new to his situation and to his magic, after all, whereas he’d already established a system for his hero notes. The After School Activity logs would take some growing into.

When it came time in the book to explain his outfit though, he’d paused, his face flushing.

He groaned, but eventually he stood up and took his book to the bathroom, where he’d find the full body mirror. Surprisingly, despite everything, he’d yet to see what he looked like altogether when transformed. The thought of wearing the dress again made him queasy, but he would do it. For science.

He closed the bathroom door and stared at the mirror attached to it, taking measured breaths to calm his heart. Cautiously, he rose his right hand to the watch and waited a second with his eyes closed. Then, he snapped them open, eyes focused on his own as he pressed the button.
Again, yellow, ribbon-like light burst from it and surrounded his body. He flushed at the feeling of losing his nightclothes in exchange for his transformed clothing, but was also surprised to find that he couldn’t actually see his clothes or his eyes change, despite watching himself. He had to remember to note down that the energy covered him very well during the transformation sequence. It was also pretty painless and quick.

The yellow ribbons left him then, leaving him glowing yellow with his own magic. He took in the way his eyes changed, yellow, four-pointed stars present instead of irides or pupils, and how his hair had turned a brighter green color with a glow of yellow lining it like a highlight. He glanced all around at himself, at the dress, and how he looked wearing it.

“Oh,” he muttered breathily, his voice tinged with relief.

“Oh”? That’s all you have to say? I thought you were going to throw a fit, to be honest.

He jolted at the sound of the voice, sweating nervously. He’d forgotten he wasn’t alone. “Uhm, I mean,” he muttered, turning this way and that in the mirror, “I just...didn’t think it’d...look--o-o-ok...okay...on me…”

...Look good on you?

He seemed to realize then what he’d just said, his entire face going red, hands waving in the air. “U-Uhm! I just--!! I-I’d thought--ah! Uhm! P-Part of being a hero is h-ha-having a good ap-appearance and style, and--! And I just--!! I-I--!!” He paused then before breathing in deeply, taking a large, cooling breath. When he’d calmed himself down, he looked off to the side, sheepish, “I...I, uhm...I thought I’d...look...weird…”

Okay, but you’re a fan of the Wild, Wild Pussycats, and Tora’s a handsome trans man in a really nice skirt.

“Yes? What does that have to do with this?” he asked, matter-of-factly.

...Ah, no, that's not what I was...eh. Nevermind. I was just wondering. Why would you think such a manly guy like Tora could wear a skirt and not look weird--which he doesn't, stop giving me that look, kid--but you could wear a dress and look weird?

Izuku opened his mouth to answer, but paused before he could. He started to get flustered all over again. “I-I mean...uhm...it's not that g-guys can’t wear skirts or anything… Like you said, I-I really do like the Wild, Wild Pussycats and I don’t care about what they wear. E-even in general, I don’t care. It’s just...uhm...wh-when it’s...when it’s...m-me, I'm not, uhm, used...to it, and...I...I don’t...I’m n-not...c-cu...”

Seriously. We’re gonna have to work on that self image of yours, kid. But other than that, you have no issue?

He hid his face in his hands, “...N-no.”

That’s what I thought.

Izuku huffed. “You sound satisfied.”

A second later, he thought of one other thing he wanted to check. Izuku felt like throwing himself into the trash at the thought, but again, it was for science.

He did it quickly before he could change his mind. He rose the skirt of his dress up and peeked at his
own underwear. Just as he thought, they were still boxers, but they, too, had changed in that there wasn’t a brand name on them and they were a light pink color. They could’ve been mistaken for shorts if he didn’t focus on it enough.

He saw the tops of his socks then, too, shaped like flower petals against his legs.

“...How are those even staying up.”

*Magic.* No, literally, it’s magic.

Despite himself, Izuku snorted. Letting his skirt down, he patted it to make sure it looked nice before picking up his notebook. He spent a few minutes trying to sketch out everything before adding additional notes to it, mumbling aloud.

“Regardless of clothes already worn, the transformation will appear almost the exact same as the first time, changing everything to the dress design seen here. Socks stay up due to magic,” he glanced down, noticing his pink house slippers rather than the usual shoes, “Some alterations may occur due to social norms or habits, i.e. my house slippers transformed slightly to become pink and more comfortable rather than changing to my outside shoes. Also, my backpack is absent. Unknown if it’s transformed or not--make note later upon experimentation…”

So...you okay now, kid?

Izuku didn’t pause writing. “Mmh...things can’t be changed. I can only do what I can do, so I should at least do that. I’ll work through it.”

...You’re pretty amazing, kid. I wish you’d realize that.

“Hmm?” he mumbled, eyes still on his book.

Eh, I’ll tell you later.

Chapter End Notes

EDIT: http://studiostatic.tumblr.com/post/163783465811/hi-i-really-liked-your-fanfic-a-lot-and-i-couldnt

I GOT A FANART, I'M CRIE
Hey guys.

So first off, I'd like to say that I really appreciate you guys' comments and I love reading your theories and such! You'll see some of your questions answered as time goes on as the mechanics of the story are further expanded on. Also, some of you may or may not hit the nail on the head in some cases. Just sayin’.

Next up, FAN ART:
submitted by raretrashchild.tumblr.com---
http://studiostatic.tumblr.com/post/163783465811/hi-i-really-liked-your-fanfic-a-lot-and-i-couldnt
https://medaloop.tumblr.com/post/163796245296/

Ilugsish qwq

Anyway, there won’t be an early morning Sunday chapter or anything—I think after that busy period, the timeline I had ended up really fucked up. But hey, I'll still update whenever I can. I'm going to be hitting another busy period this week, so please be prepared for more hold-ups.

Again, thank you guys for all your comments, attention, and fan art. I'm *always* eager to see it, so please don't ever be afraid to hit me up one way or another.

Now. Onward.

This one is depressing.

He spent the rest of his Saturday filling in as much incomplete information as he could about magic, its potential effect on quirks, and the state of being undead. The latter wasn’t really one he wanted to think about, and the former two unable to be tested at the moment, so it was mostly speculation that he hoped he would later be confirmed or denied. His mother found him later that night in his bed sleeping more soundly than he had been all throughout the day. She expressed her surprise to him the next morning about how long he’d slept, but she didn’t say anything bad about it; rather, she seemed open and trying to understand the reason for his mood shift.

He was grateful for it, but it also saddened him, because no matter how kind she was, he couldn’t think of a good way to tell her everything. He’d decided yesterday that it would be best kept a secret for the time being. After all, explaining magic would also mean he’d have to explain how he got it, and...he still wasn’t over it, so he didn’t want to have anyone else deal with it either, especially since she actually loved him.

Sunday came and went fairly uneventfully. He worked on his homework and his new magic analysis book vigorously, ignoring the computer and phone as promised for his grounding session. That was really all there was to it, save for the still concerned glances Izuku’s mother still sent his way.
The next morning, he woke up to the sound of his alarm and got ready as usual, if a little more sluggishly than he would previously. He’d made room in his bag for both his damaged hero analysis book and his magic analysis one—it made sense to keep it on him just in case something came up, he reasoned. His mother greeted him with a quick breakfast before sending him off. Aside from muttering to himself absently every once in awhile, making small notes in his new analysis book on his way to school, he was fairly quiet that morning.

Though, when he saw the funeral vigil on his desk when he got to class, even his intermittent mumbling stopped.

They’d been more elaborate with it than he could’ve ever predicted they would’ve been. Rather than a simple white lily, they had several little inexpensive bundles of ericas, freesias, primroses, even red spider lilies. Last year’s yearbook photo had been greyed and placed in a black frame, a black ribbon draped over it at the top. There was even a sealed card there, one usually used for funeral gift money.

Usually he could stand the disdain he faced from his classmates and his teachers. Usually he could push the thoughts aside and do his best to not mind it. But all things considering, this was a very, very poorly timed joke.

Izuku could barely hear his classmates giggle in their groups at his expense, could barely take his eyes off of his desk. He’d even forgotten to close the door behind him as he stumbled forward to his own vigil. Once he was close enough, he could smell the flowers—freshly taken from a florist, it seemed—and picked up the sealed card, opening it.

Inside of it wasn’t money. Instead, there was a piece of paper with the word “quirk” on it.

Some of his classmates started laughing outright at him as he stared at the paper, their gazes as malicious and daunting against the-one-who-didn’t-belong. He didn’t have the energy in him to laugh with them this time or even to push it off or to ignore it.

So that’s what it would have looked like, he thought, if I had actually stayed dead.

“Hey Midoriya!”

He blinked, trying to see through the fog that was clogging up his brain, slowly looking up to see who was addressing him. It was the girl that sat beside him in class—Sanada Keiko, transformation quirk, turns parts of her body into flames, only seems to be able to do one limb at a time—with the two boys that sat in front of them—Arashi Hitori, transformation quirk, extends parts of his body, usually his neck, and Uoka Genjitsu, transformation quirk, turns his face into a whistle-like form, can blow winds hard enough to knock over a stack of paper.

“You’re here today! I’m shocked, really.” Arashi-san said, “You know, after we heard about the advice Bakugou gave you and you didn’t show up on Saturday, we were all wondering about you. It’s a shame, though. We got you this vigil and everything and now it’s wasted.”

“Oh...ah...” He couldn’t think, their voices coming to him warped from his shock. “...So...rry.”

“‘Sorry’?” Sanada-san giggled into her hand.

“Geez, man, we should get you to pay us back,” Uoka-san huffed, almost looking displeased if it hadn’t been for the upturn at the corners of his lips.

“...Oh...h/how much did it c--”

Kid.
Izuku choked on his words at the sound of the voice in his head. He almost questioned if the people in front of him heard it too, but he realized that they wouldn’t. No one but him ever heard the voice.

...Don’t you need to turn in that late homework? Watanabe-sensei would probably like it if you turned it in before classes started.

The boy pondered it for a moment before he realized that, yes, maybe Watanabe-sensei would appreciate it. He could turn it in before class, but maybe the teacher would appreciate it more otherwise. It seemed like a nice thing to do regardless.

“Ah...yeah...”

Take the vigil with you. Don’t listen to that boy talking right now, and take the vigil with you.

Izuku nodded without really thinking about it, picking up the various parts of his desktop vigil before turning back and leaving the classroom, deaf to the calls from the three classmates behind him.

He wasn’t really thinking about where he was going, simply following his feet wherever they were taking him, ignoring the looks from the students heading to their own homerooms. At least he knew he was probably heading to the teacher’s lounge. There were a few more minutes before classes would formally start, so he was on good time, perhaps. At least, he hoped he was. He hoped Watanabe-sensei would appreciate the act.

True to his thoughts, his feet had carried him on muscle memory to the teacher’s lounge. He slid the door open and walked in, blind to the startled, glaring, and nervous looks on the teachers’ faces. He wasn’t there for them anyway, only for his homeroom teacher--quirk unknown--who was giving him a look he couldn’t quite decipher. He stood to the side of his desk before flipping his bag onto the floor, digging into it to pull out his missing homework.

“Ah...uhm...W-Watanabe-sensei. My...homework. F-from Saturday. I missed it. S...sorry.”

The man’s angular face scrunched a little more, leaned back in his seat as he considered the boy in front of him. After a moment more, the teacher reached forward and took the other end of the papers being handed to him. Izuku let go of his end of the papers once he did, reaching down to put his backpack back on.

“Hmm...nice to see you back today, Midoriya-kun.”

“Ah...thank you.”

“Your attendance levels are fine at the moment, but we don’t want you missing too many more days, not like you did last year. This school year just started, so don’t start becoming absentee just yet. Understood?” The man’s eyes searched his face before dropping to the bundle in his arms. “What are you holding?”

Izuku blinked, a little startled, before looking down at the flowers and frame in his arms.

“Oh...uhm...the class made...a vigil for me.”

The boy wasn’t sure where the whispering had started to come from.

Watanabe-sensei sighed lowly. “Do you know who did it?”

Izuku didn’t look back up. “No.”
“Then why did you bring it? Do you want me to do something about it?”

Ah, Izuku realized, *he’s irritated.* “I’m sorry. No. I just...picked it up without thinking. I’m sorry.”

Watanabe-sensei’s breath hitched, “D-Don’t apologize. Don’t do that.” The man leaned back then, sighing deeply as he ran a hand over his face. “What do you want to do with it?”

“I...dunno. The flowers look expensive. I…”

Don’t care about what those kids might have spent on it. What do *you* want?

“...I want it to disappear.”

Watanabe-sensei held out his hand, “Then give it to me, I’ll throw it away.”

Wordlessly, Izuku handed him the pile of flowers and frame carefully, bowing lowly in thanks before he moved to leave the room. The whispering got louder as he closed the door, and standing outside of the teacher’s lounge, he noticed many other students, staring straight at him.

He had the sudden desire to hide, but he knew he couldn’t do that. If he hid away, he would miss class. So instead, he bowed his head and began walking back.

“Isn’t that Midoriya from class 3-C?”

“He was holding a bunch of flowers just now. A confession? To a teacher? *How gross.*”

“He ratted them out?”

“Yikes, he looks like he could snap. How much would that do, though?”

“Yuuka-chan told me 3-C had a vigil at his desk.”

“How *weak.*”

“It’s not like he can go against them. He’s *quirkless.*”

“Quirkless people really aren’t all that useful, huh?”

“A lot of policemen are quirkless, though.”

“If someone left a vigil at my desk, I would’ve punched them.”

“He’s so pitiful.”

“But really, can you see *him* being a policeman?”

“What does Bakugou-kun call him? Deku?”

“Not even other quirkless people are as useless as he is.”

“Bakugou-kun was right.”

“He’s just a De--”

Izuku closed his classroom door, having entered the same one he did before. More students were there now, but rather than giggling, they seemed to be glaring at him or not looking at him at all. He decided to keep his head down at that, plodding over to his desk.
The classmates that sat near him were at their own desks, muttering something amongst each other. They gave him a sharp look as he shuffled into his seat, but otherwise said nothing else to him. In the inside, Izuku breathed a sigh of relief, then he let himself dip back into the foggy recesses of his mind, one he didn’t wake from even after Kacchan entered the classroom.

---

Fucking extras. They always butted their stupid noses in business they had no shit being in.

He knew some shit had fucked up when he was called to the teacher’s lounge the instant he got to school. He hadn’t even been there for five fucking minutes! What the hell did they want?

That didn’t stop him from still going there, roughly opening the door before practically stomping his way over to the asshole’s desk. His sensei--another extra, if you asked him--turned in his swivel chair to face him, a tired look on his face.

“Bakugou Katsuki. It’s nice to see you today.”

“What is it?” Bakugou asked, voice low with the earnest attempt to not growl at his teacher.

“Well, it seems that there was a coalition between the classmates to give Midoriya-kun a gift.” The man shifted then picking up a pile of shit to show to him. It was a bunch of flowers and a grayed version of Deku’s 2nd year photo in a black frame with a black ribbon. “You wouldn’t happen to know anything about this, would you? Any connections?”

Bakugou scowled. “If you’re having issues with the extras, ask them. I didn’t do shit.”

The man’s eyes narrowed suspiciously, “Bakugou-kun, as you know, this kind of behavior--”

“Isn’t my fucking problem! I’m trying to get into U.A., I don’t have time for petty bullshit like this! The fuck do you want from me?!“

The fucker’s mouth twisted with distaste, but he didn’t say anything else. He sighed, turning around and dumping Deku’s vigil into his trash can.

“I see. Get to class, Bakugou-kun.”

Bakugou didn’t say anything else to him, his rage flaring as he left the teacher’s lounge with the slam of their door. A bunch of insignificant losers in the hallways startled at the sound of the door, but he didn’t care, hands steaming from the little explosions that were threatening to escape his palms.

God, what the fuck was wrong with Deku?! Couldn’t he do anything himself?! Why was he such a fucking wimp?! The bastard almost got him in trouble because their teacher was too much of a dipsh!t to realize that he was several heads above everyone else in this utter cesspool they had the audacity to call a school worthy of him! So of course, why the fuck would he spend his own damn money to get Deku a vigil?! If he wanted to kill the little bitch, he’d do it with his own fucking hands!!

So he slammed the classroom door open, hands absolutely steaming, because someone had to take responsibility for him getting called in, and if Deku couldn’t face the music, he’d force him to.

“Oi, Deku!!” he bellowed, rage hissing from between his lips, “What the fuck?!“

He didn’t care to wait until the fucking nerd looked up and acknowledge him; he rushed over,
pushing desks aside, and grabbed the collar of Deku’s shirt, pulling him nearly out of his chair. His eyes were shadowed over from his hair, but Bakugou didn’t care—Deku knew better than to ignore him, he had to be listening.

“How the hell do you manage to fuck with my life without me even being around?! Why the fuck can’t you deal with shit on your own?! Because of you ratting out that you got a little picked on, I got called in for the stupid prank these extras pulled on you!! Are you trying to screw with me?! Are you really that jealous I’m actually doing something with my life?! Handle your shit by yourself and quit fucking dragging me in it!!”

It was then that Bakugou finally saw Deku’s face.

Deku wasn’t looking at him, not really. His eyes were trained somewhere on his face, not on his eyes, and his pupils seemed a bit dilated, his eyes faded. In fact, his whole face seemed kind of on the pale side. His mouth was a little open, too, sucking in small breaths between his lips. The usual panic that Deku exuded was completely absent, replaced instead by the wavering doll he’d grasped onto.

“I’m...sorry,” he muttered in something of a whisper, “I didn’t...sorry…”

Bakugou’s enraged glare lessened into a firm, grim frown. He’d read about shit like this. The strange glaze over his eyes, the measured breathing, the halted responses. The way Deku was acting like he wasn’t in his own fucking body.

The fuck was Deku dissociating for? That only happened to people who had trauma or something. What a little bitch.

“Oi, Deku, did you actually try to jump off a fucking roof?”

The boy’s eyes opened a little wider, “N-...no…”

Bakugou clicked his tongue, throwing Deku back into his ruddy nerd chair. “Then find something better to do than waste my fucking time over your bullshit.”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned around, heading to his seat. Bakugou didn’t care about the students fixing their desks back, glaring back at the idiot he’d left behind.

Plodding over to his desk, he settled into it roughly, trying to ignore the weird feeling in his gut over the look on Deku’s face.

---

Izuku stayed deep in his foggy state until the end of second period, when it started to lift slowly. He realized then that he’d written his first period class notes in the wrong notebook. He still didn’t feel enough to be bothered by it, but he made a note to copy the notes over to the correct one. The end of third period reintroduced his capacity for emotions. The end of fourth reintroduced his ability to focus. By that time though, it was time for lunch.

He took his bento outside, sitting at one of the benches instead of sitting inside the classroom. He’d realized his classmates were muttering about him during the break between the second and third periods, and he figured he would probably be better off away from them. So he found a secluded bench between the front of the school and the sports fields and settled there, avoiding sitting under the school or near any windows just in case.

It was a strangely quiet area where he could watch the other students walk around, and he
immediately found himself becoming a little happier with his position.

...So are we gonna talk about what all that was or no?

Izuku paused for a moment at the sound of the voice before opening his bento. His mother had given him some egg in today’s one, nice.

“What do you mean?”

You were seriously going to apologize to them after they left a death vigil on your desk? Going to pay for the costs?

The boy felt sweat starting to run down his temple. “I...I, uhm...I don’t...think I was really considering it. I just...I don’t know…”

...Something like this has happened before, hasn’t it.

Izuku didn’t answer, eating some of his rice. He didn’t need to answer, though. His timid silence was answer enough.

When?

“...Uhm...l-last year? I think two years back, too. It just...they just do it sometimes. It’s--”

If you follow that word with ‘okay’, I’m actually going to find a way to become corporeal and bring about armageddon by myself.

Izuku shuddered with the earnestly in the threat, “N-no, it’s not okay. I wasn’t g-going to say it was...I...I’m...” His body slouched where he sat, chopsticks squeezed in between his fingers. “I’m...I’m used to it. I’m s-supposed to be. I don’t understand why it...why it hurt so much this time. M-Maybe it was the effort? They would usually just leave a white lily on my desk or something, but...I mean...a-a whole vigil is a bit...t-too much.”

The lily was too much. Tell me something: how would you feel if another student got a death vigil?

The boy huffed, “I-I would try to help them! Maybe we could find out who did it…”

Would you say they should get used to it?

“No. Absolutely not.”

And what about handling it themselves?

He chewed almost cautiously on little ball of rice in his mouth before he answered. “Something like that can’t really be handled too much alone, especially if no one else did anything to help them out. They would need reliable people to help them sate the situation so it wouldn’t happen again.”

Then what do you think about what Bakugou told you?

Izuku blinked. “Ah...uhm...I-I mean...I can understand why he’d be frustrated. H-He didn’t do anything--”

Except tell you to throw yourself off of a roof and hope you get a quirk in your next life.

“Eh...aa-ah, b-bu--”
And didn’t those kids say they made it after he told you that? Doesn’t that mean they expected you to follow through with it? And even if you hadn’t, which you hadn’t, then wouldn’t that mean they expected you to see it?

“I...I know that, so--”

Would they have done it if Bakugou didn’t say that to you? Wasn’t he then, in some way, an instigator for it? And to choose to do that much--

“It! I! Ah...m-my reaction wasn’t their fault! I d-don’t usually react that badly--”

But you did. Because you did die. Sure, you came back, but you died. That vigil could’ve been real, and the things they would’ve left behind for you would be messages of solitude, immaturity, desperation, and abandonment.

“Th-they only left those because it was a joke!”

Are you laughing?

Izuku was about to answer, but his breath hitched, caught on a sob. He finally noticed then that, somewhere along the line, he’d started to cry. His tears fell in blobs of saline against his bento box, some of it falling onto his food, others of it splashing onto the cloth it had been wrapped in. Raising his hand to his mouth, he tried to hold back some of the stuttering gasps that left him reeling in his seat. His whole body felt warm with a sickness that he knew was purely physical. He tried not to damage his bento as he curled in on himself.

“It...hh--it was...ah--a b-bad joke...b-but, hah, I c-could’ve h-handled it if...ghh...if it hadn’t b-been a-aft...It--hh...it was ju-just...poorly t-timed...mhh...I...j-just need...hh...more time...to...”

He continued to sit there, sobbing above his food, his chopsticks stuck haphazardly into the box. He didn’t notice the occasional student that passed his spot, looking at him with their mixing and strangled teenage emotions on their faces. But, unlike what Izuku had said he would’ve done, none of them approached him. Some even tried to act like he wasn’t there.

He felt alone, and was alone.

Completely.

And, to Izuku, that was just something he felt he’d have to get used to. Because he knew no one else who was like him. There was no one else he knew of who died and came back. There was no one near him with magic.

He was the only one…

And Kacchan was right.

He would have to handle it all by himself.

The voice in his head didn't have the heart to tell him otherwise.

Because, when it came down to the real grit of it, they both knew it was true.
Heya. A few things.

For those of you wondering about the angst in the last chapter, bullying by making fake funeral vigils or putting a white lily on a student’s desk in Japan is actually unfortunately common in severe cases. Bullying in Japanese schools is also, unfortunately, usually a group effort—either through active antagonization, active viewing, or willful ignorance. Read up on it if you’d like, it’s pretty bad. It’s also one of the reasons Japan’s suicide rate is so high.

So then, I imagined Izuku going through this common Japanese method of bullying and simply had to make a chapter about it.

But hey, enough of that.

Also, I’ve got another busy period showing up on Tuesday and maybe Wednesday, so please don’t expect another chapter till about Thursday. Not saying that it’s impossible, but it’s not likely. I’m finishing up my summer classes before fall semester, so...yeah, gotta finish strong, you know?

Again, Thank You guys so much for the comments and stuff! I make it a habit to not reply to them all cause I don’t wanna stuff the comment section with my own stuff, but I just wanna let y’all know that I really, really appreciate them.

Ah, if you want a song rec., I think "The Mother" from the Steven Universe soundtrack fits what happens later on pretty well.

Anyway, onward.

More plot ahead.

The same dark feeling from Friday shot through him in last period.

At first, he had thought it was someone glaring at him particularly hard for his earlier behavior. Or maybe it was another stab from his already disarrayed emotions. But something thrummed in his bloodstream, and he just sort of knew. A flash of panic ran through him at the thought of it finishing its development while he was still in class, but, for the first saving grace of that day, the final bell rang earlier than he anticipated.

He wasn’t on cleaning duty that day, and though he was occasionally requested--forced--to do it, he scurried out of class quickly enough so no one could catch him, not even Kacchan. Even if he was sure he’d probably feel the brunt of his escapism tomorrow, he could wait until then. There were more pressing matters to attend to.

So, pushing aside the emotional turmoil from the whole day and focusing on the task at hand, he trailed his magical instincts—a bloodhound-like ability, one that allows the user to find residual magic, unknown if it can be used to find other magic users—letting it lead him to the monstrous
He was rather surprised when he found himself back at the little forest area that he and Kacchan used to look for bugs in during their summer breaks. Many of the trees had already finished budding and sprouting their leaves, though they were still the bright baby green of new growth. It provided a certain level of shade cover, though not enough for it to really be all that dark; it was more like there were differing patches of light and dark green than any really substantial darkness.

Still untransformed, Izuku crept around the forest area, still hearing the ozone noise that let him know it was still forming, until it came to its crescendo from him being so close to it. He held tightly onto the back of the tree he was hiding behind, taking a deep breath before he peeked around it.

He was...a little surprised. It looked different.

He saw its face first this time, still filled with TV static and featureless, but its body wasn’t long. It was shorter than the last one, though still a little taller than he was and much broader than Friday’s creature. Its body was still horribly misshapened, but in a different way, with a torso too long for its lower legs, which bent backwards at the knees awkwardly, almost like birds’ legs had it actually had feet. Its arms were very long in contrast and bent sideways at the elbows just for it to have its hands on the ground at the same time as its stubby feet. The fingers on the hands were twitching as quickly as its head was, as if it were typing on a computer rather than occasionally making little holes into the ground while it faded in and out of corporeality. Its body was tinted a dark greyish orange instead of the dark blue of the last one.

He shuddered with his full body. “Why do they always look so weird?”

They’re mere mockeries of the bodies they used to be a part of, unable to fully reshape into the same form they were in before. Sometimes they aren’t even that. Residual magic is just terrible all around.

Izuku nodded in agreement, crouching behind the tree as he dug into his backpack. He took out his magic analysis book and started sketching the way it looked. “Physical appearances are similar facially and habitually, but physical features differ greatly from each other. Speculation: the body they were once from is also the—” The boy managed to not choke on his own mumbling as he suddenly realized something. “Uhm...H-Handyman? ‘The bodies they used to be a part of’?”

Huh? Oh, yeah. I thought I told you last time about that...Hmm...Chapter 3, ‘It’s basically the escaped magical potential of another being. Except, where your magic is currently being used inside of a body, that residue has been kicked outside of its body’...yep, I’ve told you about it.

Izuku’s hand was paused above the page at the sentence he hadn’t finished, fingers trembling. “P-Please reword it, then?”

Ah, yeah. So basically, residual magic is magic that doesn’t have a human anymore. It’s lost potential, not untapped like magic usually is.

“U-Uhm, I want to be sure I-I’m clear when I write this...’kicked outside’ right? Not...u-uhm...e-errant magic?”

Yeah. Kicked out.

“Then,” he mumbled, listening as the creature in front of him stopped screeching in static, its body becoming fully corporeal as the sounds of the world seemed to silence themselves, “someone is doing the kicking....r-right?”

Hmm...yep, sounds about right.
Izuku stayed still, not moving as the residue rose its head and seemed to look around--or at least it tried to, it’s head just wouldn’t stop twitching. While it swiveled its head, it was occasionally wracked with something like a seizure, unable to keep moving until it ceased. After it got a gage of its surroundings, it let out a sliver of white noise before it started to drag its body into the darker part of the forest.

Its twitchy fingers dug into the ground whenever it set its hand down, its arms moving forward, bending unnaturally, as its little legs picked and quivered at the grass to keep the lower half of its strange physical form up with the upper half. Something about the way it moved made him feel sick, like it was constantly breaking its bones, if it had any. He imagined it didn’t.

So...you gonna transform and get kicking, or what?

“Ah...uhm...i-it’s not hurting anyone yet. N-Noone is around here anyway, s-so...I was going to just...uhm...study it.” he whispered, carefully putting his backpack back on. He didn’t slot his analysis book away, keeping it in hand along with a pencil. “I-I don’t know much about how these work, so...i-if it’s keeping calm for now, I think I can use it.”

Hmm. Smart move.

Izuku could almost hear the voice grin.

Thus began his trailing activity, keeping a few, very careful paces behind the strange magic as it bumbled its way through the little forest area. For the most part, he kept his notebook open to scribble down some occasional notes, but other times, he made just enough noise to catch the creature’s attention, and he had to hide while the thing searched before it gave up.

“It seems to repel the presence of most living creatures--I haven’t heard a single bird or seen any bugs or other animals since it solidified. Perhaps it has an area of influence in which other living beings can feel the danger of the residue. Does this also work on humans? Also, do animals have magic?”

In the same sense it’s rare for animals to have quirks, it’s rare for animals to have magic.

“Oh, thanks,” he muttered lowly, erasing his question to replace it with the statement. “What in animals allows them to sense the being where it seems that humans cannot sense it? Then again, the animals didn’t become quiet until after it became fully corporeal. Only other magic users seem to know when and where they appear.”

Watch where you’re walking.

Izuku barely managed to not squeak in panic at the warning, shuffling to hide behind the closest tree. Just as the voice had warned him, he had gotten closer to the monster than before, its body suddenly stock still. It wasn’t facing him, no, but it had stopped for some reason. Izuku clutched the tree as he watched it for any sudden movements.

After a tense moment, the creature let out a whisper of white noise, as it tended to occasionally, and kept moving forward, angling its awkwardly large and gangly body around a bright spot where there were no trees to stop the sun from beaming down. The boy stayed still until it was a healthier distance away from him before he began to follow again.

“...I think...it may know I’m here,” he whispered, writing down how the thing avoided brighter spaces in place of darker ones.

Maybe. What makes you say that, though?
“I...I don’t think it stopped just to find a way to avoid the light. I think...I think it wanted me to get closer. It knew I was distracted, so it stopped while I was, waiting for me to get in range.” He paused for a moment before writing down the speculated range--a hand or two further than arm’s length.

“These are...maybe smart. They were once in humans, so...perhaps their education levels are similar to their past self...or no?”

‘No’?

“M-magic is unavailable potential. P-perhaps whoever this magic belonged to simply had the potential to be cunning.”

Hmm...interesting theory. Maybe you’re right.

Izuku stopped walking for a moment to keep a careful eye on the creature ahead. It was moving still, but after a few moments, it moved forward faster, hissing more noise. It had slowed down for him. It definitely knew he was there.

“...It’s getting impatient,” he realized, a chill running down his spine.

 Seems like it.

“That means it wants to attack me. It wants to, but it hasn’t yet. Why?”

Izuku kept his distance, but then stopped. Without taking his eyes off of the creature, he pulled his backpack off of his back and put his notebook away. If he was right, he wouldn't have time to write anything down when it happened.

As he did, he finally started to notice the tree density. It had become more dense in their area, and the sky had since started to darken just a bit. There were more shadows than there had been when it first fully formed.

*It's waiting for it to get darker,* he thought.

He wouldn't be waiting around for that. They were still in territory that Izuku could probably work with, but he wanted to get to a better place. If he was right…

He placed his backpack back on and started to walk backwards, trying to not break sight of the creature. He watched carefully as its form made its way further into the trees, but he still didn't pursue it. If it had wanted to escape, it would've tried already.

But of course, it probably didn't think it needed to escape. It probably thought it was on the other side of the game they were playing.

So he kept backing away, slowly losing sight of it as it went deeper among the trees.

Hey, it's getting away.

“No it's not.”

He kept backing up, watching as it stopped in the distance. Then, slowly, its head still glitching on its own neck, it turned to face him, the static in its face scrambling faster.

It let out a loud hiss of white noise, turning to face him, angled its limbs in a way he hadn’t seen yet, and *bolted at him.*

Izuku cried out, eyes wide as he nearly tripped on his feet to turn around and run. He still had his
wits about him though, and reached for his watch to transform. The ribbons billowed out from the watch, surrounding him like a meteor heading for Earth, before receding to reveal the boy fully transformed and running much faster than before. He barely avoided knocking into a tree from the change in speed, but managed to just barely by scuffing it with his side. To his surprise, he barely felt it, but that wasn’t really what he was focused on.

The trees behind him had started to creak and rustle from the impact of the creature forcing its hissing way through the dense collection. Izuku couldn’t see it, wasn’t going to risk looking behind him until he had some sort of plan, but he was sure it was leaving a path of destruction.

Well, now it just seems mad.

“I’ve noticed!” he yelled back, jumping over a fallen log he’d avoided before. A few moments later, he heard what he presumed was that very same log cracking under the pressure of its grappling grasp.

I mean, you seem like a pretty close-range sort of fighter, right? Shouldn’t you get close to it?

“I-I know, I know!”

His mind was running about as fast as he was, trying to tune out the static cries and earthy destruction behind him. If he stopped, it would probably ram full-force into him, and he wasn’t exactly sure if he could face off against that. If he turned around, it’d be the same thing. If he jumped up and tried to jump over its back, maybe he could get behind it?

Just as he thought that, he noticed the sounds of devastation behind him had lessened considerably and hazarded a quick glance over his shoulder. The monster had taken up that same, strange position, with its hands firmly on the ground in front of it, fingers digging into the ground, body held low.

Izuku quickly jumped off to the side as he heard it take off, ducking behind trees to the side of their initial running route. He’d done so on good time, managing to avoid the reaching fingers that sailed past him, quickly followed by the rest of the creature’s body.

_Physically-induced speed boost_, Izuku thought, _Not as fast usually, but can get bursts of speed from literally launching itself. Probably the only way it’s followed me along so far._

He straightened up, eyes following the path of wreckage it left behind. He also noticed then that there were splinters sticking out from its arms and parts of its face. Big ones, ones that made him cringe at the thought of him having them.

“Not impenetrable…” he murmured, “Can be harmed by physical objects once corporeal...maybe consider weapons?”

He shook his head; it wasn’t the time to be theorizing about that just yet. He needed to shut the monster down first.

It had stopped its forward rampage as quickly as it could upon losing sight of him, its head twitching around chaotically as it hissed--angrily?-- at the loss of its target. Its back was still too him though, and with the creature caged in from being able to turn too easily, Izuku ran forward, taking advantage of the situation. As he did, he picked up two big, splintered pieces of wood.

Its head had just turned his direction when he jumped onto its back with something of a strangled war cry. It didn’t have time to move its lumbering body out of the way as he landed, stabbing the two pieces of wood into its back, using it as leverage to hold onto it. It didn’t even cry out in static noise at what certainly would’ve hurt him, instead opting to hiss even more, swaying.
Izuku barely got a foothold when it slammed the side of its body into a tree, jostling him. He squeaked as his feet scrabbled on the back of the creature for purchase, but he’d yet to let go of the wood he’d stabbed into it. Quickly, it shuffled over to the other side, slamming against another tree as Izuku’s hands prickled from being poked by the wood and the other splinters along its body. His legs swung around without too much control on his part as he struggled to gain some ground.

The next time it hit a tree, though, it had its back fully turned toward it, smacking Izuku’s body into it full-force. His head cracked back against the wood of the tree as he gasped in pain. But through the shock, his magic reacted involuntarily, travelling through his arms like lightning. It caused the wood to glow then, brightly sparking with yellow magic, before it struck through the monster it was stabbed into, lichtenberg figures trailing suddenly along the creature’s back. That’s when it screamed as close as its voice could get to one, like ripping neutrons apart.

It did it again, slamming Izuku against the tree twice more, and each time, Izuku sent a jolt of magic through the being, those times voluntarily. It staggered on its long arms, its small legs barely holding up its lower half at that point. The boy also panted heavily, his head swimming from the hard contact, his hands hurting from his effort to stay on its back.

Suddenly, the creature screeched and rose onto its tiny back legs, arms reaching up into the air. But it didn’t stay up for long, falling backwards onto its back, taking Izuku with it.

The moment his body hit the hard ground, it blew all the air out of his lungs, spittle trailing out of his mouth from the impact. His sight flickered and quickly colored black at the edges, but despite the hard force, his chest didn’t cave, and his legs, throbbing with agony as they were, didn’t break. Still, his hands loosened from around the shards of wood he’d impaled into its back, his body going slack on the ground from dizziness and the heavy weight on him.

Kid?

The residue twitched and hissed, bending its arms backwards to get some ground under its hands. It pushed itself up with effort, and slowly crab-walked off of Izuku’s body. He gasped with the air that suddenly could enter his lungs, trying to get his wits about himself.

Kid, get it together!

The monster’s voice crackled as it sat before pushing itself up to sit upright, bringing its hands down in front of it. Shuddering, it got its body to stand again, slowly turning around among the trees to face Izuku.

Kid!

He barely managed to blink the growing darkness out of his eyes before he heard the warning of loud static above him. Gazing up, he could only watch as the creature crawled forward quickly, hand poised to grab him. Forcing himself to move, he rolled to the side just as its hand impacted right where his chest was, two of its fingers still managing to catch him and curl on his chest.

For some reason, he felt a sharp terror run through his body. It was touching him through his clothes, but he could still feel it as if it were holding onto him skin to magic. It was cold, like steel, and somehow terribly invasive.

At the touch, an adrenaline rush like nothing else he’d felt before filled his veins.

Using the sudden energy, he curled back in toward the creature’s arm, bending the two fingers unnaturally in the process. He wrapped an arm around the thing’s wrist, keeping it from moving,
then made a decisive kick toward its torso.

Magic sparked through his leg and foot, bursting through the creature’s other side in a blast of yellow energy. The blow made the trees rustle, leaves forced off of their branches.

The energy connected with the lichtenberg figures from before, creating a solid connection from back to chest. From there, the magic trailed through its body up to its face, while the residue screeched, a static crescendo echoing in the forest. Like the last time, its facial static turned more yellow until it shut off like a powered down TV screen, its body freezing into place.

Izuku gasped again, using his still thrumming adrenaline to scramble from under the residue’s body. As he staggered back away from it, the creature’s body started to grey out, loosing color as it turned into stone. Once done, its body crackled before its torso bisected, the lower half falling before the upper half, collapsed into a pile of soot on the grass below.

He stayed silent as the same crystals like before rose, three as well, but instead of the color being grayish-blue, it was grayish-orange. The same white core ribboned energy inside of the shifting colors.

From there, the adrenaline started to fade, and the boy collapsed onto his knees, breathing harshly.

Hah, shoot, kid! That was amazing, too! I mean--

“What was that?”

Hmm?

“Th...th-that feeling…Wh-when it t-touched me…” he muttered quickly, his hands grasping onto the opposite arm as they clenched, protecting the core of his chest where the fingers had prickled him most, body shaking, “I...It felt...l-like it was l-le-leaching from me! Wh-what…”

Prickly feeling? Hm… Ah.

“What…”

Well, you know how you defeat these things, right? You push enough of your magic into its body until it stabilizes into those crystals. Well...I mean, it doesn’t really mind taking some of your magic, it just wants to digest it the way it wants to.

His pupils wavered as frightened tears sprung to his eyes, “It...it wanted to eat me?”

Ah...well...in a sense, I guess so. Magic can, uh...you know how you can multiply zero by zero and get zero? Well, that’s similar to magic, similar but not the same. You get rid of residue by subtracting its energy and stabilizing it. It does, though, have the potential to add to itself if it gets magic from another source.

“O...oh…” he said, blinking as he let the tears trail down his cheeks. After a moment he choked on his own spit and leaned forward, groaning in pain.

Dang, right. You did take some pretty hard hits, kid. Go ahead and move me toward those crystals.

Izuku groaned at the mere thought of moving, but he did, shifting forward until he could point the watch toward the floating crystals. The twelve pupils of the watchface thrummed with energy before encompassing the whole face yet again, the crystals floating towards it until they were sucked into the black hole.
It took a second, but Izuku noticed that the pain in his chest started to fade, if just a little bit. A sick chill of emotion started to cloud his already troubled mind.

“...Uhm...when I do that...when you do that...am I...eating the crystals?”

Hmm? Oh. Uh. Yeah. In a sense.

The tears started to fall from him even faster then, the undefined emotion turning into a deep regret and guilt.

“No! I don’t want to do that! W-Why do I have to--”

Hey, kid, I know it’s gross and all, but you kinda need to.

“Why?!” he cried.

It’s better that you absorb it rather than another residue, isn’t it?

Izuku paused at that, breath still hitching from his tears.

Look, kid, what you’re doing isn’t unnatural for magical girls...or, well, boys...also non-binaries...magical people. If you don’t have enough magic to sustain yourself, you get a bit of an energy boost by absorbing the residue. I mean, there’s other ways to do it, like eating healthier or sleeping more, but those also often take more time than it would if you just absorbed some other being’s magic.

It’s not wrong, either, you know. The residue is from people who have somehow lost their potential. And magic is unavailable potential. You’re not the only one with that, it’s just that I’m being a conduit for you to access that potential.

The boy choked on a sob, but still absorbed the information like a sponge. “So...then...anyone...everyone has magic?”

Bingo. And in some cases, even animals.

“Then...it wasn’t trying to lure me because I’m a ma--...uhmm,” his cheeks flushed at his near slip-up, “I...have active magic.”

Nope. Unless you’re transformed, I’m pretty sure you look like a regular human to them. It would’ve done that to anyone. The only difference is that you can fight back really well. To be honest, this universe is lucky to have quirks. I mean, at least some of them have a way to defend themselves.

“Right...” he sighed, the sadness in his chest lifting a little as he started to try moving, “because it’s affected by physical attacks.”

Yep. That’s what I meant by ‘not exactly’ in Chapter 3. A quirk that affects others won’t work on magic, but a self-effective strength augmentation quirk has a better advantage than someone with a normal amount of strength. A sliver of a better advantage--after all, it’s still a quirk--but still.

Izuku nodded, perplexed by the voice’s use of “Chapter 3” in its statement, but deciding not to address it. He then moved, standing up as much as he could. He stayed a bit bent over from the still fading pain, but it was better than being completely bent. Groaning at the feeling in his muscles, he knew he was probably going to bruise.

Hey kid, might want to get a move on. I doubt no one’s noticed the damage.
Nodding again, he looked around to find the route he’d arrived in. He...might be a bit lost, though. Sighing, he reached back to take his backpack off, but suddenly felt a thrum in his magic before he felt something rectangular in his right hand. He’d jolted in surprise at the feeling, but didn’t throw what was suddenly in his hand away. Blinking, he pulled his arm back around and looked at what it was.

It was his phone, but...it also wasn’t.

The case for his phone was covered with pink and yellow swirls with a pink lemonade phone chain hanging from the case. The screen looked like his usual GPS, only more defined in weird ways. It was more readable and brighter in a strange way. Two search buttons were available: Find Location and Find Residue.

“...What.”

Oh, lookie there. Ah, I remember this happening with one of my friend’s magical girls. Their makeup powder case turned into a locater like this one. I was hoping you’d get one. Modern day technology is so convenient.

“...Okay, you know what? I just want to go home and take a nap.”

The Find Location button pressed itself, inputting his home address without him pressing the buttons. The destination was set for “Midoriya Izuku’s Home Dome”.

...Pffft.

“Don’t.”

---

“I see you managed to get the area pretty well blocked off,” Detective Tsukauchi said good-humoredly as he approached, camera in hand. Detective Hashiro snorted in indignation.

A little ways away from them, the police were holding off a small crowd of peering people. They weren’t being unruly per se, but they were rather persistent in their effort to at least glimpse the damage the Gray Man had left behind. She wasn’t particularly sure why they struggled so much. It wasn’t hard to see.

The beauty of the nearly set sun was disrupted by the destruction around them. Trees had been knocked over, scratches etched into wood, big splinters of tree matter lying on random places along the ground. Then, again, there was the burnt, sooty remains of the Gray Man, its dead body having left an imprint in the grass that had killed it down to the dirt.

“I did what I could, at least,” she replied, “I had gotten the message from Inaba-san that her faction had gotten a call from some kids who had stumbled upon this place. Said the office had gotten reports of some heavy damage going on in the forest area and had already prepared some troops in case it was a villain attack. Which, well, in a sense, it was.”

Detective Tsukauchi took a photo of the dead remains, “But the glowing girl was here first.”

“Not really confirmed, unfortunately. No one caught sight of her this time. But with the way the Gray Man ended up, I think it’s a good assumption.”

The man hummed as he took another picture of a nearby tree, the bark damaged from impact.
Detective Hashiro sighed, taking her own pictures as she sent them to her phone. “I suppose, though, we should be thankful for her.”

“I agree. This is a public park, after all.”

She didn’t reply, looking up the small incline of the hill, where more trees had been slashed at and debarked. She blinked at that before turning to look down at the burnt shadow near them.

“...It was pretty big. Bigger than the ones we have,” she said aloud, comparing the size of her foot to the hand of the creature. When she thought about it, it probably could’ve made a fully closed fist around her waist. “Do you have any ideas on who the girl could be?”

“None yet, but with the second take-down so close to Musutafu, we might be able to break down some of our potentials.” He held his camera down, away from his face. “Still, it’s hard to identify exactly what kind of quirk she has.”

“Honestly, I want to say it was just crowd confusion. Even in the new witness confession I got right before the call, there were too few and too many descriptors for her all at once. ‘Glowing’, ‘in pink’, ‘green and yellow hair’, ‘star-shaped eyes’...”

Tsukauchi paused then. “...‘Star-shaped’?”

Detective Hashiro paused then, turning to him. “Yes. Does it ring a bell?”

The man turned to her then, smiling lightly.

“Not mine, but I think I know someone for whom it would.”
Finding Time

Chapter Notes

*drags my bedraggled corpse back onto AO3*

I am...so close to being done with my finals. I can practically taste the end. Never take Spanish over the summer for 5 weeks at the same time as an 11 week History class you will regret it don't you do it I am telling you this because I care about you guys.

I’m going to be done with my classes on Monday, but the week of break I was supposed to have afterward is wrecked by my work schedule (why...why would they schedule me for six days in a row...why...).

I meant to have this out on Saturday, but early Sunday will have to do.

So...eh...I’m tired, but I’m also Izuku-deprived.

So here’s an update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Thank you for coming in on such a short notice, Yagi,” Detective Tsukauchi greeted as he entered his office, holding a cup of coffee for himself and a light tea for the man he spoke with.

The man already in the room, one of the tall, skeletal sort with ragged blond hair and piercing blue eyes smiled as much as his thin, malnourished appearance would allow. He took the drink with a grateful nod. “No, it’s my pleasure to help you out when I can, Tsukauchi. What can I do for you?”

“Well, you are aware I’m collaborating with Detective Hashiro on the Gray Man case, and we have a particular lead that I believe you could possibly help us with,” he replied, taking a seat in his chair as he placed his coffee down beside his notebook. He wrote the morning’s date and time on it in the upper corner before glancing up with a smile at his friend. “I’m sure you’re familiar with the sturdiness of the Gray Men we’ve apprehended so far.”

Yagi snorted derisively once he finished sipping his tea, “‘Sturdiness’ sure is one way to put it. In all my years, I don’t believe I’ve ever seen someone not only survive a pole through the torso, but also keep fighting off the heroes trying to apprehend them just as fiercely as if they weren’t literally skewered. To be honest, it was a bit frightening to see such tenacity.”

Detective Tsukauchi nodded, “I completely understand. Even now, we’re having a struggle just keeping the ones we have in custody still.”

The blond man rose a brow, glowing eyes not betraying his shock, “Even in Tartarus?”

“Even there.”

“Hmm... Well, I suppose it makes sense. I’ve recently been having my doubts that they are even human.”

Tsukauchi sighed, “I almost know for a fact they aren’t. Even so, we don’t have any other solid
explanation as to who or what they are. We’re stuck treating them as human until then, especially since you never know how quirks develop these days.”

“So then, what lead do you have that I can help you with?”

“Well, recently, we’ve come upon two more Gray Men, one on April 10th, the day of your arrival, and again on April 13th,” Tsukauchi looked up at the man across from him, “Both were found dead.”

Yagi coughed, and Tsukauchi reflexively reached for his heavy-duty napkins, but he realized a moment later that it was simply that the man choked on his tea. His usually narrowed, unintentionally severe gaze was open wide, neon irides searching his face for a joke and finding none.

“Dead? Seriously? As in, someone defeated it?”

“Yes. The both were in Musutafu, one in the back alley of a neighborhood cram school, the other in Amidara Regional Park,” he replied, pulling up the photos on his computer before showing them to the hero, the shadows of their bodies imprinted into the ground. “From the first occurrence, we got descriptions of a child in something of a maid’s dress with a currently unidentified quirk. If I’m familiar, you told me about meeting a child like that on your first day here.”

“Hmm...ah, the star-eyed child?” the man asked, turning away from the screen turned toward him.

Tsukauchi gave a relieved smile. “Yes, that’s the one. I was hoping you could give us some descriptors on what this child looked like.”

Yagi placed his cup down on his friends desk, carefully away from the papers on it. “You believe the child I met that first day is the one getting rid of the Gray Men somehow...well, I suppose that’s not farfetched....hmm, no, not at all. Even when I met her, I was unable to determine what kind of quirk she had.”

“‘She’?” Tsukauchi asked, making a note.

“Well, I presume so. She didn’t correct me when I addressed her as a girl.”

“I see, thank you.” He noted it down quickly before putting his pen on the next line. “Well then, you saw her face-to-face that day. What can you tell me about her?”

The man smiled as brightly as his body would allow. “Well, she seemed to a very earnest kid. She seemed to be going to a cosplay cafe or something, which I presume is where the dress came from. Hmm...she had light green and yellow hair, was wearing a rabbit clip in her hair. A big one, white with big yellow ears. Instead of usual eyes, she had yellow, four-pointed stars. Her nose was...” Yagi paused. “...It was...hm. And her cheeks were...eh...she looked like...”

At the lessening of the man’s voice, Detective Tsukauchi looked up from his paper. “Yagi-san?” He frowned further at the look on the man’s face.

Yagi’s eyes were severe, narrowed with confusion and introspection as he held a hand to his chin. “...Strange.”

“What is it?”

“I know my facial recognition is much better than this. I know this for a fact, and yet...” Yagi gave him a piercing look, “I cannot remember anything about her face save for her eyes.”
Tsukauchi has known Yagi for many, many years. They’ve been friends for as long as he could remember. He liked to think he knew Yagi well, especially knew the level of intelligence his good friend had. A part of that intelligence was based in his memory, in his ability to remember faces and body features, in particular. Before Yagi had decided to take on One for All, he’d been looking to be a detective with his particular skill.

But for him to not remember someone’s face...

“I could tell you everything else. The clothes, the notebook she had with her, her behaviors, everything. But no matter how much I try to remember her face, all I see is whiteness with big, starry eyes,” he murmured, irritation coloring his tone at his failure, “It’s like her features are at the back of my brain and the tip of my tongue, but I cannot get them to fall out. This...was this a part of her quirk?”

“...To be honest, I can’t say yes,” he replied, marking notes down, “If it is, then the girl would have to have more than one quirk, and that simply isn’t possible. After all…”

“Right. She was the one who killed the Gray Men. Her quirk would likely be offensive…” the man trailed off again, “Unless...perhaps you aren’t dealing with quirks.”

The detective leaned back in his chair. “That’s...been a theory of mine. The Gray Men have so far been completely bloodless. We cannot collect genetic data from them, and they do not seem to have physical cells. Even the dust collected at the site of the dead Gray Men dissipated into thin air, into a gaseous form we couldn’t detect. All that ends up left of them is the imprint on the ground, and that could be cleaned up, as if it was never there in the first place.”

“What about the burn into the ground in the park?”

“The grass where the Gray Man died definitely also died, but even after studying the dirt, we cannot determine a cause. There was no poison, no unnatural substance, nothing. The grass simply died where it laid.”

Yagi hummed, “This is...disturbing to say in the least. What will you do?”

Tsukauchi breathed out a tired sigh before leaning forward again. “For now, I believe you’ve given me good enough evidence to suspect that we are no longer dealing with something quirk related. We may need to call the special forces unit. But until we know for sure, we’ll be doing what we can. So.” He picked his pad up, flipping the page. “Can you give me an estimate of how tall she was? What objects she had with her? We can possibly at least make something of a profile off of this.”

Yagi Toshinori--All Might--nodded firmly. “Of course, my friend.”

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Izuku spent his Tuesday at school with his head held low, avoiding his classmates whenever he could. The new, hand-shaped burn mark on his wrist, though, spoke of an encounter with his main tormentor. He’d felt a little blessed that the explosive boy had decided he wasn’t worth too much time that day--despite absorbing the crystals, his body was still healing from the harsh punishment it took--and other than a blow to his self-esteem at a reminder of his weakness and uselessness, he was relatively unharmed. Rather than having the pleasure of avoiding the boy, his true luck came when he was able to escape being forced to take on one of his classmates’ cleaning duties, being able to slip out quickly after school was over. He also didn’t feel the sharp, sick aura of enemy magic for the whole day.
For the first time since last Friday, he felt like he had some extra time for himself. For right then, anyway.

So of course he spent it finding an abandoned place to test his abilities. He’d already taken a short train ride to get him further from home and had sent his mother a text message saying he’d be home late. After all, he didn’t want to frighten her like he did the last time he was out long.

He traveled to the outskirts of Musutafu, nearing the coastline where, in contrast to most other places with a coastal view, there was less business and fewer people.

Hey, kid, are you aware of this really cool thing called...a vacation? It’s a wondrous thing where you take a break and do a bunch of self-care. Honestly, it’s a very popular magic.

Izuku sighed as he walked down the mostly abandoned streets near the coast, headphones in his ears though he listened to nothing, “I don’t think I really have time for a vacation, to be honest. I mean, I’m still in school as it is, and I don’t know when the next residue is going to show up, and I real can’t… I’m, uhm...n-not all that great at fighting.”

Oh, I dunno about that. You’ve given the last two some pretty good kicks.

“Yeah, after they threw me into walls and trees and the actual ground. Which, I’m pretty sure my ribcage should’ve collapsed from that thing landing on me.”

Eh, probably, but you were transformed, so it’s okay.

The boy nodded, knowing this. He’d noted down a few things after he got home before he took a bath to assess and soothe the damage. Not only had his speed and agility improved, but so had his constitution. Blows that should’ve severely injured him or broken his arms simply left him with a deep, throbbing ache in his body and some pretty harsh bruises. Still, they were healing faster than he’d expected, and were already in the bluish stage before they would yellow from healing.

“That happened faster than usual, too. Was it because of the crystals?”

Partially. The crystals feed into your magic reserves and give you a boost in certain areas. Your magic just tends to feed it into your physical maintenance.

Izuku passed a few roadside shops without saying anything, a heavy question on his mind. “Is it...uhm...normal for other magical...magicians?”

Yeah, that works. I mean, usually it’s said as mahou shoujo or majo, but magician works, too, if you're more comfortable with that.

“Oh, uh...is it normal for other m-magicians to heal as quickly as I have?”

Ehhh...not really…I mean, I can answer that question if you want, but it gets into uncomfortable territory regarding your current living status.

“Ah...” A little bit of coldness flowed over him, like a stream ran over his body. “Uh...g-go ahead.”

Well, because some of your very large amount of magic is being used to keep you alive, healing and constitution comes more easily to you than it would to other magicians. Ah, to be more specific, your cells no longer rely on ATP as its primary source of energy. I mean, if you eat food, your body will function as usual and use that to keep up the cell cycle, but where your body would do it on its own before, it now is stimulated by magic. Magic can alter the speed at which the cells reproduce, so you heal faster. You could also rely completely on magic to stay living, so outside sustenance is no longer
necessary for you. You still need sleep, though. In fact, magic works faster whilst you sleep—since it could put less energy to maintaining your conscious functions, it can put more effort into injured cells.

“...And without magic?”

You know the answer to that, kid.

Izuku didn’t say anything else for a little while until he finally walked near the abandoned coast.

The place known as Dagobah Municipal Beach Park was much less a beach park and much more a trash dump. Despite being on the coast, it was piled high with trash that the prefecture apparently deemed unnecessary to clean up. As long as it was away from the major part of the prefecture, near U.A. and other such places, it seemed it didn’t matter what the state of the area was in. Quite frankly, it stank of seawater and salted rust. The sand, where you could see it amongst the trash, anyway, looked nice. Even the pier looked like it could give a very pretty view on another day.

How unfortunate, that no one’s appreciated this place. How’s this for a training ground, though? It doesn’t seem like anyone really comes here. Even if someone did, you could probably hide behind some trash or something.

Izuku gazed over the area with a frown on his face before turning back toward the streets. Sure enough, no one was really around. It looked like it was too smelly and dirty-looking for many people to get close. After all, despite being so trashy, it was near a richer area than his own apartment complex. How the citizens of the area let it get that bad, he’d never know. But at least the wouldn’t go looking at the result of their inaction.

“...Okay, I think this’ll work,” he muttered, pulling his notebook out of his backpack before finding the stairs to get down to the beach.

On the sand, he was happy that the soles of his shoes were so thick. He was sure he couldn’t see all of the metal and glass among the sand of the beach, so having good foot protection at the moment was a must. He didn’t want to end up needing a tetanus shot. Ah, actually...

“Handyman, uhm, because I’m...uh...u-undead, can I get sick?”

Ah, well, not really? I mean, you can experience sickness symptoms, but they’re much lighter than they would be if you were never-dead. Like, colds and fevers and seasonal allergies aren’t viable for you anymore, but a serious illness, like a stomach virus, would be felt, but not to the same extent as the never-dead living.

“So, I can’t get tetanus?”

I’m not going to answer that. Don’t get reckless, kid. Your body is managed by magic, and you’ve died once already, but don’t go thinking you’re invincible.

Izuku started sweating nervously, laughing lightly at the concern in the voice. “S-sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. I was just wondering.” The boy didn’t sound nearly as sorry as he possibly should, eyes scanning the rubble for a good place to settle. He found a small, clear line in between two big piles of trash, one pile lined by a broken refrigerator laying on its side. He trotted over to it, checking it and the area around it for any sharp edges. When he found none, he sat on it and opened his notebook.

Hmmh. Anyway, what are you trying to test?

He flipped to the page he had finished up on Monday’s residue incident, before turning to look at the
piles of trash around him. “Yesterday, when I fought against the residue, I stabbed it in the back with some wood. It seemed like my magic actually kind of...flowed through it? Kind of like in the same sense that you’re apparently the conduit between my magic and me, I think I can create objects that extend my magic, like the wood had.” He paused, eyes locking onto the handle of a baseball bat.

Standing up, looked around the beach and the road up above, making sure no one else was nearby. When he was assured of this, he sighed, his face flushing as he pressed the button on the watch. Within moments, the ribbons of light receded again, and he was in his transformed form, starry eyes blinking open as he pouted a little.

Hey now, I though you liked the dress!

His face reddened further as his mouth pursed, nervous sweat trailing down the side of his temple. “I-I mean, I don’t have a pr-problem with it. It’s just...uhm…”

Kid, I don’t care how many times I’ll need to tell you, but you look really cute! Don’t worry about it!

“Sh-shush!” he hissed, embarrassed. Quickly, he wrapped his hands around the end of handle of the baseball bat that was embedded into the trash pile. He put his foot on the rubble above it to stabilize it, making sure it would lead to the trash version of a landfall, and tugged on it quickly. Luckily, it seemed that his transformed strength was in effect as well, and, with only two or three extra tugs needed, the baseball bat was removed from being lodged among all the other gunk.

The bat was grimey, covered with the slick sheen of some sort of spilled oil at its head, turning the wood a weird, puke-green color until the gradient of color turned tan at the cleaner part of it near the grip. Speaking of the grip, it was splintered and cracking, and the entire length of it was almost polka-dotted with bent nails.

Izuku blinked at the condition of the nails, noting the slightly dried brown color on some of them as well as the head of the bat. His entire body shuddered with the chill that ran down his spine.

Errrh...maybe find something else to test with?

“Ah. Yeah.” Izuku reached back and chucked the bat into the air, over the hill of trash.

He stood still for a second, wondering about his gut reaction before he shuddered again, turning back to the pile in hope of finding something better.

Eventually he did, finding a dirty, rusted crowbar. It had nicks in the sides of it and the end of the bar looked stripped from overuse, but the red on it was purely paint rather than possibly being someone’s blood, so it was infinitely much better.

“This should do...uhm…” he glanced back at his notebook, “I don’t know if I can mimic the desperation I’d felt then but...maybe I could try?” Quickly, as an afterthought, he picked up his pencil and scribbled down “Test #1: Crowbar”.

Maybe it’s not just the desperation. Just...try feeling it, you know? Act like it’s an extension of your body.

“That sounds like a quote from a martial arts tape.”

Well. Maybe it is. Just try it.

Izuku frowned, eyes squinting down at the watch incredulously. Still, he had nothing better to go off of. So, he turned around, facing the other, towering wall of rubbish, deciding to use it as his target.
He looked around it until he decided on a target—a broken picture frame near the middle. It was low enough for him to aim at it, and he would probably be able to see the effects of his force.

Jogging over to the spot, he gave the picture frame a long, hard look, glaring at it like it had done him wrong. Then, without much thought to it, he swung at the frame like he was holding a baseball bat.

He closed his eyes belatedly realizing the threat of broken glass. Just as he heard it shatter, he also heard the crunch of metal and a loud creaking noise that traveled along the pile, displacing cans and soda tops that pattered down the pile onto the sand. After a second, he opened his eyes.

He’d broken the frame and dented the washer behind it, and his hit had shaken some of the rubbish, but other than that, there wasn’t too much damage.

Izuku huffed, “No...no, that’s not right. I didn’t even really feel like it was a part of me…”

Yeah. To put a dent into it, you’ve gotta put some intent into it.

The boy snorted out a laugh, a grin spreading on his face at the pun, before his eyes snapped open, face flushing with embarrassment. Why was his laugh so high pitched, geez!

He backed away before finding a metal bucket of some sort. Deciding to use it, he picked it up and placed it where the frame had been before he settled back into a stance, almost like he were waiting for a pitcher to throw a ball. His hands clenched around the metal as he tried to focus...just focus...focus and destroy...

He felt energy thrum in his arm and swung, keeping his eyes open to witness the impact.

With his eyes open, the boy could see his magic change the way the crowbar looked, if only a bit. The red paint turned a pinkish shade, and the crowbar seemed to spark with a yellow energy before its impact with the object in front of it.

This time, there was a great, resounding din of crushing metal, like several old cars being destroyed at a wrecking yard. The metal bucket practically obliterated in front of him, the shrapnel from it flying backwards into the metal behind it before it, too, was punched in with the force of energy Izuku had put into his swing. Magic sparked across the place he’d hit the pile, and once it ceased, it left a good sized dent the trash, enough were three or four of him in fetal position could fit into it.

Izuku’s eyes lit up, as did the grin on his face, the stars expanding with his glee.

Heh, nice one.

“That is...amazing...” he gasped. Turning around, he quickly scurried over to his notebook, taking up his pencil. “The force of my hits can be improved if I use a weapon! It needs me to channel my intent into it...it also appears to change the appearance of the weapon, if only temporarily. Perhaps there’s a way to make the additional magic effect last longer? Hmm…” He paused. “…But...I think my legs are stronger? They always seem to go down faster once I kick it at the right angle...well. Test #2: Leg power.”

He set the crowbar down on the refrigerator and turned around, glancing around for another spot to target. Near the spot where he’d destroyed the bucket and dented the trash, there was an old, broken television, its screen cracked diagonally, the body of the screen damaged beyond repair. It was at a low enough position for him to kick, too, so he decided to make that his target. Jogging back over to it, he got a good look at where he wanted to aim his kick on the screen before backing up.

He positioned himself into a mildly alright kickboxing stance, his own experience being what he’s
seen and remembered from hero fights. Fists up to protect his face, he glared at the broken television screen, trying to imagine it as if it were a residue’s face. It was almost too easy to imagine it, and something in him expected the TV to suddenly turn on. An unreasonable fear tingled in his chest, and he sucked in a solid breath, holding it as he shifted his weight to kick.

He had done so too forcefully and nearly knocked himself off balance, but he managed to get his right leg to connect with the trash sticking out of the pile. Without even half of the effort he used while holding the crowbar, his magic thrummed through his leg muscles and a flash of yellow skittered across the trash.

One moment there was a good stack of rubbish. The next, a crash like thunder resounded loudly in the air. It was breaking down, a gust of air pushing it back as glasses shattered, cans broke apart into small shards, and even bulk trash, like a washing machine and a dining room table broke down into smaller pieces.

Once the magic calmed down, it left a sparking hole from his end of the trash to about 610 centimeters deep, his kick visibly superior to his weaponized attack.

Izuku staggered back, managing to not fall over as he witnessed the destruction he caused, his jaw dropped.

Whoooooo!! Now that's what I call intent! I knew your legs were stronger than your arms, but dang kid! I knew I had you right with the rabbit theme!

“This...this is too much!” he yelled, his hands rising to grasp his hair, “There’s too much of a power difference!” He pointed back at the dent he made using the weapon. “Why are my arms so weak?!”

I dunno, maybe an alternate universe version of yourself has broken, practically crushed, and irreparably wrecked his arms so badly that the effects of his actions can be felt across universes, even to the point of affecting the arm strength potential of other versions of himself all while leaving the leg strength potential at the currently ridiculous levels that you display.

“What?”

Nothin’. Try some body training?

Chapter End Notes

Izuku: This bat's bloody! *chucks it away* YEET!!!
I can't say much cause I'm almost running late for work by uploading this, but I have no regrets.

Thanks for all of your support so far!!!

Shimizu Mako knew that the gym, White Tiger Official: Center for MMA and Muay Thai, was subpar at best and a cash grab at worst, but it was also cheaper for her to get to via a nicely sized walk and the membership wasn’t as expensive, so when she didn’t feel like visiting a better gym, she went there. Most of the folks who went to it did so for that same, inexpensive reason. Still, she’d seen many students come and go while she stayed off to the side with the equipment, preferring to train alone or with other, more experienced participants who were as cheap as she was. After all, some of the newbies eventually understood that you got what you paid for when it came to the group classes, even if the equipment was fairly nice.

The main trainer, Daishi, was one she’d known for many years. Sure, this was only because she’d beat him up several times since they were kids, but he’d never admit that, and unless asked, she wouldn’t tell. He had an ego the same size he imagined his prick was, and it definitely showed in his teaching style, or lack thereof. He had a terrible habit of abandoning the students he felt were a lost cause, sticking to educating the ones who he felt would do well.

That was precisely the reason the green haired boy who’d been coming there since last Friday was struggling so much.

It was a Wednesday afternoon and the group class was in full swing already. Those in the class were stretching and, while she didn’t want to admit it, it was both funny and sad to see the too nervous boy grunt and sweat just from trying to reach his feet. A few of his fellow students near him, much more experienced at that point, snickered and hid their laughs, or shook their heads. The boy couldn’t see them, his eyes closed with the effort of stretching, but she could tell the the flush growing across his cheeks wasn’t just from exerting energy.

She rolled her eyes at the class as a whole. The boy would figure out he was being robbed eventually. Still, for some reason, she couldn’t help but have her eyes trail back over to the boy every once in awhile.

He was a strange sight, at least a bit. Most of the boy’s speech was full of stuttering, he always came with a big yellow backpack, and for some reason, never seemed to take off his watch. He was almost rejected from being able to take classes before the boy had revealed to Daishi that he actually, “f-for medical reasons”, couldn’t take it off. It was actually a monitor of sorts.

So Daishi took his money and left him out to dry.

Still, he came that day, presumably after school, wearing loose-fitted white shorts with a black stripe down the side, a white tee, black kneepads, and ankle supports. Some part of his body seemed to always be wrapped in a bandage--since the day he’d came, his wrist had been wrapped, but now he also had a bandage on his cheek and some wraps peeking up from his left ankle pad. He also had
some fading bruises on what she could see of his legs and arms. The worst part was that she could
tell some of them were too old to come from Daishi’s training.

The man had the boy sparring on his second day with little to no preparation. He’d barely held up,
and she could smell the strange scent of what she presumed was blood coming from him by the end
of it (it should be blood, but the smell was off...she wasn’t sure what it was, but maybe it had
something to do with his quirk). He was panting and teary-eyed at the end of the punishment, and
she was sure he realized exactly what was going on.

She thought he got the picture when he didn’t show up to class on Monday, but then he apparently
came back the next day from what she’d heard, trying to train himself to make up for his absence. He
seemed completely dedicated to trying to learn some self-defense. Not that he’d be getting that, not in
White Tiger, not while Daishi was “training” him.

Even so, it wasn’t her job to interfere. She was just there for the equipment, so it didn’t matter in the
end. The boy would eventually realize he was being bullied again.

Deciding to put it out of sight and mind, she returned to assaulting the hanging bag in front of her,
giving it 6 solid sets of two punches and a kick, two kicks low, two medium, two high. Each jab
jostled the bag, making it jangle on its hanger, and the kick made it swing, like her leg was trying to
kick through the bag instead of at it. Feeling the shift of the sand in the bag as she brutalized it
always gave her a sense of satisfaction, knowing that, contrary to the past, she now had tougher
muscles corded in her limbs.

...Then there was the other weird thing about the new kid, the thing he was doing right then.

She didn’t have to look at him to know he was watching her.

It was a shame that he was so young and yet he already was a creep, what with his staring and
streams of muttering he usually did after each of his sessions. He’d accidentally done the muttering
during a session before, almost like he was talking to someone else, but the ridicule he received from
the others killed that as much as he could muster. He still made the mistake despite himself, talking to
whatever voice was in his head.

She scowled at the bag, doing another set of 4 while imagining the kid as an older guy, someone
much less able to be sympathetic with. She’d met enough people who stared at her for no good
reason, because for some reason, despite living in a society full of quirks, it was still unusual to see
someone who looked like the living 3-D version of someone’s anime shark character. People of all
ages loved pointing out her “knife-like” teeth and “bowling rink” chest and “deadly-looking” tail.
Nevermind that she had something resembling a normal, if oddly colored, face--she was weird even
in the world of quirks, apparently.

She was used to staring, but it didn’t mean she liked it, and she certainly didn’t want it from some
brat who couldn’t tell when he was being robbed and beaten.

So, as a warning, she gave the bag one last, hard kick, enough to get it swinging more than usual,
before turning her radioactive-green gaze to the kid, hoping it was even more effective with her
bangs framing her face.

Except he wasn’t looking at her, he was looking at the bag. And muttering, if the slight movement of
his lips were any indication.

Whatever. As long as he got the picture. Besides, she was being petty--kid got beat up enough, and
she was an adult--barely, but still. She cringed at the reaction she’d had, but it was too late and he
hadn’t seemed to notice it, so it was relatively fine.

She had already been exercising for the last 45 minutes, so she decided to take a break, leaving the punching bag for her personal one, filled with her numerous water bottles, small energy snacks, and a towel to get the sweat off of her scales. Though she was essentially a human shark, sweat salt was definitely different from ocean salt, and the grimy feeling she got from the former was terribly dissatisfying. She plopped down onto the bench her bag sat under, took her hair out of the ponytail she’d pulled it into, and started wiping down her face while sipping at some water.

“Alright boys, let’s see how you all are holding up!” she heard Daishi call out, the muscular man grinning as he walked over to the group with pads for them to kick. “I want you all to punch left, right, then kick right! Line up!”

The boy seemed to come to himself once Daishi got his attention, sweating and nervously finding a place in line near the back. He seemed to think about getting a spot further ahead, but something about the bigger, stronger guys—even if they weren’t that much bigger than him—seemed to scare him off. She shook her head. Seriously, it was almost sad to watch the boy try to interact with life in general.

The first guy in the line was one who had been around for the past three months. His muscles had certainly grown from his strength training, as had the force of his punches. His kick though, she noted, was rather weak. He’d extended his leg too quickly and hadn’t turned his support foot back the way he should’ve, so while the sound came off strong, it really didn’t have as much impact. It was more like he was kicking at a soccer ball than at a pad in someone’s hand. Had she been faced with a kick like that, she probably would’ve just grabbed his leg and let him fall over, because he was clearly not balanced well. Daishi praised him regardless.

The next one, a seventeen year old newbie from a month ago, had a weak stance with his hands dropped. It was like he was putting out a target for someone to go ahead and smack him in the face. His jabs extended too quickly as did his kick. He was unsteady on his feet and could’ve been tripped easily—hell, he almost fell over after trying to kick. Daishi, though, merely told him to stand wider rather than more firmly, and gave him a strong pat on the shoulder with the pad.

Sighing, Shimizu ripped open a small pack of energy gummies, chewing the head off of a bear-shaped one with her pointed teeth. It was disappointing, really. Everyone in the class was there to learn something, and they were, but not well enough. But they ate it up like it was free ootoro or something, never questioning a single thing. The only one who had tried asking was the weird fluffy-haired kid, but again, he’d stopped doing that, too, after Daishi called him out for slowing the class down.

Off to the side, she could hear some of the veteran gym members—the cheap ones, like her—laughing as they did their own training, most likely at the poor form of the students. It tapered off though, hushing as the next person got into position. She glanced their way to make sure, and sure enough, two guys were blatantly looking over at the padded sparring floor. She blinked, then turned to see what they were looking at.

Apparently, they had gone through the line of students faster than she’d paid attention, because the weird boy was next. And his stance was…

Surprisingly decent.

His left foot was facing forward with the rest of his body facing a bit more diagonally. His hands were up well enough, and, while his balance had room for improvement, he didn’t look like he would fall over.
He gave his first jab, the left one. It was weak, but the form was acceptable. His shoulders shifted as they should, his left shifting forward as the right one shifted back, and his hips rotated the same way just slightly. He fully extended his arm, too, keeping a further distance from Daishi than some of the other students had. The lack of force was more because he had weak arms rather than having the right jab form, and that's saying something, especially in regards to a beginner like the boy was. His right jab was the same way: good form but not enough muscle for a strong hit.

Then came the kick. She watched with surprise as the boy angled his balance foot back, away from the opponent, his hip twisting to bring his foot around, leg still bent until he was near the pad. Like a jackknife, his leg sliced outward catching the pad in a loud hit. His shoulders were too bunched up and balance was wobbly. He’d exerted too much effort in the kick from twisting his hip a little too much over “just right”, nearly knocking himself off balance from that alone, but he had enough of a solid stance to stay upright.

Seeing that kick, though, she knew where he’d gotten it from.

She always exerted extra effort in twisting her hips to make up for the weight of her tail.

The boy had been watching her, not to look at the weird shark girl in the gym, but to study her form. Whoever he was, he’d identified her as a good martial artist, good enough to learn from. But seriously, for him to pick up that much just from watching her move…

She felt a grin pull at her lips, mouth opening just enough to give a small show of teeth.

He might be a weirdo, but he had the most potential out of all of those scrubs, definitely.

The beginnings of the smile wiped off of her face, though, when Daishi caught his leg before he could let it back down. The boy, startled by the move, struggled to keep his balance before he couldn’t anymore, falling onto his ass right as Daishi let his leg go.

“Hey, what the heck do you think you’re doing, trying to use moves too advanced for you?” he said, practically standing over the boy.

The kid was fast, getting his bearings and pulling his legs in, scrunching his body real small as he started to shake a bit, staring down at the man’s feet. A knee-jerk reaction, she realized, and something sick twisted in her stomach.

“How long have you been learning martial arts, kid? Hmm?” Daishi waited a moment. “I’m not hearing anything from you now, huh? Even though you like to mumble all through my class.” That humored some of the other students, the teens and men grinning down at the trembling boy on the floor.

“...I...I-uh...mm...” The boy looked just about ready to puke if he had anything in his stomach.

“N-not...lo--...long…”

“Right! Not long. Me, on the other hand, I’ve been learning mixed martial arts since I was 10 years old! Do you see this belt?” He dropped one of the pads he was holding to point at the golden belt around his waist. “This belt tells the world how proficient I am in just Muay Thai alone. I have a Muay Thai certification from the institute itself! I’m a kru, an actual qualified instructor, with more years of experience than you’ve probably been alive!”

Shimizu noticed something in the boy’s nervous demeanor shift upon the mention of his belt and what it meant, then again when he mentioned the certification. He was no less nervous and finicky, but his expression had changed from only fear and guilt to fear, guilt, and...surprisingly, resignation.
“Do you get where you are now, kid?” he asked, bending down to see the boy’s face. “You will learn at the pace I set for the kind of abilities you have. Don’t try to jump to a position you can’t stay in, got it?”

He didn’t look up at the man, keeping his gaze to the floor. “...Y-yes...sir…”

“Good. I’m glad we can come to this understanding. Sit out for the next twenty minutes and think on that, alright? And don’t even think about complaining. You’ve wasted my and your colleagues’ time with your attitude, so I’m going to waste yours. Find a bench, kid.” Daishi gave the boy one last triumphant look before moving past him to address the other students.

The boy sat there for a little longer, his lips moving like he was talking to someone. He’d mumble something no one else could hear, be silent, mumble again, be silent, intermittently. After a bit of that, he looked over to where the class had moved. Deeming them unaware of his existence, he finally stood up and moved off of the padding. But instead of going to find a bench, he was heading to the locker room.

Was...was he quitting?

“Hey, you.”

The boy stopped suddenly, startled by the sound of someone’s voice. Still shaking a little, he looked around for a bit until his gaze set on her, sweating nervously.

Right. Cause she called out to him without meaning to. Shoot.

Trying to play it off like she had meant to call to him, she pointed down at the open seat next to her on the bench. “Come cop a squat.”

If anything, that just made him more scared, his shoulders bunching up as he took a hold of his arms, rubbing them to comfort himself. Still, regardless of his desire to fly--because she had a hard time seeing any sort of fight response in the boy--he wobbled his way over nervously until he was standing by the seat. Then, he finally sat down, a careful but still close distance away from her.

His eyes weren’t meeting hers as she looked down at him. She could understand why, though. She was pretty scary to look at up close to some folks, especially since she was pretty tall, her teeth poked out from her lips, and black sclera wasn’t necessarily a good combination with gleaming green. She considered how to address him for a moment, before deciding and opening her mouth to--

“I...I’m s-s-sorry…”

She blinked with her third eyelids, mouth still open.

“I-I was lo-looking at you a bunch and I-I-I know I c-can be c-creepy, I sh-should’ve just a-a-asked you a-a-about it, b-but I didn’t w-want to annoy y-you because y-you always look so f-f-focused and w-when people get into the z-zone it’s bad to i-interrupt them, b-but I--”

“Your hips.”

The boy’s mouth snapped shut. A part of her felt unfortunately relieved. She wasn’t sure how else she’d get a word in if he hadn’t.

“When you kicked, you overcompensated at your hips.” Her gaze shifted to him then, pointing at her tail, moving the large thing for good measure. “I have to compensate for my tail, but you don’t. That was the biggest problem with your kick.”
Something else entered the boy’s look then as he stared at her tail, something akin to curiosity. “I-I was aware th-that might be the case, I, I just...wasn’t sure how to alter my weight.”

“That changes from person to person. You just need more practice.”

His eyes flickered up to hers with a question in his gaze, but he quickly dismissed it, looking down at his knees. He’d started to rub at his arms again. “Y-Yeah...”

...Ugh. Fuck. Fine.

“How do you want to learn mixed martial arts?” She studied the way he stiffened before he started to rub nervously at his neck, embarrassment coming off of his body in waves.

“I, uhm...I just want to get stronger...t-that’s all. A-and it’s less mixed martial arts...I...I--uh...w-want to learn Muay Thai.”

She rose an eyebrow. “Why?”

“B-because...m-my legs are...ah, m-much stronger than my arms, and...uhm...Muay Thai has a lot of kicks...more than other arts that I’ve seen...I wouldn’t mind learning mixed martial but...I want to focus more on...”

That wasn’t a bad observation. Muay Thai really was known more for its kicks than anything else. If he wanted to focus on leg strength, she could see why he’d latch onto Muay Thai. So, if he actually did his homework on the martial art, then...

She grinned, “You know more about MT than you let on. So when Daishi started talking about his ‘credentials’...”

She actually nearly snorted at the derisive look on his face. “Muay Thai doesn’t have belt colors or certificates traditionally...I don’t know how long he’s done the art, so it sounded--”

“Fake as all hell!” she laughed out, continuing to laugh with her head tilted back.

She didn’t care if that turned a few heads her way, the boy was hilarious. Literally no one else she’d seen in Daishi’s class had ever pointed out the lack of an official belt system in Muay Thai, or the fact that certification to teach was useless if they didn’t have the fight experience--not that Daishi would tell them what his fight experience was, or he’d have to admit to losing to her all 29 times they duked it out. So for the straw to break the camel’s back to not be getting beaten up during sparring, but because the trainer was a pompous asshole was practically gut-busting! Who knew he had some untapped sass? And the boy was smart, too, and resilient to a fault.

With that in mind, her laughter tapered off, back into a toothy smile. “You’re a smart kid, so why the heck did you stay around so long?”

His returning smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, but it was an earnest one. “I...I, uh...d-don’t have enough money for anywhere else.”

“Hhhm...makes sense. I only come here cause the membership price is cheap.” She sighed, calming down from the emotional high. Her own embarrassment started to set in, and her smile chilled back into a much more appropriate, stoic line. “Still, it would be a shame for you to lose this opportunity. You’ve already paid for the class this week, right? What days do you come here?”

He was looking at her straight on then, eyes wide, that question back in his gaze. “Uhhh...d-do you mind if I go get something real quick?”
“Huh? No.”

The boy scrambled to his feet then, scurrying off to the locker room. She blinked her third eyelids, watching as he left, then turned back to take a swig from her water bottle. As she did, she started to catalogue the boy’s reactions to her as well as to others, and she found something pretty surprising.

Fear reactions were almost constant towards other people—probably abused or something, as much as that disgusted her to think. He rarely met Daishi’s eyes, but after a bit of talking, he met hers. He shrunk in on himself around other tall people, but she was one of the biggest people in the room and he’d stopped squeezing in on himself as much once she’d pointed out the error in his form.

Rather than being afraid of her quirk, he seemed more afraid of what she was going to say. In fact, he’d looked curious at her tail and when he met her eyes, he did so unwavering.

So. He wasn’t scared of her. Not as much as other people, at least.

It usually took folks weeks to get used to her.

She was just starting to get a warm feeling in her chest when she heard the boy scramble back out of the locker room, his backpack in tow. He hadn’t changed out of his clothes though, and in his hand, he held some notebook of some sort. He quickly plopped himself in the seat beside her—closer this time, further within arm’s reach, but not uncomfortably so—and opened up to a page in the book covered with scribbles and notes that she couldn’t quite decipher from where she was, only able to see it upside down. He searched the page, his pencil prepared.

“I-I can do any day, really, any at all, from, uh, 4 to 6:30. I could probably push it to 7:30 if you need to. It, uh...i-it just depends on wh-what’s good for you.”

When he looked up that time, his gaze was gleaming with eagerness and hope, a warmth that filled the color in his eyes. Being hit with something like that full force made the previously developing feeling in her chest expand through her torso.

Not once had she ever been able to make someone look like that before.

“Those times are fine. I’m here from Monday to Wednesday. No Thursdays or Saturdays. Fridays and Sundays are also fine. For now, let’s set you up for Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday. You’ve got studying to do too, after all. How does that sound to you?”

It seemed like what they’d been implying with the whole conversation finally hit him straight right then. He looked up at her, eyes searching before they started to water, tears budding up in the corners of his eyes and was it just her imagination or were his cheeks getting a little pinker?

“Ah, o-okay! I-it’s good!” he replied, writing her availability in his book, starting to cry—luckily not the sobbing kind, because she could already feel herself starting to panic and she couldn’t for the life of her deal with sobbing.

She turned toward him on the bench, hands almost reaching for him, but staying cocked near her body without any direction. “Ah geez, don’t cry…uh…” Shimizu felt her cheeks flush slightly in embarrassment, “Uh…what’s your name?”

The boy was still sniffling, his eyes watery and still dripping with tears, but the smile on his face was grateful and actually reached his eyes. “I-I’m Midoriya I-Izuku.”

Without meaning to, she flashed her teeth at him a little with a chuckle, humored by how he managed to speak without sputtering on his tears. When he didn’t flinch, his eyes traveling the
sharpness with an easy, watery calm, she gave him a mellow grin without meaning to.

“Shimizu Mako. Talk to Daishi after the class to have that money of yours transferred to a gym membership rather than class attendance. Let’s try to get you your money’s worth.”
The Muay Thai lessons started that day, but not in the way Izuku had thought they were going to. Instead of starting on punches, kicks, or self-defense, the shark woman, with sharp eyes and gleaming teeth and the force of a hurricane hidden in her muscles, asked him personal questions while he stretched the way she told him to. Nothing exceedingly personal, just normal, “get to know you” kind of questions, like “what’s your favorite color” and “when’s your birthday”. He’d accidentally let the floodgates open when she asked who his favorite hero was. Because no matter what, All Might was always going to be his personal #1 hero.

He didn’t realize he’d gone on a tangent until he noticed the surprised look on his face. He was halfway through his reasoning behind some of the flaws in the concept of what All Might represented yet how it benefited the current society regardless when he’d noticed, and had promptly shut himself up. She had reassured him that it was okay, even that she was impressed by the amount of though he’d put into his reasoning, but he still decided she’d heard enough of his mindless rambling.

As it turned out, Shimizu wasn’t a fan of any particular hero, but she did appreciate heroes like Selkie. He made the waters safer, so she felt better about going for a swim every once in awhile. As far as the politics went, she thought some heroes mooched off of the poor in a sense, since many
villains were low income criminals with quirks that they decided to find a way to use. The way some heroes behaved, too, made her think that way—like Mt. Lady’s debut. The way she put it was that heroes were “currently necessary, but hopefully not a permanent fixture”.

To an extent, he’d agreed with her, but he couldn’t imagine a world without heroes. He wasn’t sure he would want a world without them, but he could understand why she’d say what she did. After all, a hero needs a villain, like a cop needs a criminal. Still, he cited natural disasters as a villain that never had the potential of going away, to which she seemed to agree.

She kept on asking questions after that, about his notebook, the scheduling he did, what he did in his free time. She was patient enough with him, too, like when he wasn’t sure if she was interested and she would wait until he decided to say something. The woman reciprocated as well, telling Izuku answers to the same questions she asked, or answers to any question outside of her’s that he had.

From those, he learned that Shimizu had been learning Muay Thai for several years, from the age of 8. She’d so far had 121 confirmed fights, only losing 12 of them. Well, she hadn’t said “only”, rather she’d cringed at the number like it was too high. Izuku was more jealous she’d won a good 90 percent of all the fights she’d had so far and expressed that. She’d merely smiled in reply.

After their training session, he’d gone in Daishi’s office and had his class payment changed over to a gym membership. The man had looked as though he was going to have a problem with it, and Izuku clammed up and stuttered all over the place. Then the man had looked up at the window to his door, turned a bit pale, and gone along with it without too much of a complaint.

It was pretty much confirmed what had happened when he found Shimizu waiting for him outside of the office, her hands in her pockets, looking casual.

From there, he exchanged phone numbers with the woman—”In case of emergencies. Or, like, if you have a project due and need to hold off on a day we’ve assigned to exercise.”—and they parted ways.

The next time they met was that Friday, as planned, and his training fully began.

As it turned out, the questions were mostly just so they could get more familiar with each other—so they could understand each other’s verbal and nonverbal language so they don’t accidentally misread each other during high-stress training. It had helped him, honestly, since he could tell now that she wasn’t irritated with him when he messed up despite the stoic expression she often had.

They did a lot of stretching in the beginning, though not as much as the first day, then jump rope and shadowboxing, the latter in which she gave him tips to correct his form. She taught him clinch drills, which was a little complicated since he had to go against her in the drill, but she’d kept that in mind and wore a shirt that wouldn’t let her scales rub the wrong way against his skin. She had him do a pad workout similar to the review Daishi had him go through, though it was much more extensive and constructive. Once that was done, she had a sparring session with him. She was mostly on the defensive side aside from a light jab or kick, making logical defensive actions against him, even if it caused him some pain. He’d been nervous and had a hard time starting—facing up against a person made him really nervous, especially when it was someone as kind (and large) as her—but he shook himself into focus and tried his best.

One thing she didn’t do that Daishi had was go light on him. In the same sense that Muay Thai was a brutal martial art, she was as brutal with him as much as his own health and her held-back strength would allow. She had no intent to make him bleed, but she did intend to make him tough. Things he hadn’t considered from the art were the use of knees and elbows and fake-out jabs and kicks that fooled him over and over again. The main thing, though, was that she didn’t beat him into the ground, and even though he bruised like a peach, she made sure he iced down at the end and was
more healed up by the next session.

By the end of that first real day, he was almost too exhausted to go get rid of the Residue that showed up that evening on his way home.

Still, just two weeks later, he was already seeing the results.

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Izuku dodged out of the way of the Residue much faster than he would’ve before. It let out a stream of static screeching as it slammed face first into the back wall of one of the buildings making the alley, its body crackling with electricity. The hulking, gray-green creature had a large ribcage, the rest of its body decrepit and almost wrinkled, making it hard to land a hit on it. It was relatively slow compared to other residue that he’d battled, but Izuku couldn’t tell if that was because it was slower or he was faster.

The creature screeched static again before bending itself backwards in a crab walk, skittering toward him on its arms and legs. This one didn’t have hands either, only the same tapered points that made up where its feet would’ve been as well, so it moved quickly and easily on the flat ground. Its body crackled with a charge of energy, and Izuku knew it would be expending that energy once it got close enough.

But Izuku counted himself lucky. He’d just gotten some new gloves recently.

Reaching his hands back, with a mental call, the rabbit pin on his backpack opened up so the bag could let out a stream of sparkling yellow ribbons that curled around his wrists. It only took a second for the light to solidify into his Muay Thai training gloves, though they were different from usual, being pink at the main fist and yellow at his wrists. The tops of the gloves had a design that, when his fists were put together in front of his face, would show a rabbit in front of a yellow moon in the pink sky, one half of the design on each glove. The ties for his gloves tightened by themselves around his wrists.

The creature rushed at him head first in its crab walk, and his held his hands out, gloves catching the top of the thing’s head. It was still running full force though, and he managed to contain a grunt when it slammed him against the wall. As soon as it did, it let out the electric charge it had contained in its chest, shocking everything around it.

Leather, though, was an insulator.

Izuku kept his hands on the top of its head, only vaguely feeling the electric sting in his body through the magic-enhanced gloves he wore. He waited until the charge dissipated and it tried to back away before he moved.

Quickly, he knee’d it in the back of its neck, making it bend its head back with a hiss, limbs trembling from the brunt force as Izuku’s yellow magic struck its way partway into its neck. The boy rose his right elbow high before bringing it down on the front of its neck, connecting the two strikes of magic that bled through its form. It gave one last, aborted screech before its facial static went completely yellow.

Izuku sighed, shifting from between the creature’s body and the wall it had pinned him against, crawling under it so he could stand further away. He barely managed to move fast enough before it turned to stone and broke down, greenish crystals with a white, ribboning core rising from what was left of its body. He deactivated the magic that made his gloves and turned his watch toward the crystals, which swiftly sucked them in, after which he already felt a boost of energy and healing
pressing through his veins.

*D’awww*, just lookit you! You’re definitely not a rookie anymore! And the use of elbow and knee there? *MWAH!* Scrumptious.

His face flushed furiously at the compliments even as he scurried away from the area, which was quickly becoming occupied by curious viewers. He could’ve sworn he heard a few cameras go off, which, not good, but his getaway was more important than being concerned about his face. He looked up at the buildings beside him, all of which were unfortunately five or more stories up. Really, he hated causing property damage.

Still, he had to get away, so he ran toward one wall before jumping off the ground toward the other building, leaving a cracked dent in the ground. He hit that one two stories up, quickly hopping off of that one as he left another crack, then hopped off the other building at four stories up. That one had him high enough to vault over the edge of the first building he jumped off of, and he landed on the roof with minimum stumbling. From there, he kept roof-hopping, trying to get as far away from the scene as possible.

Yeesh, rather than civilians, shouldn’t they be called, like, action vultures or something?

“I mean, I can’t say anything!” he huffed, landing on another roof before running and hopping onto another one, “I do it all the time!”

Well, I mean, it’s *you*, kid.

“So just because it’s me, it’s reasonable?” He had to almost be at least 3 miles away by then.

Yes.

“Isn’t that hypocrisy?”

I have never once said I wasn’t a hypocrite!

He sighed, “At least you’re honest.”

After some searching, he found a place to hide--behind a big billboard a few ways away from the spot of action. He still had some time before the train home would be rolling back into the station, and he didn’t want to be accidentally recognized at any point, so he figured it would be best to stay away from as many people as possible, even if it meant being high up. Temporarily, he deactivated his magic, sighing as he took a quick rest.

Sooooo, your fight this time was only about four minutes! Well, to be more clear, three and three quarters. You’ve slam dunked your five minute average into the trash! Seeing how far you’ve come makes me feel--*sniff*--like a proud parent! One who hasn't done much, but still!

He felt his cheeks heat, but otherwise said nothing, pulling out his phone to search the net for any facial shots. So far, the news was focusing on the fact there was yet another Residue attack--*Gray Men, the public called them Gray Men, he had to get used to that*--and they only had a picture up of the remains of the defeated creature. He sighed with relief.

...*Pfft*, hey, Izuku, I was just thinking. Since the residue’s magic mimics quirks, maybe to prepare for a fire one, you could stuff an extinguisher into your backpack the next time you transform.

For a second, the boy imagined himself, transformed, sneaking a fire extinguisher into his bag and almost laughed himself. He sobered himself up quickly, though. “N-No, that’s not necessary. I mean,
I don’t know where I’d get one. The one at home needs to stay there, and I don’t think you can just...just buy an extinguisher from anywhere. I think I’d be able to handle the heat of it, probably.”

Yeah, I mean, you get burned pretty often.

His fake smile wavered too much for it to be considered real in any sense. “Please stop scowling vocally like that.”

No. Never. I’m not going to stop doing that until you get back from this dang field trip unscathed by that douchenozzle.

His thumb paused above the refresh button on the Google webpage, blinking. “...Field trip?”

Ah. You forgot about that, didn’t you. The field trip.

He started looking worried.

That starts tomorrow.

Well, now he absolutely looked worried.

For three days and two nights.

He cringed.

With your classmates.

“Ohay stop,” he groaned, balling himself up into fetal position, his head resting on his knees, “I forgot about that...do I have to go?”

Well, I mean, the school is paying for it, and it’s not like you can skip out on it. There wouldn’t be a class left in the school to house you or anything.

“Maybe I could get sick. I could just...you know, get really sick and not go.” He looked up from his knees, hope in his eyes. “Do you think I could get sick if I stayed in a lake for the rest of the night?”

Like I said before, sickness doesn’t come easy to the undead.

He groaned again, louder and more emotionally tired, knocking his forehead against his knees. Hearing of his undead state was still rather painful, but the nonchalance had thankfully lessened the blow. Still, it didn’t mean he wanted the benefit of not being sick. More than anything, that’s all he wanted at the moment.

“...What could make me--”

Not answering that question.

“But I seriously don’t want to go!” Izuku looked up from his knees again, his left hand picking at the fabric of his pants nervously. “I mean, I’ll be missing my training sessions with Shimizu-senpai! We’ve only been doing this for two weeks, what would she say?! Wouldn’t she get angry with me?”

Oh c’mon, kid. You know for a fact she wouldn’t. Besides, you already told her about the trip beforehand. You just forgot it was this Monday.

His face scrunched up anxiously, burying his left hand into his hair as he curled in closer, feeling like he was being pressed on by the unmistakable hatred of the universe. After all, someone among the
watchers of the universe had to hate him for this to happen.

Just as he thought that, his phone pinged with an alert. He closed his eyes, sighing, before he opened them sullenly and moved his phone within view.

*Video of the Vigilante destroying Gray Men* was the feed’s name, and his heart slammed into his throat in a full-force fright train.

Ooooh...that, uh, might not be good.

His body started to shake as his eyes trailed the words, hoping that one of them would shift into something else so the title wouldn’t be accurate, but when nothing happened, the icy chill of anxiety trailed down his back so quickly that his ended up sitting up straight. His breath quickened and his heart clenched up, like lava was spilling from his arteries into the rest of his body, but...but he had to know the damage. As much as he didn’t want to see it, he had to know what to expect.

If what he expected to have happened did indeed happen, then...well, he wouldn’t have to worry about going on the field trip. He’d be too busy hiding from police to do that.

Trembling, he slid the notification to the side and unlocked his phone to view it. The webpage loaded up to reveal a news article that, much to his dismay, was already showing better quality photos than he’d seen up to that point. The photo above the video below showed him running further into the alley. His back was turned and his backpack covered a lot of his body features, but he still wasn’t sure…

He slid further down on the page and watched with frantic eyes as the video started, a newswoman giving details that he didn’t care to listen to. All he wanted to see was what they’d captured of him.

His hand clenched when the camera panned back from the woman’s face and torso, giving room for the video of him--

--Running away.

It was a clip showing him running away from the scene, jumping up the buildings before he vaulted out of sight. For the most part, it was a view of his feet, legs, backpack, and the back of his head, and not a single second seemed to hold a view of his face.

He watched over that clip again and again just to be sure, but no. No matter how many times he watched it, it never showed his face, with either his hair or some strange white blur blocking it even when his face was turned toward the side during his jumps. In fact, when he watched it a fifth time, he realized his arms were much lighter than the usually were, too, with the same, strange white blur over them.

“Ah...so...it’s...mildly false advertisement,” he mumbled, realizing it never actually showed him fighting the residue either. He sat there for a second before a few relieved tears fell down his cheeks.

“...T-thank goodness...I thought…”

I bet the comment section is pissed, too. Hell, I’m almost pissed off they didn’t get any of your sick moves! Still, who would’ve thought your magic disguises your features? You’re pretty versatile.

“Wait, y-you mean, you didn’t know I could do that?” he gasped.

Nope. I seriously thought your face was just out there for everyone to see. But hey, we hadn’t had too much of a problem with that, so I figured it would be relatively alright, you know? I mean really, folks would have a hard time looking for some kid with star-shaped irides. Also, you’re registered as
quirkless. Considering the way this world works, you’re probably the last place anyone would be looking to find a magician, even though it should be the first.

“O-Oh...okay...” he mumbled, the calm flooding his system actually making him tired. He stood to his feet then, stretching his back. “...I think I’ve waited long enough. The train should be there soon, so let’s get home.”

Yeah, you need to pack your bag, anyway.

“...Oh God…!” He leaned back, covering his face. “...I still don’t want to go.”

Hey hey, c’mon, don’t be a downer. Maybe Yokohama will be fun! Eh, it doesn’t matter either way. It’s getting late.

He grumbled under his breath, but otherwise didn’t say anything else, transforming again before he hopped down from the billboard onto the top of a big building. From there, he roof hopped his way to the train station.

...I’ve been wondering. What hero name would you give yourself?

“Eh?” He hopped from a shorter building to a taller one with an extra boost, not stumbling in his effort.

You and the Resi--err, Gray Men aren’t really a secret. See? They’ve already revamped the name to Gray Men, so what do you want your name to be? You might need to decide on it before someone else does.

“Oh...uhm…” he flushed, “I...I, uh, h-haven’t really thought about it.”

You know why? Because you’re too dang busy! This is why you need a vacation. I mean, sure, you’ll be learning on it, but it’s still a change of scenery. Take a load of and relax this time around, alright?

He groaned long and loud at the idea of being inactive for too long. Still, he knew burnout was real and a rest was needed every once in awhile. “...Okay…”

--- --- ---

Orudera’s 3-C class was very talkative in the train terminal, chatting amongst each other in excitement over their trip. While 3-A was going to Inagi’s shrines and amusement park, and 3-B was going to Sagamihara for the temple and prefectural park, 3-C had raised quite a bit of money during their festivals and activities, so they had the opportunity to go to the cheaper places in Yokohama. Quite a few of them were taking a nice amount of pride in that, closely grouped together and chatting over what they would do for the three day period.

Contrary to that, Izuku stayed at the fringes of the group, mutedly looking over the list of activities. They had it set up where you could go with one of two different large groups every few hours depending on what you wanted to see, kind of like a “build your experience” approach to having a field trip. Most things, like group dinner and bedtime and Tuesday’s visit to Sankeien Garden, were mandatory, but otherwise it had a surprising amount of freedom--mostly because a lot of the potential touring areas were at a reduced price for them. It was mostly their sleeping arrangements that cost the most.

Still, the thought of having to choose a group of his classmates to travel with made him sick to the stomach, a minimum of 3 students needed in a small group, so that even if they happened to get
separated from the large group, they would still be with someone familiar. It wasn’t that he hated them, no, far from it. He just...didn’t really want to spend extended periods of time around them if it wasn’t necessary. If he could be with a group that was friendly with each other and had no problem ignoring his very existence, he’d be fi--wait wait waitwaitwait is that a museum just for ramen?! I wanna go there!!

“Eh? Ah...” he muttered, putting his ear buds in, the mic on it close to his mouth, “I mean, I wasn’t really planning on going there. I was listening to...” He glanced up at the group of boys he was near. He didn’t know them very well, even if he did know their names. If he didn’t know them well, it meant they hadn’t talked much and they were probably less likely to try picking on him. “They weren’t going to go there, so...”

But, like, did you want to go there?

“...Kind of. I don’t mind if I miss it, it’s okay,” he replied, pointedly looking away when one of the group members glanced his way.

There was a call from the front of the group, and then the class was boarding the train to get to Yokohama, Izuku staying carefully at the back. The students quickly settled into their friend groups, though there were two seats beside each other in both rows. Izuku found one at the back of the groups beside a quiet girl, whose eyes were glued to her book.

“U...uhm...” he tried, carefully trying not to reach for her.

She turned his way wordlessly, and before he could ask if she wanted the aisle seat, she picked up her things and shifted out of the seating completely. He watched, still frozen where he stood, as she rearranged herself beside the teacher on the other side of the aisle, who looked disgruntled but didn’t complain. It hurt a little, Izuku had to admit, but it wasn’t like he hadn’t expected something similar, so he shifted into the seating area and settled in the window seat, away from everyone else.

Hmmh. Whatever. Look at it this way, kid. You have two seats all to yourself. They’re trying to slight you, but you get more freedom than anyone else on this train.

He hummed absentmindedly before reaching into his backpack, taking out his After School Activity Book to clean up some of the notes he wrote. With his headphones in, he went ahead and turned some music on on his phone and listened to it as the train started, taking him and the others to Yokohama.

---

On the way there, they passed two different developed Gray Men. Izuku didn’t see them, but he felt when he shifted in and out of their range. Concern had filled him, but he couldn’t very well jump out of the train and go fight them, though the voice had to remind the boy of that.

You live in a world of heroes. Even if they can’t kill them, they should be able to confine them for a while at least.

“But where? And for how long?” he muttered, glancing side-eyed out of the window, worrying the end of his pencil with his teeth, “Shouldn’t I...I don’t know...find a way to get rid of the ones they have?”

Well, I mean, you could if you want. I’m not against you getting more help, even if it’s from the government or something if you can find a way to explain what’s going on without getting into too much trouble yourself. After all, usually magical gi--magicians come in groups, but as of right now,
you’re pretty well alone.

“...Aren’t there more magicians out there? Aren’t there more in Japan? More than me?”

A magician is usually hard to miss to other magic users when their magic is active. Of course, your sensory range isn’t all-encompassing. There might be more out there and you’re just the only one currently caught on camera, or you might be alone for now. There’s no telling, really.

Izuku’s eyes narrowed, his brows furrowing, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he gazed out of the window, wondering if he’d see a glimpse of the creature he was meant to destroy in passing.

...You’re not meant to destroy anything, kid. I call you a “kid” remember? Because you are one. This isn’t all on you.

He didn’t reply, staring out. Eventually, the feeling of the presence faded, and he turned back to his booklet. After a moment, he wrote a note.

*Find others if possible. Get help.*

---

“Another one? What’s its size?” Hashiro asked, driving down the road, following the armored truck that would take the newly apprehended Gray Man to the prison unofficially codenamed Tartarus. “...That big, huh? You’ve already called ahead to have the room prepared, correct? ...Good, alright. I’m following the truck there, but I’ll be reporting to Tsukauchi-san soon. ...Right, of course. Thank you for all your hard work.”

She clicked the button on her dashboard to hang up the call, eyes steely and focused on the road.

That was the fifth call for apprehension that week, the second one to suddenly occur after a Gray Man had been apprehended elsewhere. More of the Gray Men were starting to pop up…

“...Theia, call Tsukauchi-san.”

The dashboard lit up from the command, replying “Calling: Tsukauchi-san” in a professional, stoic, feminine voice. She waited while the dial tone rang until she could hear it cut out.

[“Hello? This is Tsukauchi.”]

“It’s Hashiro. I’m following the armored truck taking a Gray Man in, but we’re getting sidetracked. Another one was apprehended a few miles away, so they’re going to get that one, too. I’ll try to get data on it, but...”

[“I understand. They’ll be in a hurry… Did you get any news about the man attacked at the scene? How is he?”]

“Still unconscious from what I know,” she replied, turning the same corner the armored car did, “Almost completely unresponsive, too, save for some reflexive movement. I’ll contact the doctor after some time has passed. There’s no way to know his condition at this point.”

[“Were you able to get a witness testimony?”]

She frowned then, “Yes, but...I’m not sure what to make of it. They were taken to Sagamihara’s main police station to give an official, more organized testimony, but from what they told me, the Gray Man had pinned the man down and sucked some sort of energy from him.”
“He was left with the gray figures on his body, correct?”

“The same ones as the other two. The man also sustained some heavy injuries, despite trying to use his quirk to protect himself.”

“But, again, it didn’t work well enough.”

“Unfortunately, no.” She slowed to a near stop behind the armored truck, which had to turn on its sirens to get past some crowded area. “He had the ability to create square sheets of ice about seven inches thick from the water in the air, and it did protect him to an extent, but according to the testimony, the Gray Man was too strong. It kept breaking through the ice until it pinned him and broke his arms. Then, it did...whatever it had to him.”

Tsukauchi was quiet on his end for a moment, and her hands tightened on the wheel.

“...How’s the progress on finding the glowing girl?”

“The video from yesterday confirmed to the chief what I’ve told him: whatever her abilities are, they seem to block others from recognizing her, even when electronics are involved. That’s complicated things considerably.”

She snorted derisively, though her expression remained negatively neutral, “How useful.”

“Still, we got something of a lead, and I have some friends of mine looking into the population of Musutafu. That seems to be her most active area as of now. And while we can’t get facial similarities, we were able to determine that the girl is roughly 166 cm tall, take away the possible height from her shoes. That narrows our search quite a bit, thankfully. Though, the implication seems a bit rough.”

“How so?”

“It's unknown how her quirk affects her body, but if it's not a transformative-type quirk, she’s just a bit taller than normal for a girl in her teens.”

Hashiro’s eyes widened just a bit, giving an incredulous glance to her car’s dashboard. “You think we’re dealing with a high schooler? I know I’ve called her a child before, but... Are you serious about this?”

“Possibly. Remember, I have a source who once met her in person--her abilities, whatever they are, prevented them from remembering any really defining features about her save for the things she had with her and her behavior. Judging from those objects and the way she acted, it's not too farfetched to look toward high schools, perhaps even middle schools.”

“Middle schools? Seriously?” The woman couldn’t believe it. Tsukauchi had to be pulling her leg or something.

The man replied to her, but her attention was suddenly caught by something else.

The armored truck in front of her had already started moving again, as she was moving behind it, but the back doors looked a little strange. They were always the heavy gray color of metal, with bolts and clasps keeping them very well shut.

But the center of the doors were frosting over. Little crystals of ice were spreading from the center, tracking its way across the door to the ends. The center of the closed doors were starting to turn a metallic shade of blue.
“Tsukauchi-san. I’m about to send you an image. Check your text messages.”

She blinked at the door, firmly committing every piece of ocular information she could to memory, then sent it through the connection to Tsukauchi’s phone. She started slowing her car down, just to be on the safe side.

“What does that look like to you?”

After a moment, he replied, his voice firm.

[“Hashiro, you need to get from behind that truck.”]

She was already ahead of him, having backed up a good three cars away from the truck. “I’ll call you back. I need to call the drivers and let them know wha--”

Suddenly, the frosted part of the door cracked. Then, just a second after that, a block of ice shot out from various parts of the bed of the truck, some of it even embedding into the ground. There was a loud clang of ripping metal and crumbling concrete, and the screech of tires as Hashiro slammed onto her brakes, swerving to avoid one of the crystals that had jutted straight outward.

She barely managed to swerve the right way, turning the right side side of her car toward the reaching damage, the jutting crystal of ice piercing through the back right passenger door, her own vehicle squealing with breakage and the sudden stop.

Hashiro gasped out, her seatbelt preventing her from being slammed too harshly against her own door, then another car hit hers, and she clenched the steering wheel from being jostled. She stayed still as her head cleared, breathing heavily as a chill filtered into the car from the shard of ice through the back of her car.

[“Ha--iro! Hashi--, an---r m-! Ar- --u al---ht? W--t hap----d?”]

Finally gathering her bearings at the sound of the damaged connection, she shifted to get out of her seat belt, the belt slapping back against the side of the car once she was out of it. She reached down to get her phone from the USB it was connected to.

“C-Call the heroes! I’m on National Route 16 between Sagamihara and Machida! This is a Code Silver! Code Silver! National Route 16! Sagamihara and Machida!”

She heard something crackle, and looked over to the ice piercing her car. The frost was starting to extend off of it, chilling the car further. Gritting her teeth, she disconnected her phone and tried to roll down her window. The car was malfunctioning though, the damages too great for it to work as it should. She cursed under her breath, taking off her jacket, glancing at her phone to make sure the call was still active.

“I’m okay, Tsukauchi-san! Code Silver! National Route 16, Sagamihara and Machida! Call the heroes!”

She reached over to the passenger seat glove compartment and took out a backup spark plug that she kept there. With the tough magazine of her gun, she smashed the porcelain on it until she got a nicely sized shard. Then, with as much force as she could muster in the small space she had, she threw the shard and covered her body with her jacket. The sharp point on the porcelain was enough to shatter the window, some small, insignificant pieces falling onto her leg.

She quickly broke the biggest pieces of glass off, pushing them outside, before wrapping her gun in her jacket and running it over the smaller shards, trying to make it as safe as possible for her to crawl
out. Another crackle from the metal on the other side of her car had her quickly scurrying out.

Gasping, she crawled out onto the hood of the car that had hit her before turning back to assess the damage.

Her eyes widened at the sight before her.

The truck the Gray Man had been kept in had been swiftly turned into a pillar of ice and metal, its bed completely damaged. Standing on top of it was the Gray Man that had been apprehended, but it was different.

It stood on four legs, but it had another torso, making it look something like a centaur. All of the bottom limbs now had the same stick-like appearance to them, without hand or foot. Its entire body looked like a cloth was stretched over too many bones, and its arms were too long for the rest of its body, its elbows all the way down to its hips. Long, spidery fingers twitched, claws scratching against the pillar of ice it stood out on. It now had two, thin horn-like appendages sticking up from the top of its head, shaking violently due to the convulsions of the creature’s head. Its body thrummed, and underneath the dark, inky grey of its body, swirls of light blue could occasionally be seen, like a blue ball covered with swirling black glass.

Its head twitched around until it settled in one direction. Then, it let out a screeching stream of static that had Hashiro covering her ears. With that, it jumped high off of the pillar of ice, and the instant it touched the ground a few feet ahead, the concrete frosted over.

It didn’t stop there, though. Rushing forward, it charged toward a compile of cars and people in its way, people using their quirks to scramble out of its way, screaming. One of the cars it landed on still had the driver inside, but the instant its feet touched the car, it frosted over, and the person inside screamed as ice started traveling up their body. One other unfortunate person was touched directly by one of the creature’s swinging, limp hands, frosting over instantly. All the while, it didn’t spare a single, twitching, static glance to anything else as it frosted everything over.

Hashiro watched after it, eyes wide and panicked. Suddenly, she remembered the drivers of the truck and slid her way off of the car’s hood. She didn’t even have to get to the front of the truck to see the frozen red icicles hanging off of it.

Things were swiftly getting out of hand.

---

Upon arriving in Yokohama hours before, despite his initial negativity, he brightened instantly at the sight of the unfamiliar city. There were several buildings he wasn’t familiar with cropped up and several large groups of people traveling the streets in droves. He could even see the Marine Tower once they were out from the train station. He’d quickly snapped a picture of the building...then after a moment of consideration, turned to take a selfie with the tower in the background, grinning a little lopsidedly with the aborted effort of a peace sign near his face. He had cringed, but still sent the picture to his mom with a message to let her know he arrived safely.

As the teacher helped the kids onto the bus they were taking to the relatively cheap ryokan inn they’d be staying at, Izuku had decided last minute to send the picture to Shimizu as well. He hadn’t been sure why he’d thought to do such a thing, but he’d figured it would either be a hit-or-miss situation with his teacher-not-teacher. He’d hoped she wouldn’t be put off by it at least.

He had been surprised when, moments later, his phone vibrated with a return text message, not only from his mother, but also from “Shimizu-senpai”.

His mother’s message had been a simple [Be safe and send pictures! ^o^/]. She’d gotten more used to using emojis over time, and it was really starting to show in her text messages. He’d smiled at the text, sending a quick reply, before turning over to the one from his trainer.

Shimizu’s message had been...surprising.

[have fin <((“)>]

He hadn’t been able to help the snort that escaped him, covering his mouth to keep from giggling out right. That had gotten him a hard glare from Kacchan, who fussied loudly about him shutting up, but even after the scolding session and the jeers from his classmates, he couldn’t bring himself to feel bad.

He had to think of some more fish puns. Or was it shark puns? Was she making a pun about fish or sharks? Not that sharks aren’t aquatic, but there was a difference in the grade of joke he’d have to look into if she focused more on shark puns than fish ones. It would require more research into her taste in humor.

In the meantime, he’d decided to send back a laughing crying emoji.

Of course, that was hours before.

Now, while with the group of seven students he’d gotten stuck with at the Yokohama Museum of Art, he was looking at his phone at a mass text message from his teacher, demanding that all students follow police and hero direction and try to get to a safehouse in the midst of what seemed to be a very large scale Gray Man attack.

The one that was swiftly freezing its way towards the very city he was in.

...So much for a vacation, I guess.
I wanted to post this on Tuesday so it would be exactly a week since the last chapter, but eh, this'll have to do.

Anyway, thank you all for your patience and support! I got really busy, and I may need to take longer than a week to update again, but hopefully not. I like updating this story. I like even more seeing you guys' reactions, so please please please leave me comments and stuff @w@

This is the end of the two-part special.

Uh...so, this took up about 25 pages in Google Doc.

So.

*It's About to Go Down.*

It was May 11th.

The occupants of the museum were bordering on the state of panic, sweat rolling from their foreheads from the sudden spike in body heat and emotion as they tried to make sense of what was happening. The workers had already started to escort them to safe places in the museum, but others were trying to leave entirely, trying to the nearest train station and leave Yokohama entirely—if the Gray Man was still far off, they could leave the city and be fine. Arguments were starting to break out from anger and fear, but at the very least no one tried to harm any of the art in protest. Not yet.

He was huddled close to the other six students from his class, most of whom were frantically texting with their teacher and other students in the group chat made specifically for the trip. Their guide, a calm, middle-aged woman with laugh lines and a sense of humor when it came to art, was the solid, firm-eyed barrier between the children and the droves of other people, having secured a bench for them to sit on whilst they waited for orders. In the growing concern, the students had forgotten to shun him off of the bench, so Izuku was granted a nicely-sized seat on it.

Rather than trying to contact the teacher, he was quickly skimming the web for as much news on the Gray Man as possible. He finally happened on a news webpage that showed a live video of a news feed, as well as a picture of the Gray Man. He felt his heart twist like a rag upon the sight of it.

“Wh...what? It’s not...they’ve never looked like that. Why does it look like that?” he muttered lowly, trying to not draw attention to himself.

Looks like some unlucky guy had his magic stolen. Either that, or it ate another Gray Man.

“Ate another? *Stolen*?”

Remember, kid. You can add zero to zero. It’ll still be zero, but in the case of magic, it’ll be a bigger zero. Magic can consume other magic. You do it each time you absorb crystals—which is justified, since errant, mindless magic no longer has control and leads to stuff like this.
He placed a hand on his chin, eyes flitting around the page to get as much information as he could from it.

It had attacked earlier that day, near Sagamihara, before it was apprehended by Grand Slam—*heavy-hitting, time-limited strength quirk, very analytical before activation for a quick takedown*—and Lady Mercury—*speed quirk, bad for corners but good for straight, heavy impact, weighs more than she looks for someone so small.* There had been one victim: a young, college-age man with white hair with red streaks by his ears whose name had yet to be released. The last the news anchor had heard, he was unconscious and in the ER for injuries to his arms.

They also reported the strange, dark gray coloring that had spread out through his veins from his chest at the point of contact from the Gray Man.

“...Stolen magic. Magic in this world seems to mimic quirks, so the ice--”

--Is probably a result of the stolen magic mimicking the quirk from the body it was once in.

“Then...the man’s quirk wasn’t stolen?”

No, but his potential was, and, depending on how much of it was stolen, that’s much worse.

Izuku glanced toward the other students he was with, carefully taking note to see if they were looking his way. When he found them too occupied, even turned away from him in some cases, he turned back, muttering to the voice. “Potential to use his quirk?”

No, no, kid. If that was the potential I was talking about, you’d have no magic at all. No, magic is untapped, inaccessible potential in all parts of life. The potential to be wise, or become wiser. The potential to learn a new language. The potential to choose between steak or curry for dinner...well, not that last one. Anyway, magic is taking all untapped potential of all parts of your being, not just the untapped potential of a quirk. Having your magic stolen means having your potential stolen.

The only reason why the Gray Man’s ice is so strong is because that is the potential the man had and never used, or never had access to. It may have also taken his potential to grow an inch taller, or his potential to jog five miles instead of three. When that man wakes up, if he does, he may or may not be able to use his quirk, and he would suddenly find a learning or efficiency block in places he hadn’t had before. Because the potential to do those things is now gone.

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It hadn’t taken too long for the heroes to arrive at the disaster on National Route 16. Traffic had backed up after the accident, and a national alert had to be blared on television that all transportation on the highway for several miles was completely cut off. It was advised to avoid the route and the streets near it if possible, since authorities couldn’t quite keep track of the escaped Gray Man, regardless of its icy trail. Japan was on the border of declaring a state of emergency.

Several waves of police and heroes arrived at ground zero. The first wave had heroes with them to help get people away from the route and take as many of them as possible to the hospital. It was during this wave that an EMT with a healing quirk diagnosed Hashiro with a mild concussion and fixed her up the best he could, since she demanded that she stay on site. The next wave was meant to keep the media back in case the situation got worse. It was also where Endeavor finally got to melting some of the ice on people trapped in cars. It was a very careful work--too much heat would be just as bad as not enough.

Tsukauchi arrived with the third wave, the one with more ambulances and helicopters to take the
survivors in quickly for treatment and the unscathed for questioning. The two of them stared up at the spiked pillar of ice that was once the truck that encased the monster. None of it had melted yet, and the stark splatters of red color from the ice protruding from the driver and passenger seats of the car made Hashiro grit her teeth.

“What is this?” she hissed. “This level of disaster...it’s as if quirks have been discovered all over again.”

Tsukauchi said nothing, eyes traveling the truck, committing it to memory in a different way than Hashiro could.

“...What kind of quirk could do something like this?”

“I don’t believe it’s a quirk.”

Hashiro turned to him, eyes wide. “What?”

Tsukauchi usually had something of an easygoing expression on his face. That had always seemed to be his default. But right there, it was replaced with a melancholic fury, eyes cold as steel and mouth drawn to a straight line. Yet with it, his gaze trembled with the slight sliver of fear he let out--fear of the unknown.

“You’re right, it’s as if quirks have been discovered all over again, except I don’t think this is a quirk. I believe we’re dealing with something else, perhaps related, but nevertheless it’s something we can’t name without help. We have too many unanswered questions about quirks as it is, like why they appeared and where the quirk factor originates, but this breaks even the quirk rules that we do know. Stealing abilities is not common among quirks, especially with the symptoms that follow, yet this is the third Gray Man to do so.”

“...Have you called the special forces unit?”

He glanced her way. “I called them on the way here. While I’m pretty sure they won’t be able to do any apprehension, they are more advanced when it comes to the investigation of unknown phenomena. We should at least be able to get some answers for what all of this is, and from there, we can develop our countermeasures.”

Hashiro nodded, turning back to the pillar of ice. “Which heroes are going to attack the Gray Man?”

“Nightquake, Climantine, and Mach Barrier are going to attempt to intercept it. They hope to apprehend the Gray Man before it enters Yokohama, but if not, citizens are already in the process of being moved to safe houses. The heroes here will be able to assist once the damage here is cleared up.”

Hashiro clenched her elbows nervously. “Will that be enough?”

Tsukauchi looked away from her, eyes narrowing. “It will have to be.”

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Once the news that the Gray Man was nearing Yokohama spread via the news, the stiff, string-thin peace that had settled among the citizens inside pulled too taut and snapped.

The people erupted into a frantic haze, trying to rush to the doors or find safe places inside of the building. Even though the museum security tried their best to calm the situation, it wasn’t working well enough, even to the point that some of the more panicked citizens started using their quirks. One
man in particular used his wing quirk to push people out of the way, trying to fly out of the building somehow, most likely by breaking a window. He was subdued before he could, but that had given the rest of the people very bad ideas and set off the security alarm, the noise blaring through the museum.

The student guide demanded as loudly as she could that they hold hands so they wouldn’t get separated, and out of shock from the burst of chaos, they did so without complaint. The hand Izuku held onto was clammy and shivering. Yaomasa-san--body-enhancement quirk, went hand-in-hand with the horns coming from her head, typically a cheerful if somewhat boisterous person--looked like she was trying not to cry and failing to, watery tears starting to trail down her chubby, pinkened cheeks. Her hand wasn’t necessarily holding his, but he wouldn’t blame her for it. After all, she seemed to be too scared almost to move.

Initially, he’d felt a rush of panic at the burst of chaos as well, but that had calmed quickly. He had to stay rational, had to think fast. After all, it was a Gray Man attack. He’d dealt with those plenty of times, and he could deal with it again. He just needed to find a way out...

Isn’t this actually a good opportunity, Izuku? With these people panicking, security attention is scattered. You could probably find a way out of here. You’ll need to, if you want to reduce the casualty count.

Casualty count. Right. Because magic didn’t follow the world’s rules all that well and some quirks just plain didn’t work on Gray Men at all. And magic was best pitted against magic. And he was a magician. It was no different from any other time he’d faced off against one of them, save for the apparent power boost it had.

If he didn’t do something, nothing would be done.

His hand tugged as the line started to move. Some of the security there were directing the people who were listening to follow a large group to a nearby safe house--some place bigger than the museum that could reasonably house more and do more for citizens than their current place could. It would probably be to a mall or, if they had time, to the nearby convention center. Izuku knew that if he ended up there, there would be no way he could get out or transform.

He looked up from his phone, watching the backs of the other students’ heads. They were turning frantically, their usual bravado replaced with sweat, tears, and shaking. Icy fear had colored them so differently from usual that they felt like completely different people. All because they were afraid.

For a split second, he imagined their faces slack instead, eyes unseeing and bodies stiff with the cold, inky, sticky chill of death.

And he let his hand slip from Yaomasa’s when their line was pushed against by others hurrying to safety. She didn’t even cry out or call out to him, too caught in her own fear to recognize that he was gone. Or maybe she did, and she was just blocked out by all the other voices calling for their lost, separated friends and family.

Well, it didn’t matter either way. For once, he’d take advantage of his normal appearance and general forgetability.

He wasn’t necessarily short, but he was short enough to not be outstanding among the other citizens. Keeping relatively low, he searched his phone for layouts and exits, hoping to find some place he could slip into and get away from everyone else.

*The main group is trying to get out through the Main Entrance. I’m sure others are trying to get out.*
the West Entrance, but it’s better than being around the bigger group, he thought, *If I slip out through the West Entrance, maybe I could find some place to hide and transform from there.*

With his course set out, he stayed low and inconspicuous as he shifted from current to current in between the mass exoduses of people. He was pushed and shoved all over the place. More than once, someone pushed him too harshly into someone else and more anger spiked among the escaping folks, but true to his plain nature, he was able to slip away pretty quickly so the irritation wasn’t aimed in his direction. The last thing he needed at the moment was for someone to target him. Struggling to not fall and be trampled in the panic, he stayed upright, fighting to find the way to the back.

Finally, he had a breakthrough. A few smaller groups were shoving their way toward the slightly spiraling staircase to the West Entrance and parking lot, some even still trying to use the nearby elevator to get there. Izuku let himself roll with the flow, and once the staircase was in view, some of the pressure cleared up as the people ran down the stairs at different rates. He almost got knocked over at least three times, and he slipped on one of the stairs, almost landing on his ass, but he quickly got his balance after each slip-up and managed to not hurt himself.

A few more people shoved past him as he finally made it to the doors, and, of course, there were too many people trying to get through for anyone to actually get out. Grimacing at the sight, he turned away from them to the parking lot, deciding to exit in a somewhat illegal way.

Once he burst through the doors to the parking lot, he could instantly hear the squealing of car wheels as they tried their best to deck it out of the lot and onto the road, trying to get away before the situation got worse. As such, the parking lot exit was constantly being sped through, and Izuku felt considerably less confident. Still, he pulled in a breath, staying close to the walls as to not get in the way of an oncoming car.

Once at the opening of the parking lot, he looked back down in the shaded lot, more lights turning on and getting ready to come his way. He took another heavy breath in, legs shaking...before he turned swiftly around the corner and ran as fast as he could.

The light at the end of the small tunnel showed a yellow, orange, and purple haze, the result of a setting sun, evening shifting in on the city at the same rate the chaos did. He panted loudly as he ran forward, trying to reach the end before another car came through—he was almost certain they would not see him until it was too late if someone came through.

So when he heard the sharp squeal of wheels in the main lot behind him, he reached for his watch without thinking and transformed then and there.

Still running, the yellow ribbons flicked over his body as his speed suddenly increased, as his lungs mellowed, as his sweat dried. Pants turned to thigh-highs and knee pads, shirt turned to a knee-length dress made with a material he wasn’t sure of. The tied back of his apron flapped in the wind as he burst out from the parking lot exit, and, not looking back, he kept running.

In his current state, he could feel it, even more than he had when he wasn’t transformed. The inky, tar-like aura of the Gray Man curled against his legs, making them wobble out of terror, but his internal mantra kept him running, even as he hopped over the cars in the main street and dodged escaping citizens, looking for a more secluded place to plot and wait for the enemy.

*If I don’t do it, no one will. If I don’t do it, no one will. If I don’t do it, no one will.*

*The Gray Man is coming.*
6:24 p.m.

The Gray Man made it to the border of the city during the most beautiful part of the setting sun. Tall and imposing, its feet caused crackles of ice to spread where it stepped, intricate ice cell designs twirling and cracking against the suddenly cooled concrete. Its head twitched eerily as it kept stepping forward, hissing out in a stream of static as its face flickered in like.

The streets were abandoned, the government alert having spread fast enough for citizens near the cusp of National Routes 16 and 1 to flee or hunker very, very down into their buildings. It didn’t seem to care either way, freezing the roads as it passed from street light to street light, disrupting the electricity in some places from the chill that suddenly came over the systems.

People inside the buildings made sure to stay out of sight, but the braver ones hid behind furniture in them, peeking out and holding their cameras, recording the creature’s march as it came closer and closer to the coastline.

Aside from the clicking sounds of still working street lights and other electronic functions, and the crackle of ice as it formed unnaturally in the warming environment, an otherworldly silence permeated the spring air.

It passed several stores and residential areas, even a police station, before it iced over a railway on its path toward a major highway. That road, too, even though it was a major one, was blocked off and deserted, giving the creature several lanes of space to walk upon.

As it made its way to cross the entire road, nearing the Anpanman Children’s Museum, with its colorful statues, creative build, and childish designs, it paused, noticing a figure standing on the road with it.

Long, stringy black hair fell along their back and sides onto the road below it, so much so that one almost couldn’t see what else the being was wearing. They wore an all white hime-kimono with a high collar and sweeping sleeves, though the black sleeves of a long-sleeved shirt could be seen at their wrists. The bottom of the kimono nearly dragged on the ground below, and there was no obi tied around their waist. The only other thing among the long black hair was a noh mask, a hannya with pointed horns and a jealous, furious, golden-teeth grin spread across the mask’s gleaming face.

“Gray Man, can thee understandeth and heed mine own words?” they said, their voice guttural and thick, like molasses. “If ’t be true thee can, I shall warneth thee only once.” The figure hunkered down, bending forward as their legs bent to support the weight shift, arms hanging limply from their shoulders, fury exuding from their form. “Surrend’r and repent.”

When the Gray Man did nothing more than hiss, its head twitching erratically, the figure’s fingers curled like claws, and the long hair around them started to float in a wind that wasn’t there. “Very well. If ’t be true thee shall not surrender, we shall force thee to thy knees.”

Rather than the figure moving forward themself, their hair thrust out from where it was floating around them, extending suddenly to reach for the Gray Man. The creature screeched out a hiss of static before quickly sidestepping out of the way and running full force at the long-haired figure. They didn’t even move as it came close, its hands up and fingers twitching with eagerness to grasp and destroy.

The Gray Man suddenly dogged left out of the way of another barrage of hair, some of the strands...
twisting together to make grasping fingers that strove to cling to and suppress the creature. The figure stuck their left hand, and the left side of their hair flew out from near them, creating more, tar-colored limbs that reached for any part of the creature’s body.

Said creature continued to dodge out of the way, the hair twisting after it. Eventually, it settled on one part of the highway before dashing forward faster than before, hissing.

Before it could get too close though, it smacked itself roughly against a nearly invisible wall surrounding the figure. It staggered backwards with a loud, angry screech, before backing up further, still facing the long haired figure. As it turned out, the figure hadn’t been alone.

Behind them, a man in a blue, white, and yellow hero suit held his palms out toward the creature, the big yellow gloves revealing the strange, fan-like attachment in the palms. He grinned widely with shining white teeth, his yellow shades hiding his eyes.

“C’mon, you’ve gotta try harder than that if you want to defeat my barrier, Gray Dude!”

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6:30 p.m.

“The Ghastly Hero, Nightquake, and The Air-Speed Hero, Mach Barrier, are confronting the Gray Man in Yokohama near--”

Katsuki gritted his teeth as he watched the news from inside the building he and 12 of his dipshit classmates were hiding in alongside their guide--some peppy shit with a bow-tie--and their dumbass teacher. Building security was around them, too, making sure the people didn’t get too rowdy while hiding out. Turning on the television and having the news on caught everyone’s attention quickly and any pending arguments had calmed considerably at having something to focus on. If they weren’t watching the news on the television, they were on their phones, or they were still trying to contact their friends and family.

Katsuki hated all of it.

He was stuck in the building with a bunch of simpering extras. “Want to be a hero”? Hah! What bullshit! They couldn’t even stay calm in the middle of an attack! What made them think they could ever be heroes?! That’s why he was the one going to U.A…

He clenched his hands together, little explosions bursting in his palms from his sweat. One of the security members gave him a sharp look, but seeing as he wasn’t causing any damage, ignored him after a moment. The fucker should just focus on all the sobbing, hair-trigger idiots in the room rather than him. Yeah, he was kind of spooked, but at least he wasn’t crying his damn eyes out like a fucking baby.

“Oh shit...oh shit, they lost Midoriya...” some extra muttered, and--

Wait, what?!?

Katsuki hadn’t realized he’d yelled that aloud until he noticed the extras looking at him with varying degrees of fright. When exactly had he gotten to his feet?

When none of them moved to reply, he turned to the teacher, a scowl on his face, ready to demand what the kid meant, but… The dumbass was looking freaked, frantically typing on his phone before he started making a call. There wasn’t much that made their homeroom teacher haggard--after all, he’d dealt with a bunch of bullshit failures of students for most of his academic employment, so he’d
Katsuki’s palms burned with the desire to set off even more, but he held it back. Sitting back down roughly, he reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone, looking, for the first time during the whole trip, at the group chat.

Some idiot—Yaomasa or whoever the fuck—had apparently let go of his hand without knowing. At least, that’s what he could get from the absolute disasters that were their text messages. The place they were in had been stupidly crowded, and it was very likely that Deku was lost as fuck.

No one had any idea where he was.

In the middle of a villain attack.

And he’s quirkless.

That time, he did set off an explosion in his hand, a loud one that had the security rushing over, ready to subdue him.

He didn’t care whatever placating words his homeroom teacher said, diving in between him and the security, begging for them to wait. He didn’t care about the way the security went from hostile to concerned. He didn’t care about what anyone else was saying.

How the fuck did they lose Deku?! Out of everyone, he was the absolute least capable of taking care of his fucking dumb nerd self. He was quirkless for fucks sake! How could they lose him knowing that?! They were a bunch of fucking failures, and Deku was an even worse one, letting himself get carried away by the crowd.

These people were the ones in charge during an attack? These guys?! It was literally their job to keep track of people, and the lost track of one of the weakest ones! Who gave a fuck about Deku dying, if the idiot wanted to kill himself, fine, but it shouldn't be a possibility under fucking police supervision!!

Dammit… DAMMIT!!

Why couldn’t he do anything more than sit there, surrounded by a bunch of half-asses who couldn’t clean up their own shit?!

“They appear to be backing the Gray Man into...hold up...oh, alright, thank you Ueda-san! Reporting! This just in! We have sightings of The Seasonal Hero, Climantine, in the area! She’s perhaps helping Nightquake and Mach Barrier apprehend the monster! As the fight approaches downtown Yokohama, we can only hope she’s in on whatever plan the heroes have come up with. Additionally, while we are currently unable to confirm whether this is true or false, we also have tweets and messages coming in of seeing Musutafu’s glowing girl approaching the scene from near Yokohama’s coastline--”

The group chat kept pinging with new messages from the other students. Katsuki didn’t bother looking at it, his fist still clenched and threatening to burst with fire.

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6:36 p.m.

Izuku hid as much as he could in the areas around Yokohama i-Mark Place, a large corporate building that surely housed quite a few people. Still, he’d needed a place to assess the situation, and
as long as no one tried to catch him or something, he figured he’d be fine. His magic blocked out his appearance, after all, so they could take all the pictures they wanted if they saw him, honestly. He was too focused to be all that worried about it.

It didn’t mean he wasn’t aware of where he was, of course. He still flinched when the ice got a hair too close to Mach Barrier for his comfort, or when the hero’s barriers sent the monster a few inches into the ground. He also had to make sure he was safely ducking out the way of any stray concrete that sprayed up and out from their furious, lengthy battle.

Upon the news that Climantine was in the area, Izuku had a vague idea of what the heroes were trying to do and, honestly, it reminded him why they were heroes in the first place. It was a pretty genius idea if they had the mechanics of the Gray Man’s magic correct.

Even where he hid, he could feel the humid, coastal air becoming more arid as an effect of Climantine’s quirk. She was likely situated on top of some close-by building to do so—the higher the altitude, the more effective and spacial.

Izuku had an idea.

While he wasn’t good with long-range attacks yet, he could possibly do one with the weapon he had in his bag. So that the heroes wouldn’t have to deal with the Gray Man any longer, he would use his long-range attack to finish the Gray Man off. He had to do it when all parties least expected it so he could make a quick getaway while also stabilizing the creature. But he had to wait for the right time.

So far, the Gray Man was in the process of doing something similar to fleeing, but every time it tried to run away, Nightquake was in its way, long strands of metal-strong hair twisting and curling to subdue the monster. Mach Barrier stood on his own as well, constantly making walls to defend himself and Nightquake while also trying to keep the creature in one general area. It had worked relatively alright, except they were inching closer into the city.

Izuku was almost sure it was trying to get to the Pacifico Yokohama National Convention Hall, where many of the citizens had been moved to when they couldn’t evacuate in time. Izuku couldn’t really determine why, but perhaps it simply wanted to cause that sort of chaos. It was more likely that it saw the convention hall as an all-you-can-eat cafe, though, and that scared him the most.

Still, he didn’t need to interfere yet. The heroes could handle this part. So he watched from his hiding places as Nightquake tried again to encapsulate the beast, only to use that same bunch of hair to destroy a weakened line of ice, as Mach Barrier created fields that crushed the stone and metal it hit against in the midst of the battle. They were strong, and Climantine’s assistance would only prove even better. They were heroes.

And yet, for some reason, a drippy, gluey, rotten fear wouldn’t stop trying to clog his lungs.

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6:43 p.m.

The Gray Man dodged another swipe from the hair pursuing it before it struck its foot against the ground, creating a line of ice that trailed sharply in their direction. Nightquake shuffled to the side, looking as though they hadn’t moved their feet at all, like they were floating. Mach Barrier created another block of solid, hyper-condensed wind before slamming it down onto the monster, who screeched static and tried to push back against it. It only lasted for a bit before its legs bucked and it fell to the ground, embedded into the concrete.
Mach Barrier huffed, trying to keep the force up, but he was already fatigued. The battle had lasted longer than anticipated, and Climantine’s work still wasn’t completely done. The plan wasn’t ready just yet. After a few minutes, his barrier dissipated before he wanted it to, and the Gray Man staggered quickly to its feet before the hair nearing it could wrap around it.

“Stayeth vigilant, friend of mine. The beast grows weary coequal as we doth,” Nightquake muttered, their hair pulling in, closer to their body.

Mach Barrier huffed heavily, wiping his brow with the back of his hand, “Yeah, gotcha Nighty. It’s almost time, right?”

“Aye. Rest now, buildeth thy energy. Thy barrier shall beest very important. In thy stead, I shall pursue our foe.”

Nightquake bent low before suddenly shooting forward, their kimono billowing in the air as they came closer than ever to the creature. Right as it reached a long, wrinkled hand forward to grasp them, they ducked under it and tried to slice at it with hardened hairs as they passed, but the monster jumped off to the side. Nightquake jolted forward again, keeping up their momentum as they quickly sliced and grasped at the creature. It responded in like, retreating but hissing angrily as it did, trying to get away from the hero in front of it. The dark hero kept this movement up for another five spurts, each spurt shorter than the last, each dodge from the Gray Man less accurate.

Finally, as the hair reached for it once more, the Gray Man was finally faster than the hero, grasping the strands in its own hand as it let out a hissing stream of static. It tugged harshly at the hair, but Nightquake showed no sign of budging, pulling in the opposite direction.

The Gray Man refused to let go, and they tugged against each other until the creature stood solidly on its four legs, twisting its decrepit upper body. Nightquake’s fatigue hit, the pain from their scalp suddenly too much to bear. They yelled, losing their footing as they reached up, holding the roots of the hair that was tangled among the Gray Man’s fingers, their body flung into the air. The Gray Man twisted its torso sharply, making the hero fly in an arch until they were slammed into a nearby, thankfully mostly empty, parking lot off to the side of the long road.

“Nightquake!” Mach Barrier called out, but the words stuttered in his throat when the Gray Man turned its face towards him.

It hissed lowly, raising its front left foot before slamming it down onto the ground in his direction.

But ice failed to form. Only snowy frost shot out from the impact, barely a few centimeters toward him. Almost like it was confused, it tried again, only to get the same result—a small jet of snowy frost that wasn’t even three feet long.

Suddenly, an eerie laugh echoed from the nearby parking lot, Nightquake staggering to their feet, their hair still caught in the creature’s grasp, though the rest of it flowed hauntingly. The kimono was coloring slightly red at the shoulder, but they paid that no mind, their grinning mask facing the creature.

“Aye, thy hour of reckoning hast arriv’d.”

The hair in the monster’s grasp suddenly convulsed and stretched, taking in the monster’s forearm. The Gray Man screeched, pulling back against Nightquake’s quirk, even grabbing it with its other hand, only for the flurry of hair to overtake it as well. Hissing, it began trying to pull away with all four of its bottom limbs, only for its backside to hit solid air.
Mach Barrier forced himself not to mind the pain lacing up and down his arms as he made a solid barrier behind the creature, making it larger even as it did its work, trying to curve the barrier around the Gray Man, almost like a cylinder. Nightquake stepped closer from their position in the parking lot, more hair flowing from their mane to join the other strands that confined the creature, its thrashing contained by the growing, incomplete cylinder of solid air formed around it.

The Gray Man hissed and clawed and screeched, stamping its feet as it created a bunch of snowy frost below its body, but eventually, even its legs were being confined in the forming ball of hair, its limbs forced to bend as it lost its balance.

Eventually, the creature was wrapped completely in hair, even as it still hissed static from behind the tightly corded strands. In retaliation, Nightquake tightened their hair, the ball shrinking with a crackling sound.

“That...Yond shouldst doth ‘t.”

Mach Barrier released his quirk with a gasp, throbbing hands holding onto his knees to keep himself up, his head sweating bullets. Still, even in his fatigue, he managed a wry laugh. “Heh...h-how the heck do you even keep that up?”

Nightquake turned to their comrade, the mask slightly obscured by the still floating hair, “Keepeth what up?”

He felt sweat run down his temple for a completely different reason. “Ah. Nothin’.”

“I’m sooooo sorry guys!” a light, airy voice called from above.

When the two heros looked up, they saw Climantine, clad in her orange rain boots, white leotard, orange poncho, and coconut leaf hat. She floated down from on top of a nearby, several-story building, her waist encased in a big, round ball of water, her quirk letting the large amount of liquid float on air. She still didn’t let the water touch the ground though, deciding to hop out of the floating blob before she touched ground, landing facing vertically in the four lane street to greet them. She blinked big, apologetic eyes at the two.

“I was trying to get all the moisture in the air to return to the coast, but this is a coastal city, so there was way too much to get done all at once! I decided it was best to just get this specific area’s water and make a ball out of it, but...the air got pretty dry for you guys, too, huh? I’m so sorry!”

Nightquake turned to her, raising a placating hand. “Prithee apologize not, Climantine. Hadst ‘t not been f’r thy quirk, the battle would has’t been moo perilous.”

Climantine stared at them with wide eyes and a patient, questioning smile, head tilted just slightly to the left.

Nightquake stared at her for a moment, almost willing the other hero to understand, but eventually turned away. “...If you hadn’t used your quirk, we would’ve been worse off.”

“There it is! Nightquake’s usual way of speaking!” Mach Barrier cheered, though he didn’t have enough energy to raise his hands into the air.

“Go kicketh the bucket.”

“Did you even need to--”
Izuku sagged behind the pillar he was using to hide, breathing a heavy sigh of relief.

The heroes had done great against the Gray Man, and their plan, while it didn’t work completely the way they wanted, was a success in the end. Honestly, he was pretty surprised. Usually, Mach Barrier could make a lot of minor barriers in the course of 50 minutes, but the force needed to stand up to the pure strength of the Gray Man had to put him up to his Mach 3 barriers, which he could only keep doing constantly for about 20 minutes. They were over his limit, but he’d pushed through it.

Nightquake had done an amazing job, too. Even though they reached their fatigue point, which was usually when their hair stopped growing, they kept it up long enough to even ball the Gray Man up. He was sure their scalp was probably bleeding, as it sometimes did when they overextended their quirk, but they always seemed fine later on. And Climantine’s revamped idea had been perfect for the situation. They’d have to be careful whilst moving the Gray Man to--

He jolted, remembering suddenly.

Ah. Right. He actually needed to go ahead and destroy it.

There was absolutely no way that the Gray Man would stay fatigued for long, if it was at all. Unless Climantine kept the air around it dry, or they found a way to keep it perfectly immobile, it would latch onto some of that and start trying to make ice again. With how tired Nightquake was probably getting, he knew the immobility probably wouldn’t last.

So, reaching back, he called for his weapon of choice, and the ribbons came out, forming a pink and yellow bow. Kneeling down, Izuku tried to remember what he saw in the YouTube video and what he did during his practice. He also had to predict where to hit on the ball of hair that would most effectively hit the creature inside.

He breathed deeply, pushing down the inky feeling in his lungs, and got into position, summoning an arrow.

Then, at what he saw, the ink in his lungs completely filled them and chilled his very soul.

No…no, no, no!

They hadn’t predicted the Gray Man’s abilities correctly after all!

---

6:49 p.m.

The only warning that Nightquake had gotten was a startled cry from Climantine.

Nightquake felt a sharp pain at the tips of their hair before they lost feeling completely, the strands that held the Gray Man stinging with cold at their scalp. Suddenly, the ball of hair they had formed around the monster thunked onto the ground, covered completely with frost. The icy cold was quickly traveling up the strands. Snapping out of their surprise, they detached their connection with the hair, the unfrozen strands quickly cutting off from the frozen parts like a lizard separating from its tail.

“What is--”

Before they could finish the sentence, the ball froze over completely before it started to crack.

“Get from around it! Back away!” they cried out.
Mach Barrier staggered backwards, caught off guard, but still managed to back away quickly. Climantine jumped back as well, the ball of water floating behind her still, separating the three heroes into a Y shape around the Gray Man, Climantine alone.

“I thought they said it had an ice quirk! With water!” Mach Barrier yelled, forming a wall of solid air that he was trying to squeeze around the crackling ball of hair.

Climantine’s eyes widened with horror. “No...could this be...a dry ice effect?”

A mere second later, the ball of hair burst, sending shards of frozen hair at the heroes. Nightquake drew further back, cursing as they raised clumps of their unfrozen hair to protect themselves. When the iced shards touched it, they started feeling the beginnings of frostbite on their personally made barrier, and they quickly detached the hair that touched the shard as well.

Mach Barrier lost control over the air they had formed around the creature, deciding instead to go on defense. Luckily, he made a wall thick enough that the shards bounced off of it, but the concrete that the shards touched started to frost over, just like how it looked whenever the Gray Man initially walked around.

Climantine, thinking quickly, pulled the ball of water from behind her to catch the shards thrown her way. When they connected, a big burst of fog flushed out from that side of the ball, flowing down and starting to cover the ground.

Staggering, the Gray Man stood where it had previously been confined, body trembling and throbbing with blue energy in the strange, stained grey glass look of its body.

It took one look in Climantine’s direction. Then it shot towards her.

Nightquake’s hair wasn’t fast enough, but Mach Barrier quickly threw up a wall between the monster and the other hero. Yet, it hadn’t been strong enough, the man recoiling as the barrier was quickly smashed through. Climantine yelped, trying to back away, but she wasn’t fast enough.

The Gray Man jumped into the sphere of water the hero had formed.

First, there was another large burst of fog that spread out in the street, blinding the heroes.

The next, among the fog, Mach Barrier and Nightquake heard a sharp crackling noise.

Then, they heard Climantine scream.

Unable to see or do anything, the two other heroes gritted their teeth and waited for the fog to settle. It took a few moments, but the haze of white lowered enough for them to at least see what was in front of them, even if they could still no longer see their own feet.

The Gray Man was encased in the ball of frozen water, still moving in it as if it were wading in liquid, its head shifting and twitching erratically even inside of its shield. The ball created a frozen stand that held it above the ground, like a crystal ball on a pedestal. Instead, it was a round, frozen fortress that still spouted fog near the bottom of its icy form. Sticking out of the ball were several spikes, particularly around the bottom of the sphere.

It was on these spikes that Climantine had been impaled. She appeared to have tried to run to the other heroes, but her back and arms were stuck to several shards of ice as blood ran down her back. Her head was dipped forward as she twitched, struggling, her mouth and eyes open wide in agony.

Mach Barrier felt a cold terror strike in his heart, and Nightquake bellowed in rage.
6:52 p.m.

“C...C-Climantine is down! It looks like she’s been severely injured! Though the Gray Man had been captured in Nightquake’s grasp, it appears that the creature’s abilities were beyond what was anticipated. Right now, we have reports of backup swiftly moving in. We can only hope they will arrive in time...w-wait! It looks like Nightquake is--”

The many sheltered people watched in alarm as Nightquake rushed the pedestal of ice, hair flaring behind them.

The pedestal formed a lot of little crystals on the ball’s face before shooting them out at the hero, but Mach Barrier wasn’t out for the count either, creating and destroying several small, quick walls to assist the furious hero while not impeding their forward dash. The shards broke and fell on the walls, but made more ice along the ground once they fell, freezing the concrete in places the heroes still couldn’t see due to fog.

That didn’t stop Nightquake from continuing forward, hair poised to attack. Once close, the hair they had clumped together increased greatly, hardening together before slashing at the spikes of ice that Climantine was impaled on. With a loud crack, the ice broke off, some pieces still stuck in the hero’s body, but more hair reached forward to catch her before she fell to the ground. As the hair that cut the ice started to freeze over, it fell off from the still active hair, Nightquake bringing Climantine’s body close to them.

The pedestal shined with the body inside, then, and more spikes of ice formed on its surface before shooting out at the two heroes. They were quickly pulled back though, a strong barrier of air shoving the two back away from the creature as fast as possible as Nightquake didn’t resist the force.

“It appears that Mach Barrier and Nightquake were able to retrieve Climantine, but she’s still in critical condition! Back-up is still a few minutes away! Though...it looks like Nightquake might be unable to continue fighting.”

The people focused on the ghastly hero, and surely enough, the only active hair the hero was using was putting pressure on Climantine’s wounds, the hero holding her close in their arms. The rest of their hair was cut shorter and slightly frosted at the ends in jagged cuts of detachment. The top of the hero’s head looked slightly red, too, but they couldn’t quite tell if that was their imagination or the screen.

“If that’s the case, then it’s up to Mach Barrier to stay on the defense while the other heroes arrive. Reports say...twelve minutes! If Mach Barrier can last for twelve more minutes, the other heroes will be able to take care of the situation and Climantine can be given intensive care.”

As the reporter said this, the pedestal began to glow and shift more furiously, and shards of ice and cold started shooting off of it at a rapid pace. Mach Barrier had jumped in front of the other heroes though, and started creating barriers to fend the ice off.

Still, it looked like they were breaking apart as quickly as they were being formed.

The citizens watched on from their screens, helplessly.

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Izuku watched helplessly from his hiding spot at the side of the building, hands trembling.
He could hear Mach Barrier’s air fields dissipating just as quickly as the hero formed them. He wasn’t being given enough time to solidify them well enough, and even if he did, the hero couldn’t hold it for long.

The battle had been going on for at least 30 minutes. He was already past his limit.

Izuku... he knew he had to do something!

But what could he do that three pro heroes couldn’t? He wasn’t all that strong, not yet, he needed more training, and his speed left a lot to be desired, and the ice was too good of a defence, there was no way his measly arrows could get through it, and if he touched it, his skin would freeze over like Nightquake’s hair did and he couldn’t do it wasn’t ready this was too much all at once he couldn’t trump three heroes that’d be a stupid thought he could--

Breathe.

Izuku realized he’d been mumbling out loud breathlessly, losing more air than he was taking in, the edges of his vision going dark. He gasped and covered his mouth as he tried his hardest to not hyperventilate.

That’s it, kid. Breathe. In...hold it...out... In...hold it...out...

The boy followed the voice’s instructions as the darkness started dissipating. Eventually, he could breathe well enough without the reminder and hunkered down further in his spot.

Alright. I know this looks bad, and it’s a particularly tricky situation, but kid. Don’t compare yourself to heroes. Don’t measure yourself by quirks. You don’t have one. You know what you do have, though? Magic. And that’s what this situation needs.

“But--”

You are more qualified and capable of this than you give yourself credit for. Do you know how many others of these could be around had you not been getting rid of the minor Gray Men? Sure, those heroes got the ones in the more public areas, but they let the ones in other communities lie, and you cleaned up their mess. You’ve learned tactic after tactic, skill after skill, and you’re still evolving. So use what you have.

He gazed out at the fight again. “But what if...it’s not enough?”

That’s the thing about you, kid. I know you know how to make it enough.

He kept watching with wavering eyes, but the shaking in his limbs had finally started to calm “...O-okay...okay... Alright. Okay.”

So, first thing’s first. What’s the first question you need to ask?

“Wh...what it’s weak against.”

Bingo. So?

“...Air. Or wind pressure. There hasn’t been a lot of wind today, so perhaps that’s why it’s been able to control its powers so well. But against all the heroes here, Mach Barrier’s been the one strongest against it. That’s not to say Mach Barrier’s air force isn’t stronger than steel, but where steel would freeze over, it’s hard to freeze air unless you somehow manage to freeze the oxygen and nitrogen.”

As he said this, Izuku surveyed the surrounding area, trying to plan. “Had it been in a closed area,
that would’ve been more of a threat, which is probably why it had so much power inside of the car bed—they gave it a closed off space full of both air moisture and free-to-freeze molecules, but of course, there was no way of knowing that would happen with the information they had. Either way, the control of air pressure is the best defense against it, and maybe the best offense.”

Right. Can you do that?

“I...don’t think so.”

Really?

Izuku could hear the invisible eyebrow raise and thought harder about it. Then he remembered something particularly important about his powers. “Actually...maybe I can. Still, it has a firm barrier of ice now, but...maybe that helps. If I can pierce it somehow, but I don’t want to touch it directly, I just need to be fast enough, but I’m not really the fastest runner, and I probably wouldn’t be able to outrun the ice if it tried to...but maybe...I don’t need to outrun it, I just need to hit it at a weak point. If there isn’t one...I need to make one… Handyman?”

Yes?

For some reason, he could hear the voice start to grin. “How many arrows do I have?”

Six.

Izuku nodded, summoning his bow. After a few more seconds of planning his route, he summoned an arrow and pointed it at his first target.

“T-That’ll have to do.”

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6:55 p.m.

Mach Barrier’s arms were at their limits, and he could no longer feel his fingers. He had already beyond overextended the use of his quirk, but he couldn’t very well give up. Behind him, Nightquake looked for a way to escape, but each time they tried, the bastard of a monster would aim for them and Climantine. Poor Climantine, who was still bleeding out in her friend’s arms…

There just was no way past the creature blocking their way back.

So, despite knowing his limits, he pushed on, forming barrier after barrier, even if they dissipated right after. The ground before him was covered in broken shards of ice that chilled the entire street. His feet could feel the cold through his boots, but he couldn’t move or stop. He had to push on.

By that time, he could barely get a barrier to stay for more than 5 seconds, but it was just long enough to keep defending himself and his friends.

The creature pulsed in its shield, the static hissing louder, like it was taunting him. He gritted his teeth.

“You think...you think you can just kill me? Well fuck, I’m not going down without a fight! You’re just going to have to keep playing with me for the next nine minutes, asshole!” He grinned wide, furious, even as the globe of ice started to give off more fog and ice crystals formed on it in varying sizes.
“Plus Ultra!!”

Suddenly, there was a flash of yellow somewhere behind the globe as well as a sharp *thok* sound.

The inside of the globe lit up yellow, sparking with the energy, and the Gray Man made a sound that distinctly, even as static, sounded like *pain*.

He almost didn’t notice the glowing yellow figure that ran from the sidewalk near the corporate building toward him out of the pure shock of hearing that sort of noise leave its face. Quickly though, he blinked out of it from the surprised noise behind him as well as the call from the person who had run up to him.

“M-Mach B-B-Barrier, sir!”

When he looked down, there was some glowing kid in a pink dress staring up at him with strange, starry eyes. For some reason, he couldn’t quite read what their face looked like, but they seemed to be concerned for him.

“W...What the hell--”

“Th-There’s no time to explain!” the kid said quickly, voice somehow unidentifiable, “P-Please tell me! How long do you think it’ll take for you to recover enough to make the thickest barrier you can right now?!?”

“Wha--”

“Please!”

He looked up at the sound of crackling ice. The creature looked...dare he say it...*injured*. Its body now had the slightest inklings of yellow polluting its skin in crack-shaped figures along what could be called its flesh. The icy sound was from the large amount of shards forming along the globe, rotating around it like the rings of Saturn.

“Shit, uh, a minute?! What the hell are you doing out here, get to safe--”

Before he could finish the sentence, the creature let out a loud screech of static, the shards roving behind the globe before they slid over it, down the pedestal of ice, and toward the group almost too quickly for him to react. Cursing under his breath, he reached his hands up and tried his hardest, calling for his tired muscles to push out enough energy to form another barrier. But the ice was coming too quickly, he wouldn’t be able to make it in time--

The kid, who had been a bit to the side of him, stood in front of him, their body positioned in some sort of martial art pose. What was it...kickboxing? Karate? Muay Thai?

He let his hands down to reach for the kid and pull them back, but the ice was nearly at them when they kicked just at the right time for the top of their foot to hit the ice.

He had expected a lot of things to happen at that moment.

He’d expected the kid’s foot to freeze over as they became a human icicle out of stupid vigilantism. He’d expected the ice to overtake him next, for him to black out before he could see what would happen to his friends. At most, he’d expected the top chunk of the ice the kid kicked to break off before the rest did its job.

He hadn’t expected the ice, including the shards on the ground, to be *blown back*. 
A sharp gust of wind blew back against the overwhelming cold. The ice that had immediately touched their feet was shattered into tiny shards, while the pieces on the ground were blown back and, like projectiles, imbedded themselves into the concrete, walls, and glass around and behind the creature. The kid’s leg was still poised in the air, sparking with whatever sort of quirk they had. His jaw dropped without shame.

“That’ll do! Wh-When I call out to you, please form the barrier! I-In the meantime, I f-fend it off!” the kid said, turning to him with scared yet eager eyes, “O-Okay?!”

“Ah...uh...yeah. Cool.”

“O-Okay!!” They stuck a trembling thumb up in the air.

He stuck one up back as well as he could with the lack of feeling in his hands.

Then they turned back, somehow summoning an arrow that sparked and glowed with the same energy that had been surrounding their leg, before shooting it at the icy globe. That one, too, struck, this time on the lower part of the globe, like the kid’s aim had been off. Still, with a loud thok, a stream of yellow energy spilled into the globe and sparked on the ice, making the Gray Man screech yet again.

“I-I’ll run around it to draw its attention! U-Uhmm...p-please see if you can get away, M-Mx Nightquake!”

As the kid said this, they ran off to the side, and, just as they said, they attracted the Gray Man’s attention like a laser pointer to a cat. It made sense, too. For some reason, whatever quirk the kid had did a lot more damage than three heroes combined, its skin covered even more with jagged yellow lines, like it was actually being shocked by electricity. It summoned more ice, but it was no longer even looking in their direction.

He felt like he was having a fever dream. Like, he had to already be dead and be hallucinating or something. Turning back, he tried to see if Nightquake was seeing the same thing he was.

He couldn’t very well tell what their facial expression was, but judging from the lack of response and the way they looked up at him as well, he figured that, yes, they were seeing the same thing. Yes, a kid—Girl? Boy? Nonbinary? He really couldn’t tell for some reason...seemed like a girl but… Anyway, a kid in a pink dress who was shivering in their own shoes one minute and kicking ice to pieces the next, was, in fact, saving their lives.

He gave Nightquake a quick nod, and the hero nodded back. Not wasting any more time, they stood, holding Climantine as still as they could in their arms, and ran away toward the direction the police and backup heroes would be arriving, forced to try to pass the Gray Man yet again. As he expected, the creature turned back toward Nightquake and let out something of an enraged stream of static, forming ice to attack them and their cargo.

Before he could even think of creating a barrier to block it, another thok sounded, and more yellow energy struck the creature inside of the ice.

“O-Over here, stupid!” the kid’s voice called as they circled the monster, diverting attention from the two heroes.

Livid, the Gray Man quickly made some half-formed icicles on the body of the globe before shooting them at the kid. The kid threw the bow into the air, making it dissipate in a bundle of yellow ribbons, as more trailed from their backpack to surround their wrists. The new ribbons formed gloves on their
hands, and they posted up in some martial arts stance.

Each shard that came flying at them was met with a jab from the kid’s gloved hands, and, with a much smaller glimmer of yellow, electric-like energy, the shards were destroyed. Their expression was surprisingly serious, like they were snapping in and out of hyperfocus at times—they stayed focused, that was for sure, but it was like something in the kid’s demeanor changed when they had that dogged stubbornness on their face.

Something about the gleaming stars in the kid’s eyes filled him with determination.

He grinned, feeling some spark of nerves back in his fingers.

“HEY KID!!”

They jolted, startled, before turning to him as they dodged another shard of ice. He hunkered low, fingers splayed as much as he could get them to. He could feel the wind at his fingertips again.

“I’m ready when you are! Let’s blow this f*cker into the shadow realm, ey?!?”

Their eyes widened at him before a matching grin spread on their face as well, “Y-Yes sir!! Thank you!!”

In a quick flurry of ribbons, the kid had the bow and arrow again, and ran towards him. He could feel his quirk call the wind as it started to harden once again before him. The short, two minute break had done only a little bit of a wonder for his stamina, but it was enough. He could at least make a Mach 2 barrier for three seconds. He hoped that was all the kid needed. They never actually said what they needed the barrier for.

Once they were nearly at him, they turned back for a split second, letting a by-faith arrow loose, and, by some string of luck, it landed right at the forehead of the creature’s icy dome. The Gray Man’s body shook with the energy this time, the static sounding near tortured by the kid’s quirk.

Good. He hoped it was suffering.

With one last grunt of effort, he finished the barrier that the kid needed, the nearly invisible wall gleaming before him.

When the kid jumped, he suddenly realized what they wanted him to make it for.

Curving their body midair, the kid landed feet first onto the wall, the skirt of their dress fluttering with the air.

The next, he felt his barrier break with the force the kid kicked off with, a surprising boom sound coming from the kid’s feet as his own body blown back as he lost balance.

He fell right onto his ass and back, groaning, before he heard a very loud cRAK from near the globe. Wanting to see what happened, he struggled and sat up, breathing heavily.

The kid had his feet settled on the arrow they’d shot into the ice last minute, but it had embedded deeper into the ice with that kick, impaling the creature’s head. It wasn’t screeching out streams of white noise anymore, the static that made its face a purely yellow slate of color, the blue color to its body gone.

The smile on his face widened as he watched the yellow fade, though it did twitch as the kid lost their footing, gasping as they fell onto their back.
Seconds later, all of the ice and water around them started to defrost, the source of the issue gone. The big globe of water had been cracked by the kid’s kick, and he could see water starting to leak from it.

“Hey kid! You might wanna--”

“EEEEEEEEEEKKK!!”

He snorted, the suddenly soaked kid rolling out of the way of the rest of the freezing water. They quickly stood up as they surveyed themself, groaning as they started trying to get some of the liquid out of their clothes. He watched, amused, until snorting devolved into a loud laughter.

He fell backwards onto his back as his body finally started to register the end of the battle, still laughing even as he closed his eyes.

It was over. The Gray Man was gone.

Nightquake escaped with Climantine and possibly made it to EMTs to save her life.

The police and backup heroes would be there any minute to take care of the rest.

God, he wanted to sleep for a really long time.

“U-Uhm, Mach Barrier sir?”

He peeked an eye open under his glasses, meeting the concerned gaze of the star-eyed kid. Who was still dripping.

“Are you...are you going to be okay?”

“...Yeah, kiddo,” he said, breathlessly, “Yeah. I’ll be okay.”

They smiled down at him, still managing to look worried despite how he somehow couldn’t define any features about them, “O-Oh! That’s good! I-I know you probably overused your quirk, so you probably can’t feel your hands or anything.” Their worry morphed into guilt, to his surprise. “ I-I’m really sorry it took me so long to act, b-but I d-didn’t want to get in the w-way of the plan y-you guys thought of, because w-when you think about it, i-i-it was actually a really g-great plan, but the G-Gray Man didn’t u-use water m-magic like expected, to be honest, I-I was pretty surprised, too, bec-cause when I heard ab-bout what happened, I’d th-thought that--”

“Hey kid?”

They jumped. “S-Sorry! I...I, I’m s--”

“Kid,” he mumbled, closing his eyes, “you literally saved my life. Don’t start apologizing after that.”

“O-Oh...I’m so--ah...uhm...w-what is it?”

He was actually starting to feel pretty drowsy. What was he going to say again?

“Uuuuh...shoot, uh...damn. I’m just... You have...one hell of a quirk, kid. Like, I heard ‘boucha from the news and stuff, but in person? That shit’s crazy…”

“...T-Thank you.”

“And,” he sighed, “I know yer technically a...uh...vigilante and all that, but...man, I sure don’t regret
meeting you here.”

He vaguely felt something on his arm then, but it wasn’t cold. It was warm and wet. He peeked an eye open, only to see the kid’s face scrunching up with the effort to not cry, only they were failing miserably, hot tears starting to trail down their cheeks.

“I--...I...th-thank you…” they hiccuped, starting to rub at their eyes, “Th...that m-means a l-lot to me... U-uhm!” They turned their big, watery eyes to him, the stars gleaming with their wavering smile. “I--...I’m...a h-huge fan! O-Of you, I mean…”

He laughed breathlessly as his eyes fell shut again, the fatigue hitting him hard. “That so? ...Well, tell ya what. Nex'time I can feel ‘m arms, lemme sign somethin’ for ya…”

If he heard the kid’s reply, he didn’t remember it.

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When he woke next, it was to EMTs moving him away from the wall he’d been set up against.

Several heroes were around, but none of them were needed to fight. Police were taping off the area while others helped escort those who had hidden in the multi-story i-Mark corporate building out. He could vaguely hear mutterings about regrouping and search parties.

The glowing kid was nowhere to be found.
After dodging the sight of the helicopter, Izuku managed to turn back to his usual self and infiltrate a building, hiding there as if he’d been there the whole time. It was then that he realized all of the messages in the class group chat, and he finally messaged back that he was alright. He got asked what took him so long to reply—not in those exact words, they were, uh, more rude—and he lied through his teeth about chaos and disputes and trying to be careful among it all. They automatically attributed his carefulness to his quirklessness, which hurt, but at least they filled in the lie however they liked.

Needless to say, the kids only spent one night at the ryokan inn. Their trip was cut short, as was class 3-B’s in Sagamihara, but class 3-A, being further away from the chaos, only had theirs cut short by a day rather than by two.

It had been a bit awkward in the room with the rest of the boys, all of them talking about the “glowing girl in pink” that defeated the Gray Man in less than three minutes while the police and heroes had taken hours. He’d muttered that the heroes probably fatigued the creature, and the boys acted like they hadn’t heard them, but they started whispering about the possibility of that moments later as if he couldn’t hear them. The train back had been like that as well, with several morning news stations focused on the frighteningly clear video of him working with Mach Barrier to defeat the Gray Man, his classmates even calling the “girl”...well, cool.

Being called that suddenly after years of being ignored made him reel, but he had to contain it. After all, no one knew it was him, and it was best that way.

Especially when he knew there was probably a warrant out for his arrest for vigilante use of “quirk”, though it was magic and wouldn’t count, but the government didn’t really have a way of knowing that.

He might want to clear up that “girl” assumption, though. At some point.

Somehow.

The kids weren’t given school after the train ride back, so they were all free to go home, except he had to give the teacher a full report of what happened while he was lost. He stuttered and stumbled through his lie enough that the teacher finally got tired of him and sent him home. He didn’t
remember half of what he said, only that it was rowdy, which was why he didn’t message back immediately that he was safe. Izuku really hoped that wouldn’t come back to bite him in the ass or anything.

His home lacked his mother’s warmth when he opened the door, the woman off at work. He’d sent her many, many apologetic text messages the night before and she knew he would be home. He’d sent one to Shimizu as well, who only sent [text me] when he wasn’t looking at his phone, but he had still appreciated her concern. Still, even though his mother wasn’t there to greet him back, he still sagged, a stark sense of relief flooding his veins at the sight of the small hall in their apartment.

He sighed, slipping his shoes off before sauntering into the living room with his luggage. He had so many notes he needed to make, both in his hero journal and the magic journal. Dumping his backpack in the space between the coffee table and the couch, he turned the TV on for background noise and trudged over to the kitchen for something to snack on. Sure, he didn’t really need to eat anymore, but instant ramen was delicious no matter what.

True to the name, it hadn’t taken him long to get it ready, and he slugged back into the living room, settling down beside his bag. Pulling out his notebooks, he started flipping through channels, trying to find something interesting. He sniffed a little when nothing really was on, so he settled on one of the hero channels, one that was more popular with the morning and afternoon crowd.

“Hoi, hoi, hoi! Welcome to another super-duper shot of Hero! Daily! Shot!! It’s I, your lovable host, Totoko-kyuuuuun!!” a young woman with bob undercut pink hair, bat ears, and lots of hero-related hairclips in her hair greeted excitedly. Her desk was surrounded by hero memorabilia. She blinked her long lashes rapidly as an audience cheered for her. “We’ve got lotsa good hero info for you today, especially after yesterday’s terri-bad attack on Yokohama! Gigguuuuuuun?! How did somethin’ like that happen?! Lemme tell you!”

Deeming the channel fine, he opened his hero book and flipped to his page about Mach Barrier. Finding the page was already filled, he decided to do revamped pages on the three heroes he saw that day...or, well, the main two. The event, unfortunately didn’t treat Climantine so well, so he didn’t have as much new data on her. Speaking of which, he really hoped she was okay…

Shaking his head, he started on Mach Barrier’s new page, half-listening to the TV.

“The higher ups have info on the human who was attacked all tight ‘n snugged up, ‘cause I can’t seem to find a single tip about who they are! That being said, the docs say he’ll be al-mighty! He’s still asleep, but surgery was a success! Banzai!” She threw her hands into the air, black bat wings flapping behind her. “But hey, isn’t this bad?! Don’t get too close to the Gray Men, okay?! Totoko-kyun would be very upset if you got your quirk sucked outta ya cause you got too close to one! So when they show up, da-da-da-da-dash away!!”

Yeah, that’s just about as likely to happen as Katsuki-kun not having a stick all the way up his anus.

Izuku choked on his ramen. He coughed a bit, but managed to get his bearings. Trying to not laugh, he shot a glare at his wrist, the eye in the watch actually staring back, squinting in mirth.

He cleared his throat. “Not funny.”

It was and you know it.

His lips pursed, but he didn’t reply, writing some notes that came to mind for the hero book.

“To all of you concerned fans out there, Climantine is doing a-okay! Banzai!! She took quite the hit,
but due to the quick action from Nightquake and Mach Barrier, she’s on the road to recovery! Be sure you guys flood social media with support for our favorite seasonal hero!! O-tayyy?! O-tay!! Now, now, now, we’re getting to the part we’ve all been waiting for...the final battle between the Gray Man and Mach Barrier, teamed up with the kyuuuuutest loli-vigilante I’ve ever seen!”

Izuku scored a deep, long tear into the page he was working on, eyes wide with shock.

H-snrk...Holy crap.

He looked up from the page stiltedly, and sure enough, alongside the hostess, there was a picture from the fight in aerial view, likely from the helicopter. There were three zoomed in pictures with it as well, one of the Gray Man, one of Mach Barrier, and one of himself, still rather unidentifiable by camera.

“You all in the media have sent in your name ideas, and we’ve decided to dub this Gray Man ‘Nessus’!! Kinda a cruel name, don’cha think? Who’s gonna end up being Hercules?! Huh?! Anyway, after Nessus got cornered up by the absolutely awesome hero trio, its power boost was re-DONK-ulous!! Stupid strong! To be honest, I was sha-sha-shakin’ in me boots when watching the initial footage on the news!! Luckily, Musutafu’s mysterious fighting loli-maid made her way to Yokohama just in time to help get rid of Nessus with a ba-BANG!! Seriously! Take a look at that first kick!!”

Just as she said, she showed a video from the news helicopter that showed him kicking the ice back, yellow energy sparking around his leg. He felt his face start to flush.

“WOWZERS!! Amirite?! Like, seriously, I’ve never seen a kick that juicy in my whole life! But you know what’s even better than a kick like that? The final attack loli-maid used on Nessus! Che-che-check it out!!”

Izuku’s entire face was beet red, trembling in his seat. “Wh-why do they keep calling me a l-lo-lo-lo-”

Pffft...Loli?

He covered his heated face with his arms as much as he possibly could, contorting his arms around his head, sweat pouring down his face. “Noooo! Don’t say that!”

Hehehehehehehehh!

“You know the really, really cool part? After the heroes fought Nessus for a whopping 31 minutes, maid-girl finished up the fight in roughly one-and-a-half minutes!! And to some of you out there sayin’ ‘oh, the heroes tired Nessus out for her, she’s just takin’ the credit,’ WELL! You can say wha’cha want, but evidence from previous Gray Man battles shows that she's a consistent girl! Her average defeats of a Gray Man are under six minutes, and those numbers are decreasing!! And unlike heroes, this vigilante baby-doll bombshell can actually get rid of the problem rather than contain it with her absolutely astounding quirk! Whatever it is... Hey, hey, hey! I’m not sayin’ our beloved pro heroes don’t do a fan-TABULOUS job! There’s just no clean-up like this little lady can dish out!”

Izuku may or may not have been covering his eyes, screaming. I--ahem, Handyman may or may not have been laughing their incorporeal butt off.

“There’s still a whole lotta mystery surrounding the nature of this vigilante girl! Who is she? Where did she come from? Why does she hang around Musutafu so much? Is she from there? What is her
quirk?! Heck, the mystery behind how her quirk works is quickly catching up to popularity levels equivalent to that of the mystery behind All Might’s!! Maybe, just maybe, there’s some sort of relationship between the two?! How is the world going to adapt to the new genre of ‘glow-tic loli’?! Who is going to make your merchandise?! Is this your calling for me--am I to be your merchandise ambassador?! When will a hero agency hire you?!

“Oh my God, make it stop!!” Izuku cried, peaking through his fingers at the screen.

The bat-eared woman in the screen leaned forward over her desk, eyes gleaming, pointing. “We’ll find you out! I swear on it--”

“Oh God--”

“MINUTE MAID!!”

Izuku paused, eyes unable to really focus on anything. He wanted to crawl into a hole and die or crawl into his bedsheets and never come out again or…but…

Did she...did she just name him?

The woman on screen grinned, ears twitching and wings flapping. “Oooh, I like it! The name has a really nice ring to it! While I’m still wondering ‘bout you guys’ choice on naming the Yokohama Gray Man ‘Nessus’, I really like this one! Since the glow-tic loli vigilante hasn’t announced a name, the wonderful folks of the internet have made one for her! It’s been spreading in popularity since about 9 a.m. today! Whoever you are out there, lady maid, I hope you like it, sweetie! Kyuuun!” She made a heart shape with her hands before clasping them together with a full-toothed smile. “Now, now, on to more awesome, awesome hero news!!”

Izuku stared at the television with a blank expression on his face, though it was still very, very red. After a second, he seemed to snap out of it before quickly shifting among the news and hero channels with a click.

“The vigilante has been given the codename Minute Ma--”

“--As of 9 a.m., citizens have been calling on Minute Ma--”

“--ute Maid was involved in--”

“--etween the Gray Man codenamed Nessus, and the vigilante, codenamed Minute Mai--”

“--ndezvous with the three heroes to subdue the Gray Man, now called Nessus. Still, it took the efforts of a vigilante by the name of Minute Maid to--”

Izuku dropped his hand to the coffee table, staring blankly as he still held the remote.

Usually, this would be inter-dimensional trademark infringement, except it’s under trademark class 32 and hero names are under class 45, so we’re all good. Also, as long as folks know about the actual Minute Maid juice corporation under Coca-Cola and its lack of relation to you in general, there’s no trademark infringement, dilution, tarnishment, or defamation. I mean, sure, you’re a vigilante and technically have no trademark, but if push came to shove, you’re still in the clear. Well, unless you start selling juice with that name. Then you’d get sued.

“...What?”

Legal awareness, kid. Legal awareness.
“Oh...Bu--...but...but I--”

Did you have another name in mind?

Izuku paused, distressed embarrassment still all over his face. “N-No...it’s just…”

It’s just?

“It’s just...uhm...I-I was planning on something and it f-feels weird to just be...named...and...” He looked down, his head practically steaming. “…‘Glow-tic Loli?’”

What can I say? You’re cute as a button, baby boy.

His head thunked on the table. “Noooooo, stop.”

Awww man, this makes me really want to put you in panties.

“STOP!!!”

---

Tsukauchi paused the news website’s video with a sigh, cut off only by the knock on his door.

“Come in.” He took a sip of his coffee right after, something he almost could’ve regretted after it was Hashiro who entered his door. Coffee spit takes just sounded painful.

She had a wrist brace on and looked somewhat tired, but her hair was bundled up tightly at the top back of her head, folders settled under her arm in a vice, secretive grip. And she was pointedly supposed to be having a day of rest after her concussion. Yet there she was.

“Don’t you know the meaning of bedrest?” he asked with a wry smile.

She returned it with raised eyebrows and a flat, unimpressed gaze. “We’re detectives. There’s no such thing as bedrest. Besides, I’d personally offend myself if I didn’t step in at a time like this.”

Tsukauchi sat up as she placed the folders down on his desk, sitting on the other side. “‘Minute Maid’ huh? It’s clever, I suppose.”

“Hmmm. Did you get the update on Todoroki Kazuo?”

“Yes, and it gives us more information on this particular phenomena,” he replied, starting to look through the folders, “Turns out his quirk isn’t actually gone.”

Hashiro glanced up at him incredulously from where she’d settled in her seat, “From the show of ice power from yesterday, I would think his quirk would be gone.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but I got a report and documentation showing that he froze part of his bed over during the night in an involuntary use of his quirk. Though, it seems all he can do safely now is create frost. Not because his quirk was stolen, but apparently, if his body temperature drops below 35.8 degrees Celsius, his entire body starts shutting down.”

“As in...from frostbite?”

“Exactly, but the process is unfortunately fast. He jumps from shivering directly to whitened, frost-nipped skin, frostbite following directly after. Falling into hypothermia is like second nature after that.”
Hashiro frowned, “So, the dry ice effect Nightquake said Climantine identified must be related to that somehow. But how could a Gray Man steal something like...I don’t know...how would you describe that?”

Tsukauchi didn’t look up, but his eyebrows rose. “Hmm...perhaps an aspect of the quirk rather than the quirk itself. Most people are safe-guarded against their own quirk to an extent so they don’t cause themselves harm. Usually. Ice quirk holders in particular tend to be better off in cold climates, and they can usually withstand body temperature drops much steeper than two degrees.”

“So then, the Gray Man took his ability to use--to an extent--and regulate his quirk. Which would explain the involuntary quirk use.”

“Sounds solid.”

“But that means Todoroki-san won’t be able to use his quirk safely at all,” she said, her voice low with regret, “He almost killed himself in the midst of a coma. Do they plan to put him through quirk training again if he wakes?”

“Rather than quirk training, quirk suppression, it seems.”

“Hmm…”

“The likelihood of him waking up has steadily been improving. There’s some hope for him, at least.”

“Has anyone told Endeavor yet?”

Tsukauchi shifted his papers, “Yes, he and his family have been informed of the situation.”

“...How did he react?”

“About as much as you’d expect him to.”

Hashiro’s brow furrowed, the corner of her mouth twitching. “I swear there’s something wrong with that man.”

Tsukauchi chuckled, “Well, that’s certainly not my jurisdiction.”

He would’ve said more, but he paused on the line he’d just read in the report. Blinking, he went back and read over the line again. Then he looked up, frowning lightly at Hashiro.

“This is from the Deputy Chief Kawamura, correct?”

“Mmm hmm,” Hashiro replied, crossing her legs as one bobbed slightly.

He read back over the line. “‘Apprehend’ instead of ‘arrest’, huh?”

“She did save several lives that day, no one can particularly get mad at her for that.”

“That being said, she’s the missing link in finding out what the Gray Men are and why she’s the most effective against them. I’m guessing that’s his logic. Reasonable, except I’m not sure why he’s using vigilantism as the explanation.”

“Probably because it’s the most obvious offense that, if the media demands an explanation, we can dish out.”

Tsukauchi leaned back in his chair, head back as well, with a loud, foreboding sigh. “I can already
hear the backlash coming for that.”

She chuckled at his expense. “Such is the way of media interaction. Anyway, which school are we visiting first?”

He turned his head toward her, still leaned. “Oh, no, we don’t start that until tomorrow. Most of the schools that had their vacations cancelled are out today and tomorrow. We’ll start on the ones that get back tomorrow, then, once we’re done with those, get to the ones that start the day after. I’ve already contacted the ones we’re visiting tomorrow, so their faculty should be prepared.”

“Alright. Which ones do we start with?”

He sat up in his chair then, turning toward his computer. “High schools first, then middle schools. I’ll print you the list.”

She nodded in reply, turning back to the reports and references in her hands, one named *Quirk Categorization and Identifying Quirk Types.*
Passing Time

Chapter Notes

*eyes clenched closed, seething*
Aaaaaaaa I really wanted to have this out yesterday.

I don't have a lot of time before work today, so I can't link all of the fan art like I want to, but I'll come back over this later and add that in, okay? *I seriously love all of your fan art, even if I can't directly comment on it because I don't own an Instagram, and if it's on Tumblr, it should already be reblogged and stuff, but if it's not, I'll be sure I get to it ASAP, okay?!*
EDIT: I put it in the next chapter. :3

In the meantime, here's the next chapter. I didn't have it in on time, so I made it longer.

As always, thank you guys for your support!

The trash had smelled as terrible as usual. He’d had the unrealistic fantasy that maybe the beach would be less pungent than it had been when he’d left on Monday, but of course, things just tended to not work out that way.

A small part of Izuku realized that it was probably a bit weird that he hung around dirt and grime on a scheduled basis, early enough that the sun hadn’t completely risen yet, but he was becoming more precise with his kicks and his arms were getting maybe a bit thicker. He’d been sure he saw something of a bicep earlier. Yeah.

He felt productive, at least a bit, and the weight training was just an added bonus. Also, he was pretty sure he was getting a smell immunity in a sense. Maybe he was hallucinating or something, but he was maybe starting to be able to discern certain bad smells from others. That might become useful?

Out of the many (recently numbered) large piles, he had cleaned up something of a tenth of what had been there, and there were a maze of pathways trailing through the mess that he’d etched out himself. There was still quite a bit of work left, of course, but knowing that the mounds were becoming progressively smaller made him giddy, a feeling that didn’t go away even when he had to sneak back into his own house to get ready for school.

His saving grace was that he came back in time just before she’d come to his door to wake him up. Climbing the building was easy—well, because he wouldn’t “climb” per se. Quickly transforming and jumping up to his floor was the best option in the end, and it helped him learn how to land better, too. He just hoped no one ever saw him and no one ever decided to address the finger-shaped holes in the wall around his bedroom window from the first time he tried it. From there, it was a dash to the bathroom because he surely smelled like rotten milk and eggs and the saltiest kind of sweat mixed together in some amalgam of terrible.

He hoped his ability to sneak around and become generally invisible would get better with his break-ins, but...well, he’d never had the best luck. Public sneaking, when not transformed, apparently wasn’t his forte, especially not in school.
“Hey, Deku!” Arashi-san called out once the end-of-day bell rang, expression scrunched like he was looking at a particularly persistent stain. Sanada-san and Uoka-san looked at him with similar expressions as they got up from their own desks.

“E-Eh?” Reflexively, he stuffed his hero and magic books as deeply into his bag as he could muster without damaging them. He flinched a little when the boy slammed his hands down on top of his desk. It wasn’t as startling as Kacchan’s explosive slamming, but loud noises tended to make him antsy sometimes.

“What do you have anything you’re doing today?” Arashi asked lowly, trying to imply something. Probably that he shouldn’t say “yes”. But saying that would’ve been a lie and he lied enough day-by-day, so even if it made them want to beat him up, he was telling the truth.

He didn’t have to say that the “thing he had to do” was go hero watching, of course.

“U-ah...y-yes, I, uh--”

“No? Great!” Arashi slipped over beside him, slinging his arm over Izuku’s shoulder, “Let’s hang out! You, me, Keiko, and Uoka. How ‘bout it?”

The boy’s hand clenched on Izuku’s shoulder, warning him. Had it been Kacchan, he would’ve frozen completely at the hold or agreed immediately. Arashi, though he could stretch his body, could not cause harmful explosions in his palms that would scar and burn him. He was a bully, sure, but he wasn’t the bully.

“I-I, uhm, I do actually h-have things to do, so--”

“Oh, come on, Deku!” Uoka leaned into his space, an eyebrow raised, grin widening when Izuku tried to lean away from him, “You’re the reason we’re back at school early, so you at least owe us some quality time, don’t you think?”

“I’m sure you’d like to get an apology present for Yaomasa-chan,” Sanada chimed in, sitting on her desk as she kicked her legs a little, “She got into some trouble for losing you, so she’s been upset ever since we came back. Don’t you think you owe her?”

Izuku...couldn’t argue with that logic. --what-- He had slipped away from the group on purpose, but to others, the blame would’ve fallen on the person whose hand he was holding. He could remember the fear on Yaomasa’s face…

His face flushed, mortified, “Ah...uh...mm...I-I guess I--”

“Great!” Arashi grinned, “Doesn’t an arcade visit sound good?”

“I-I don’t know if I--”

“You know, that’s a great idea!” Sanada san cheered, “I’m sure Yaomasa would like a gift from the vending machine over there!”

Izuku trembled, trying to think over how much money he had left. He was almost positively sure that they were going to have him pay for everything, just like last time. He almost didn’t have enough to buy his notebook stash or pay for lunch after that trip, and he wasn’t looking forward to that.

But...well…

For Yaomasa-san.
“Maaan, I’ve gotta say, having you around is kinda like bad luck, you know? What would you call that...uuuuh…” Arashi hummed, his arm still around Izuku’s shoulders like a vice.

They were in the more populated area of Musutafu, passing down occupied side streets not big enough for cars. There were mostly people on foot, but occasionally there’d be the passing bicycle, bell ringing to let the walkers know they were near. Most of the folks around were salarymen heading to the already repaired train station, but others were heading to shops and such down the streets. His group was heading to one of the more popular side roads, where there were cafes and dollar shops and, of course, a local arcade.

“Like, a backwards zashiki-warashi?” Uoka offered.

“More like a general bad luck spirit,” Sanada laughed, “There’s no need to get specific, especially when you don’t know a good one to call him.”

If you think he’s bad luck, how about you stop messing with him then?

Izuku hummed lowly, his expression falling into exasperation, but he didn’t say anything, neither to Arashi or the Handyman.

“Seriously, I think if he hadn’t come on the trip, we would’ve been better off,” Sanada sighed.

“Who knows, maybe Deku’s the one who attracted the Gray Man in the first place. His mumbling is actually a bad luck spell!” Uoka cheered. Arashi laughed, his hand tightening on Izuku’s shoulder.

Sanada screamed playfully. “Aaah! Scary!”

“Hey, hey, could it be that Deku’s been cursing our class this whole time?” Arashi jeered.

“How gross! God, Deku’s such a creep.”

“Seriously, the class would be so much better without him,” Uoka sighed, hands up as he shrugged smugly.

Izuku felt sick, his face hot with embarrassment, his stomach churning even though it was relatively empty. Still, even if all he could throw up was bile, it would still be better than whatever the noxious plume bubbling in his chest was. He wanted to leave, wanted to hide away, but the arm around him and the hand on his shoulder...he was caged. He couldn’t leave. He wanted to leave so badly.

Wanted it to stop.

They didn’t have the same fiery quirk that Kacchan had, but their words still burned against his ears. His neck crawled, hot, like an allergic reaction, and his head throbbed. His old burn marks itched and his throat was raw with his internal screaming, his mental pleas for them to stop, because if they kept going they would say it, and he didn’t want to hear it, he still wasn’t used to it he didn’t want--

Sanada flipped her short hair back, a poisonous smile on her lips.

“I wish Deku would just die already.”

Burning tears started to trail down his cheeks. The hand on his shoulder steamed against his skin. The sun beat down on his back. None of the building signs made sense in the sudden summer-grade heat that flushed over his body.
Their laughter hit his back like hot coals, but he couldn’t do anything. Couldn’t say anything. Wouldn’t know what to say.

Something about death just really triggered something in him, and it turned his tongue into sludge the instant he thought about it in regards to himself. He’d been doing so well, too, keeping himself busy, to do what he could to not think about the things he couldn’t control. But every single time someone reminded him, he just…

Something about his consciousness had shifted to the right a bit, all the way to his shoulder. He couldn’t sense anything but the right side of his body and his shoulder.

Where was the rest of him?

Were they almost at the arcade?

None of the buildings were moving.

Had they stopped?

Sanada was in front of him, but he couldn’t tell what she was saying.

Was she using her quirk on him?

That’s illegal.

It was too hot.

Too hot.

The next thing he knew, there was a shadow. The hand on his shoulder was smoldering, the heat starting to dissipate. His ears cleared up enough with the relief from the heat to hear a voice.

---

“Midoriya-kun.”

Arashi felt his laugh suddenly putter out in his throat, twitching at the sound of the voice behind him. He’d had his eyes closed while he was laughing, but when he opened them, he realized he had been the last one still doing it. When he looked up, both Uoka and Keiko had stopped laughing, eyes wide with…

A sudden fear?

“Hey, Midoriya-kun.”

The voice behind him and Deku called the boy’s name again, firmer and lower, like the rumble of an engine. Even Deku blinked this time, more salty tears falling from his eyes, and both he and the useless kid turned to see who it was.

A hooded figure stood a good head above him, and he felt his heart skip, then stall.

It wasn’t that they were wearing a full body hood. They were in a hoodie, but the inside of the hood looked dark from the brightness of the sun behind them.

And from the darkness peered neon green eyes, slitted pupils staring straight at him.
“Hey, Midoriya,” the figure said, and sharp, razor-like teeth glowed white from within the hood.

“Oh...Shimizu-senpai...hello.” Deku’s voice was breathy but that wasn’t the point. What was the point was Deku didn’t sound scared, so he knew this guy. Even called them senpai.

“Are these your friends?” the figure asked. Their gaze flicked over to Deku and trailed along the boy’s face, but it quickly returned to him, their pupils even smaller than before as it committed the way he looked to memory.

“Ah...uh,” Deku sounded more like himself then, “I...uh...we’re classmates.”

The figure’s gaze flicked over to Deku and stayed there, and somehow it seemed they grew even taller. And was that a tail over their shoulder? A shark tail?!

Their eyes were back on him suddenly, and he let Deku’s shoulder go reflexively. He wasn’t sure if he imagined it or not, but Deku’s body seemed to go lax. Alternatively, the figure’s body went rigid.

“That wasn’t my question,” they growled.

They were growling, right? A voice couldn’t get that low without growling, right? Oh God, he was fucked. He was so fucked.

Fearing for his life, Arashi looked at Deku. Maybe the boy could get over their teasing for today? Maybe there were no hard feelings? Deku was a nice kid, so he had to let it slide, right?

When Deku looked down and twiddled his thumbs instead of answering, Arashi felt a white hot panic stab him through the chest.

“You.”

They were addressing him. They had to be addressing him. Why couldn’t his quirk be invisibility or something?!

Arashi turned to the tall, hulking, toxic-eyed person with sharp teeth and clenching arm muscles that he could vaguely see through the hoodie. “Ah...y-yeah?”

The eyes considered him firmly before flicking over the other two. He heard Keiko choke on a gasp when it landed on her, but Uoka managed to not make a sound. The figure stared at them.

Then smiled.

It was a small one, could barely be called a smile, but the simple stretch of lips pressed more of their teeth from between them.

“You all don’t mind if I borrow Midoriya. Do you? I wouldn’t want to take him away from his classmates.”

“No, he’s all yours,” Arashi blurted out, not thinking, “We were just going to an arcade, but your business is more important right?”

Uoka seemed to catch on, snapping out of whatever stupor he was in. “Ah, yeah, like, we can, like, uh, hang out, uh, another, er, day or, uh, something.”

“Y-Yeah! Uh, d-don’t mind us! We can get Yaomasa-chan a gift some other time, right Deku?” Keiko asked, the cheer in her voice wavering nervously.
The figure’s eyes narrowed again, their third eyelid blinking as they refused to stop looking at the three of them.

“What’s a ‘Deku’?” the figure asked, and all three of them shut up, teeth clicking together, unable to open their mouths again.

Fuck.

---

Izuku realized a few things piece by piece.

When the burning hand released its hold on him, he started coming back together a lot faster than he had when he was caged in. It was a blessing, certainly, and the cool, watery aura from the tall figure near him soothed the burns he’d been suffering.

The left side of his body came back from wherever it had escaped off to, something he was glad for. It had felt uncomfortable not having a centered consciousness. He really wanted to find out how he could stop doing...whatever that was.

The world had slowly come back into focus, and he realized he was standing on the sidewalk with his classmates, Shimizu-senpai standing taller than the rest of them. She was dressed casually, with an orange hoodie and grey sweatpants on, her tail draped over her shoulder to take up less space. He couldn’t tell if her hair was in a ponytail or loose, but there were slightly sweaty strands sticking to her cheeks.

He’d realized suddenly that he’d been answering her questions without really thinking, but since it was Shimizu-senpai, he decided that he didn’t mind it. It was probably nothing.

What he did mind was the last question she’d asked.

“What’s a ‘Deku’?”

Ah. He really didn’t want her to know what that was.

“I-It doesn’t matter!” he suddenly said, hands up and moving. Shimizu’s gaze flicked back over to him, and he could see the...frustration in her eyes. What was... He shook his head off that train of thought and kept talking. “I, ah, wh-what did you want me for?”

Shimizu kept scrutinizing him and he felt a little laid bare, but for some reason, he could tell it wasn’t out of spite or anger. She seemed...concerned even. So the neon green of her stare didn’t frighten him. She didn’t mean him any harm anyway.

Settling on whatever she’d been looking for, she sighed, and lightly put a hand on his head. “I wanted to show you a store I think you’ve been missing out on. There’s some good equipment there. Want to go check it out?”

Equipment? Ah, for Muay Thai? That would be great!

He felt his cheeks flush with excitement as the gummy feeling in his chest started to dissipate. “O-Okay! Yeah, I’d like to!”

She nodded her head forward, down the street, “It’s this way. Let’s go.”

His head bobbed in reply, an eager smile on his face. “I-I’ve been looking at some more of the
training gloves recently, and I-I was thinking maybe it’d be okay to wear the heavier ones?”

“Hmm? Why?”

“Well, I mean, I want to build up my--”

He kept going, listing out his thoughts as he completely forgot his classmates, the three left gaping and scrambling away at the sound of “equipment”. In the back of his mind, he wondered if he’d imagined the emphasis she’d put on the word. It was probably something going on with his ears.

Shimizu’s hand stayed in his hair as they walked. He didn’t mind it.

---

The shop Shimizu took him to was amazing!

It was a MMA store, but there were sections for different equipment for different sports, including the section for Muay Thai that he and Shimizu were perusing. Izuku was excited, practically gushing over the quality of the gloves and shin guards. His expression had blanked before scrunching up magnificently when he looked at the price, which made Shimizu cover her mouth to hide her laughing, but that didn’t stop Izuku from window shopping at least, marking down the names, sizes, and prices of things he wanted to invest in.

“Shimizu-senpai,” Izuku called out as he walked over, watching as she looked at Muay Thai shorts, “W-What are you going to buy?”

“Hmm?” She didn’t look up, her fingers testing the material of the pants. “Oh, nothing. Just window shopping.

He sighed, smiling, “Y-You too, huh? The things here seem pretty expensive.”

“They are, but reasonably so. These here are actually good quality,” she said, checking the size on some shorts she was probably thinking about getting.

“Yeah! Th-the shorts at the place I went to have a different feel to them, but the material in these d-don’t drag against my skin like the others do. I-I think...uhm, that the Verusian brand is pretty nice...uhm...”

“Yeah. It’s easy on the scales.”

Izuku blinked as he processed what she said, then he thought back on some shark facts and realized that, yes, clothing drag would probably be uncomfortable. In fact, when he looked over her now, he could see the evidence of where her scales had dragged against the soft material, small patches of fuzz poking up on parts of it.

“Oh...ah. Is your quirk why you cover up completely when sparring?” Izuku asked, leaning on the table of shorts.

She nodded, shifting from one pair of shorts to another, “If someone rubs my scales the wrong way hard enough, they could cut themselves. Covering up makes that less likely to happen. And some materials drag too much on my scales, so I don’t wear them. These, though, do pretty well.” She held up some Verusian brand shorts, one much bigger than the ones he’d considered.

“Aren’t those too big?”
“No. I get a bigger size so I can have a tail hole made in them.”

“Ooooooh, yeah,” Izuku nodded.

Inwardly, he was really, really happy. Talking so casually with Shimizu always made him feel a lot less alone. Even when they had serious conversations, something about the way she said things just made him rela--

“Speaking of which, what is your quirk?”

He clammed up immediately, sweat beading at his brow.

He...He’d never told her, had he?

Oh God, if he could’ve avoided that question for the rest of his life, he would’ve answered “what’s a ‘Deku’” from earlier. Given, she probably needed to know he was quirkless--she was his trainer, after all.

He still hated having to explain it, though. After he’d tell people he’s quirkless, they always realize that he was weak and scrawny and couldn’t really do anything. They’d start to leave him alone and pay attention to people who had potential. He’d just watch from a distance until he left entirely, deciding not to waste space where he had already wasted time and...

He really didn’t want to see Shimizu’s expression shift when she realized he--

“Kid?”

He jolted, startled out of his thoughts.

Shimizu was looking directly at him then, gaze expectant. Her third eyelid blinked instead of her other ones.

A lump quickly developed in his throat and lodged firmly in between his vocal folds, keeping him from so much as squawking. His mouth opened, then shut. Opened again, paused, then shut. He licked his lips, trying to wet them and find a way to sate his suddenly parched throat.

Shimizu stood up straighter then, eyes narrowing with concern.

He...he needed to...

“I...uh...” He started to shake. “I...I, ah...uhm...quirk...uhm...no...I-uh...don't...”

Something suddenly seemed to click in Shimizu’s mind, and her expression darkened as the slightest bit of a scowl twisted her features. The slight grimace at her mouth made sharp teeth poke from between her lips, and some sort of ugly irritation made her eyes gleam.

“Quirkless, huh? I’m guessing that’s what Deku refers to.”

Izuku paused, hands clenching the front of his shirt.

She’d said his nickname with utter disgust, but...brushed over the word quirkless with her usual tone.

He looked up at her, eyes wide and searching. The scowl on her face had deepened, but she wasn’t looking at him. Her tail twitched from where it was on her shoulder, and her fingers tapped irritatedly against the wood of the table the shorts were settled on.
“That’s stupid. Utterly stupid. See, this is why the quirk hype is so damaging. Stuff like that gets made up and it’s absolutely stupid,” she seethed, hissing her words through her teeth as her tail finally lost its place on her shoulder and swayed behind her. “What kind of idiotic...when did they try to give you that nickname?”

Izuku wasn’t sure how to feel, but his eyes were starting to tear up. “Uhm... W-when I was five. M-my quirk never came in, so...”

“Five? Five years old? And they’re still clinging to that name?” she hissed lowly, “So stupid! I knew they were being shits when I saw you crying, but--dammit, that just really gets on my nerves, teachers never get involved when they should, sitting back and doing nothing... What did they say to you to make you cry like that--Ah.”

For a second, Izuku didn’t understand why she’d frozen the way she did until he sniffled. Then he realized he was crying again, hot, happy tears streaming down his cheeks. Then he started crying harder, breath hitching, because he really couldn’t handle it.

He’d been expecting a lot of things, but Shimizu getting angry and cursing because of what others did to him rather than because of him wasn’t one of them.

Just the thought of that had him covering his face as he tried to hold back from sobbing, body shaking.

“Uh...shoot,” Shimizu muttered, moving around the display to reach her hands awkwardly in his direction. “Was it something I said? Hey...”

---

He was able to calm down by the time a store employee had come over to check if he was okay.

He’d been able to get his breathing in check by the time they had, mostly because Shimizu, not really knowing what else to do, had simply put her hand on his head and hoped for the best. The pressure against him was grounding enough to help him sort his feelings out, but it certainly left him with enough embarrassment to last a few days. After the employee came over, they had both decided to leave, Izuku’s face still rather red, and they walked down the street as evening was just starting to vaguely set in.

The sun was lower, leaving a haze of yellow light to glow off of all the shiny surfaces, contrasting with the growing shadows. The two walked beside each other, Shimizu with slower, almost lumbering steps so Izuku didn’t have to hurry to keep up with her. The boy occasionally threw the woman a glance, unsure of how to break the stretch of silence between them. It wasn’t that it felt awkward--though it kind of did--but...he had a question. Several actually.

He wasn’t sure how to address them with her, though. After all, they were sort of hard-to-ask questions as they were, and after what she’d witnessed that day, he was sure it would feel awkward to ask them. Maybe he should just wait or maybe, just maybe, he shouldn’t ask them at all, but then he’d probably end up stewing over the questions for hours and he needed to focus later but--

“What are they?”

He startled when he realized she was glancing down at him. Ah, he must’ve been mumbling.

His face went hot, but he still managed to ask.

“Ah, uh...ahh...h-how do you stop...them?”
“Stop them...ah, you mean the bullying.”

He nodded instead of replying, watching where he was stepping.

Shimizu hummed. “...Dunno, actually.”

“Eh? Ah, okay...” He kind of figured she’d give him an answer like that. She didn’t seem to be the type to get bullied all that much.

“Hey, I was bullied, too. At least they tried, anyway,” Shimizu said, looking up and away from Izuku when he gave her a shocked and embarrassed look, “You weren’t mumbling that time, but I can assume things at least.”

“Oh, no, I just...you? B-but why? You--you have a really cool quirk and you’re really strong! I would’ve thought...”

“I wasn’t always ‘cool’-looking,” she mumbled. After a moment, she sighed and stared forward.

“Quirks don’t usually activate till you’re four, but you can start showing attributes of your quirk as early as birth, especially if your quirk is a physical type. When I was born, I still looked relatively quirkless, save for gills, fins, a nub of a tail, and my third eyelids. My scales and teeth hadn’t grown in fully until I was 5. I spent most of my early childhood looking like some fleshy blob that couldn’t decide between human and shark. So, uh...preschool was a weird time. After that, they started avoiding me instead of trying to bully me.”

“Why?”

“Because I could cut them if they rubbed me the wrong way hard enough,” she said flatly.

Something about the way she said it told him she wasn’t just referring to her skin.

“I would tell you to talk to your teachers, but if what I’m thinking is going on, they’re not helping out much as it is,” she said.

“Uhm...I mean...they’re pretty busy and it’s a lot to deal with at once I think--”

“Then they shouldn’t have taken the job if they weren’t prepared for that.”

Izuku swallowed, but he wasn’t nervous because of her. Rather, he was kind of startled by the amount of irritation she’d managed to stuff into that statement.

“But, of course, I know you’re probably not the kind of kid to go snapping at people the way I did, so that won’t help them back off. Still, even if you don’t snap at them, be honest,” she looked directly at him this time, “Tell them what you want. If you want them to let go, tell them that. If you want them to leave you alone, tell them that.”

“But...th-they’re stronger than me,” he sighed, resigned, “They wouldn’t listen.”

“Are they?”

“Well, I mean, they have quirks and I--”

“But they can’t use them without it being illegal.”

“That’s never stopped Kacchan, so--” He quickly slapped a hand over his mouth, a stringy, sharp shot of something running down his spine. Slowly, he turned toward the woman beside him.
Her eyes were wide open, staring at him. Her pupils were very, very thin, and something about the darkness inside of her hoodie seemed to consume all the light peeking inside of it. It may have been his imagination, but he could’ve sworn he saw the gills on her throat shift with the effort to breathe slowly.

“...Who’s Kacchan?”

Sweat rolled down the back of his neck.

He might have, uh...put a target somewhere he hadn't meant to.
Running out of Time

Chapter Notes

Alright! First thing's first! (I said I was gonna edit the other chapter to have this, but fuck that, this one's ready so why not)

Fanart!!
From befuddledbun
From medaloop
From tizzpy
Submitted by fakeepisode
1st from glichtouch
2nd from glichtouch

I crie evrytim qwq

Please let me know if I missed yours or anything! Sometimes I forget about the Instagram ones...NOT CAUSE I DON'T LOVE THEM I JUST DON'T USE IT!

Thank you guys so much for all of your support! Seriously!!! *gives you guys a basket full of love and appreciation*

Ah, I'm a lil sick at the moment, so if more of the spelling is off this time around, it's cause I got a bit woozy. It shouldn't be too bad I hope?? =w=

Anyway! Time to the boy yet again!

...Eh? What do you mean he's suffered enough? That's cute.

Though he’d really tried, he hadn’t managed to convince Shimizu that the situation with Kacchan was fine and being handled by the time they went their separate ways. In fact, she’d left him with the advice to record the next time he used his quirk on him so he could report it to the police later on. Well, he wasn’t going to do all that--oh for goodness sake ki--that would’ve ruined Kacchan’s chance at getting into U.A., and he didn’t want to cause him too much trouble. For all his occasional shortsightedness and harsh comments, he was a very smart and strong person.

He wouldn’t keep Kacchan from becoming a hero.

It was alright if Shimizu didn’t understand--she’d never met Kacchan, so she couldn’t know what he was really like. So, the strange, knowing look she’d given him while he defended his old childhood sort-of friend had made him feel really uncomfortable.

Still, he of course was going to go to the Friday training session. He had to work really hard if he was going to keep beating the Gray Men, especially if they became really strong like Nessus had.
Friday was...already weird.

As Izuku walked down the halls to his classroom that morning, the other students gave him a wider berth than usual, muttering amongst themselves. Especially the first-years. If he glanced at them, the first years would scurry off as quickly as they could, as if frightened by him or something. The second years and third years were mildly the same, simply ceasing their conversation to look away, as if he was Medusa or something.

Walking into his class was even weirder. Arashi-san was absent. Sanada-san and Uoka-san were in their seats already, doing their best to not look in his direction. The other students that sat near them were talking amongst their friends at first, but quieted down considerably once he was in.

“What is…” he wondered aloud, opening his backpack at his desk.

Well kiddo, there’s a few ways for bullying to end via outside sources.

Izuku frowned at the smirk he could hear in the voice. “What?” he mumbled lowly.

Well, there’s parental or authoritative intervention. There’s also good ‘ol intimidation.

“But...I’m not intimidating at al-- ooooh...”

I can’t make Shimizu a “thank you” cake, so you do it for me. Or, uh, get her some healthy stuff, like energy gummies.

Izuku sighed. Seriously, being treated so strangely felt like it was going to become more tedious and troublesome as time went on. But...well...none of the students were approaching him, so he could sit at his desk and look over hero articles before class, slowly losing the worry in his heart about being approached that morning.

At first, he kept glancing around, trying to see if anyone would actually approach him, but the longer he sat, the less likely it became. Then his phone pinged with a new story, and he got distracted enough by it to stop scrolling mindlessly and actually read and enjoy the article.

The tight leash of anxiety on his soul loosened its reins, just a small bit.

Well, it almost did, except he choked on his own breath as the doors slammed open, a positively steaming Kacchan bursting in as his lackeys tried to slow him down. Izuku locked up completely then, eyes wide as the other boy stomped his way over, disregarding the other students as they looked on, frightened and curious. His hands were pushed so lowly into his pockets that his fists looked as though they would burst out the bottom of them.

Before he could back away, one of those hands reached up and clasped his shoulder, the fabric steaming as a burnt smell wafted off of it. Izuku tried not to tremble in his grasp, but he couldn’t move or speak, furious molten red staring at him from blonde-shaded eyes.

“Stay after class, Deku.”

Kacchan’s voice was a low hiss, bleeding into his veins and freezing him cold. When Izuku didn’t say anything, or even nod, Kacchan clicked his tongue, irritated, and turned away. The other kids in the room lightened up a bit, but otherwise stayed muted, still not approaching him. Sanada and Uoka, though, didn’t even bother looking up.

Of course, it doesn’t work on everyone if they don’t see it themselves...
Katsuki shoved Izuku into the blackboard at the back of the room with one hand, glaring down at the weak idiot as he held his backpack to his chest. Extras A and B were behind him somewhere, he didn’t fucking care. What he cared about was the shit Deku was trying to pull. Really, how stupid could he get? What the fuck did he take him for?

Now that he was caught in his ploy, he was shaking in his stupid red shoes. What a slimy bitch.

“Thought you could intimidate me through some stupid twerps in the class, ey Deku?” he hissed, hoping the idiot could understand the kind of shit he was in, his attempt revealed.

The idiot looked up, shocked, “Wh-what? N-no! No, I--”

“Quit trying to cover for yourself, dumbass. Who’s the asshole you got to do that for you, huh? Some scrub looking for quick cash?”

“L-Like I said, K-Kacchan, it’s not that! I--I--she just--t-they were saying s-stuff and sh-she overheard and--ghh!” The boy against the wall whimpered as he started smoldering his shoulder.

“God, finally shutting up. Listen, if you wanna go off and hang around shady fuckers and become a villain or whatever, feel free to do it. I don’t give a shit. Just know that once you are one, I’m going to kick your puny, quirkless ass into next fucking year. Got it?”

“K-Kacchan--” he choked, eyes shut tightly, “I-It hurts…”

Whatever. It didn’t matter. He meant for it to hurt, if it’d make the fucker wake up from his stupid delusions. Without thinking about it, he added more heat to his quirk. It wasn’t like he was going to burn his skin off, but the pinned boy still cried out, his knees buckling.

Deku fell to the floor, dropping his bag as his left hand flew up to cover the hole in his gakuran and shirt, grey smoke still steaming from the cloth. After a second, watery green eyes gazed up at him, fearful and trembling.

He sneered, “I didn’t hear you.”

Deku scooted back as much as he could from him until his back hit the wall. Then he started curling in on himself, his fear-stricken stare finally leaving his body, averting to the ground. Tears had started trailing down freckled cheeks.

“Y-yes...Kacchan…”

Maybe, Katsuki thought, he’d finally start to realize where he stood. He’d finally understand his position. Katsuki wasn’t the weak one, he was. A quirkless, useless idiot shouldn’t look down on a future hero. Maybe now he could understand that.

Behind him, the side characters were hissing something like “going too far” and “needing to leave”. He was going to leave, yeah, but not because they told him to.

Katsuki kicked the wall near Deku’s head for good measure, scowling at the weak, frightened squeak the other boy let out, his whole body curling further as he trembled in fright.

“Good. Don’t try something stupid like that again, or I’ll teach you this lesson as many times as I need to.” His palms popped with a fiery energy.
When the idiot didn’t reply aside from shivering, he pocketed his hands roughly and turned away from him.

Disgusting. It was always so disgusting. What ever made Deku think he was better than him, especially when all he could do was cower and cry? It didn’t make sense. It would never make sense.

That’s why he had to knock some sense into him.

---

Izuku gritted his teeth at the burning pain in his shoulder. It was deep, like it reached his bones, and throbbed along his entire arm in punches of pain.

Oh God, Kacchan had really done it. He had training that day, how was he supposed to hide this from Shimizu-senpai? He wouldn’t be able to move his arm without crying in pain. If he skipped out, she’d only get suspicious, too. He hadn’t wanted to skip--he always looked forward to his training sessions. But with his shoulder the way it was, he wouldn’t be able to move. He had to assess the damage, too. He didn’t really want to do it. He was sure his shoulder was--

Stop worrying. You’re healing.

At first, Izuku didn’t understand what the voice meant, their tone much flatter than he could remember hearing from them before, but then he felt something throb in his shoulder, something that wasn’t pain, and a wash of coolness start to flow over where Kacchan had burned him. It started at the edges of the burn, like something chilled was eating at it as it came closer to the center of the injury, where the most damage was.

He waited for the chill to reach all of his injured skin, still stinging but not hurting, before he cautiously took a peek at it.

His skin was an angry red color in the hole in his clothes, vaguely shaped like a hand, but his skin wasn’t peeled, blistered, or anything of the sort. It still stung, of course, but that seemed to be the worst of it. Considering what he had imagined, he thought he was looking at a miracle.

His mouth gaped open in shock. “It...it’s not...”

You’re a magician, kid. Sure, you still feel the pain and all, but your cells run on magic. Healing is nothing. Besides. He would’ve given you a second-degree burn otherwise.

Izuku’s eyes widened as he felt a rush of magic run from his chest to his shoulder, and the angry red started to fade faster. At the same time, his vision went a little woozy and his head drooped without meaning to, feeling a little more tired than he had mere seconds before.

Patching you up still takes energy, though. Feeling a little sleepy is probably better than having a burn on your shoulder though, right?

He nodded in reply, feeling joy flush his veins faster than the fatigue could. Still, the boy heard something strange in the voice. Their tone was strangely monotonous, their speech on the more formal side. A stark difference from their usually happy-go-lucky and teasing demeanor.

“Uhm...Handyman? Are you--”

No. I’m not okay. Because I’m not happy. Because I know what you’re going to think next and I hate it.
“What I’m going to…” he trailed off. Why were they so mad? What was he about to think? As he wondered this his eyes trailed from his watch back to his burn, the skin now a bright pink rather than the angry red it had been before. The burn was almost completely gone…but his clothes were ruined! He was looking through a hole in his gakuran and his shirt to see his skin! “Oh no, how am I going to cover this?! M-Mom will get upset! Ah--and Shimizu-senpai! She’ll be so mad…”

Here’s an idea…don’t.

Izuku flinched.

He could’ve seriously hurt you. It takes, like, two to three weeks for a second-degree burn to heal on a normal human. He needs to start facing repercussions for his actions, but he won’t if you keep coddling him like everyone else.

“C-cod--”

It’s not like I blame you for him being a stuck-up dipshit, kid.

Izuku was shocked. He couldn’t remember Handyman ever cursing before.

He’s lived his whole life getting what he wants despite being as likeable as a tetanus-ridden lego, and you’ve spent your whole life getting the butt-end of the stick. I don’t want you to stay used to that. You don’t deserve to be used to that. I know it’s just a reaction from being abused, so--

“Wait, wait, wait!” he yelled, cutting Handyman off. “I’m--! I’m not--!” He choked his voice down, reducing himself to a harsh whisper. “I’m not abused or anything! N-nothing like that! He’s just…I’m just being bullied, a lot of kids go through that!”

Humans are notoriously terrible at categorizing things, giving new terms to situations that don’t need one and robbing things of the names they should have. Abuse is an umbrella term. Bullying is an umbrella term under that umbrella, so close to it it’s almost one in the same had the name not been different. Should I go down the list of what “bullying” Katsuki’s thrown at you, starting with your burned shoulder? Some would call that physical abuse. And as Mako was so kind to point out yesterday, completely illegal.

Izuku tried really hard to defend his position, but his words kept jumbling in his throat and he couldn’t quite push them out.

The constant yelling at you? Demeaning and embarrassing you in front of others? Verbal abuse. Invalidating your emotions? Blaming you for his negative circumstances and expecting you to pay for it? Emotional abuse. You need me to keep going down the line here, kid?

“All stop!” he whispered, his voice raw. His throat was closing up, his breath heaving, an ugly, bitter fury bubbling in his chest, uncontrolled and uncontrollable. His hands reached up and clenched at the hair on the sides of his head. They didn’t understand. Just like Shimizu-senpai didn’t understand, even the voice in his head couldn’t understand him. Couldn’t understand either of them. “I’m not--...I’m not! He’s not! Nothing’s being done to me and he’s not doing anything like that! I’m not and he’s not, so shut up! Just shut up!”

The birds chirped outside the sun-tinted classroom windows. There were hushed whispers and hurried steps passing outside the room. He could hear himself breathe.

As such, he could hear it hitch at the same time terrible, suffocating regret stabbed him in his heart, leaving him reeling, trembling.
“Oh...oh God, I-I’m s-sorry. I’m sorry, I d-didn’t mean to--I’m sorry. I’m--”

Don’t be, Izuku. I was pushing it.

Handyman wasn’t pushing anything. They were just worried about him, a worry he clearly didn’t deserve, and he lashed out like they were physically attacking him or something. He was the worst.

You didn’t do anything wrong. I cornered you, saying all of that too quickly. You lashed out, but you were cornered. It’s to be expected. You aren’t the worst. Don’t say that.

And even after getting yelled at, Handyman was still trying to be nice to him.

Izuku curled up into a ball and breathed. He needed to breathe and he couldn’t and he just needed some more time.

All he needed was more time.

He could get a handle on himself, reel himself in.

He could handle it.

---

After several agonizing minutes of contemplation, he ended up texting Shimizu-senpai that he couldn’t make it that day, gritting his teeth as he sank lower into whatever sort of inky funk had a hold of him. He at least did it two hours before they needed to meet up, but still, he would’ve preferred to do so much earlier. Like, a week in advance earlier. He hadn’t known he’d be such a downer today, though. Would’ve never known.

Her reply had been a simple [ok] before being followed up by [still on for sunday?].

He’d said yes, and a few minutes later, he picked himself off of the floor to leave for home.

If he stuffed his burned shirt and gakuran into the back of his closet where his distracted mother couldn’t find it, Handyman said nothing about it. They didn’t have to.

He could feel the universe staring at him.

---

The heavy sludge of his all-consuming emotional turmoil didn’t leave him even days later. It left him tired almost all the time, his body weighed down a good extra hundred pounds, but he forced himself to push through it regardless. After all, emotional fatigue or not, he still needed to train, still needed to clean up the beach as he planned. There were still Gray Men to destroy.

It happened after a training session with Shimizu-senpai, actually, in a city right beside Musutafu.

This one was quite a bit more attention seeking than the others had been, and it had obviously eaten some magic, what with its size and all. Thankfully, Izuku could rule out the magic coming from a human—it didn’t have any extra special qualities to its body like it did when taking the magic from humans, so it must’ve eaten other un-evolved Gray Men.

It was at least 8 feet tall, grayish red, and this time, its front legs were much smaller than the strange, arthropod back legs. It was like a frog crossed with a fly and it was missing its wings. It hopped, each landing shaking the ground as it rushed through the busy streets, people crying out in surprise as they scrambled to get out of its way. As the evening sun almost completely set, Izuku leapt after it,
losing his balance once or twice when they landed at the same time, his legs throbbing from the force. If some people called him Minute Maid as he passed, he barely noticed, too focused.

He checked his phone again as he looked over the GPS coordinates. If he could just chase it to the end of that street then make it take a left, he’d be getting closer to the empty field where the bare bones of a new building stood. If he could take it down there without causing too much damage, it would all be okay. He could make it work.

One more hop from the Gray Man ahead of him and they were mere feet away from the turn.

Pushing more power into his legs, he left a small dent in the ground as he shot forward, finally siding up to the creature. It hissed static angrily at him—at least, he imagined it was angry—and, just as he had hoped, it turned left at the next hop, sending it toward the mostly empty lot he was hoping for.

What he hadn’t predicted was Desutegoro standing in the middle of the road, bumping his fists together as he prepared himself for impact. The Gray Man screeched out a loud stream of white noise, but it didn’t stop its forward march, heading straight for him as though it could barrel through the man. It had certainly barreled through a lot of things before now.

Or maybe...was it going to attack him?

It could very well attack him!

“D-Desutegoro! Sir! Watch out!” he cried out, reaching a hand out as if it would get him closer to stop their inevitable collision.

He didn’t heed the warning, hunkering his body down as he held his hand out, palms open, to catch the creature. Seconds later, the Gray Man rammed itself full-force into the punching hero, its shoulders hitting the hero’s outstretched hands. The man grunted loudly from the pure force of the Gray Man hitting him, his body sliding back a few inches, the concrete breaking under their impact. Still, the man’s strength wasn’t one to be underestimated.

The Gray Man screeched as, despite its plans, Desutegoro managed to stop it in its tracks.

Izuku knew an opportunity when he saw one.

Without further ado, his next hop was a bit more airborne. He pulled his feet in as he fell, nearing the creature’s back, and just as he was about to land on it, he kicked out as hard as he could, yellow magic flashing like a lightning strike through the Gray Man’s back.

The creature cried out once more in a loud burst of white noise before it was choked off, like a television had been turned off, its facial static yellow before it, too, lost all color. The impact had Izuku falling through its quickly crumbling body, and he barely landed on his feet before he lost balance, gasping as he fell back onto his butt. The Gray Man’s soot fell among the two of them, and Izuku’s watch discretely sucked in the crystals it left behind.

Izuku coughed, fanning his hand quickly to get the soot away from his airways, with Desutegoro doing the same. Once the soot settled though, Izuku gazed at the tall, muscular hero. He was looking at his hands with a questioning, serious frown. Izuku could vaguely see what he was looking at; in the middle of his palms, his skin was starting to redden. He had actually started to bruise.

“D-Desutegoro…”

Said hero’s gaze snapped from his hands to him, and Izuku almost felt fear.
Almost.

But this was a hero.

“That was amazing!” Izuku cheered, his cheeks flushed from the adrenaline rush, “For a second there, I was really, really worried, but of course you could stop it! Ah, this is even better than I imagined! Now the construction in that empty lot can stay untouched! You don’t think it’ll be too much to fix the roads that got damaged, do you? I’d hate for it to cost too much… Anyway!”

The hero looked surprised for some reason. Izuku couldn’t quite pinpoint why that was, but it didn’t matter. It didn’t look like he was hurt after all, save for the bruising. He clasped his own hands together, still caught on the high of finally feeling something good after the last few days.

“Really, the instant I saw you, I should’ve realized you’d be okay. I don’t know exactly how much it weighed, but you can take about 800 pounds of weight, right? That’s absolutely amazing! I’m so glad I was able to see something like that up close!” He moved his hands up to his mouth vertically, trying and failing to cover his smile, his eyes positively sparkling. “T-Truth be told, I’m a big fan of yours! Your drug bust incident in Ibaraki, how you stopped that grocery robbery in Yao with just three punches, how you arrested the drunk driver in Suita by stopping the man’s car before he could hit the kid he almost ran over! Your strength is so cool!”

“A-Ah, yes…” the gruff hero said, coughing into his fist.

As he rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, practically gushing over being able to speak to the hero, he realized something.

“Ah...but, uhm…” his hands dropped down toward his chest, his fists balled against it, “Your last rounds already passed, didn’t they? What are you doing here?”

The hero in front of him stared down at him from his full 6 feet, 9 inches. His mouth was a straight, solemn line, fists balled at his sides.

“Uhm...Mr. Desutegoro?”

Something other than the voice in his head was telling him to run. But why?

Desutegoro was a hero, so it was fine, right?

Oh right, he ought to be running anyway, more people were coming and--

“Minute Maid.”

Izuku’s attention snapped back onto the hero, eyes wide and mildly confused. Minute Maid? Who was that again?

Desutegoro was holding a hand out in his direction, as if he was waiting for him to take it.

“I really don’t want to make this harder than it needs to be. Please.” His voice was a low rumble. “I need you to come with me.”

When he looked closely at the hero’s ear, he could see something there. It was round and dark, almost unnoticeable if you weren’t looking for it, if you didn’t happen upon it. Izuku had seen plenty of those in TV shows and movies.

Wireless earphones, like walkie-talkies.
Someone was talking to him. Desutegoro needed Izuku to go with him without complaint. He called him Minute Maid...that was the vigilante name he was given from TV, right?

Was he...

Were they...\textit{trying to catch him}?

Makes sense, don’t you think? As far as they’re concerned, you’re not a mere citizen dressed in pink. Izuku’s eyes widened in fear.

Did you forget? You’re a vigilante, kid.

Any residual joy he’d been feeling was flushed out in a cold sweat.

When Desutegoro moved his hand closer, Izuku backed away quickly, hopping backwards to put a good extra four feet between them.

The man reached for him briefly, shock coloring his features, and Izuku didn’t know why, but that worried him even more. His hands took a hold of his elbows and \textit{squeezed}, grounding himself, trying his hardest to not fall into the dizzying panic that was quickly taking a hold of him.

“Ah...ahh…”

Something in the alleyway close to him shifted, and his flight response activated without him thinking about it. He turned around as quickly as he could, yellow magic sparking around his body, and he jumped away as quickly as he could. He could hear Desutegoro call his vigilante name out behind him, and the crackle of what sounded like wood--\textit{Kamui Woods}--extend behind him.

Still, he didn’t stop, \textit{couldn’t} stop.

He didn’t even bother looking back as he sped down the street, away from the growing crowds and the heroes, looking to find a place to hide and escape.

---

“Wait, Minute Maid!” Desutegoro called out, gritting his teeth when Kamui’s sneak attack wasn’t fast enough to stop the girl from retreating.

It seemed she was even faster if you made her afraid enough. He wouldn’t bother giving chase--he wasn’t all that fast on a good day.

“Shoot. Desutegoro, what happened?” Kamui Woods asked, coming from the alleyway as his wooden attack receded into his arms.

“Sorry. It’s just…” He looked back down to his fist, clenching it tightly. Watching the sparkle leave those star-light eyes, replaced with the cold horror of realization, was more disheartening than he would ever like to admit. “She really is just a child.”

Kamui blinked at him before sighing, shaking his head. “No, no, I didn’t mean you.” He turned his head toward one of the tall buildings near them, frowning.

Perched at one of the corners was a relatively unknown hero clad in black, only a splash of his yellow goggles visible from such a distance.

“Why didn’t he activate his quirk? She shouldn’t have been able to run away like that. Did
something happen up there?”

“No, he did.”

“Huh?” Kamui turned to Desutegoro, confusion plain on his face even behind the mask.

Desutegoro frowned, his previous down mood lost in the midst of analyzing what happened. “I called on my strength while she talked to me. I didn’t feel the extra rush of my quirk. His quirk was working. She just wasn’t affected.”

Both of them turned down the road, long unable to see the glow from her body.

“...I guess Inspector Yayoi wasn’t as crazy as I thought,” Kamui muttered.

---

Up on the roof, Eraserhead stared down the road Minute Maid had made her escape down.

His quirk didn’t work on the Gray Men, and now there was some vigilante kid it didn’t work on either.

He hummed under his breath, a hand reaching to the back of head, scratching at his hair. He still had to take a quick nap before his real shift started, so he stood up and turned around, heading back to the office to give his report with the others so he could rest.

Sheesh. So troublesome.
Confirmation Time

Chapter Notes

Oh boy, I did this kinda quickly, huh? I kind of surprised myself too, tbh.

Anyway! First off! FANART!!!!

From sticker
From emeraldglee

Thank you guys soooooo much!

Also, while I don't always reply to all of the comments, I just want you all to know that I still very very veeeery much appreciate them! I love reading them and am very grateful for the time you take to write them! Also, even if you just drop a kudos, that kudos fuels my life, man. I get energized AF!!! Thank you all so much for your support!

Ahem. Anyway.

More exposition~ Hopefully it's interesting <;3

Just so you know, this chapter makes very slight references to chapter 6.5 of Vigilante: Boku No Hero Academia Illegals. You don't have to read it to understand basically what's going on, but it helps just a tad.

Anyway, if this chapter isn't as interesting as I think it is, don't worry! The next chapter gets back to some more action *thumbs up*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The meeting room was already set, three empty seats open near the head of the hollow rectangular table. From the head starting to the right sat Tanema, Detectives Tsukauchi and Hashiro, Midnight, Ingenium, Thirteen, and Snipe. Endeavor sat at the other head, followed by Lady Mercury, Gunhead, Mach Barrier, Best Jeanist, and Nightquake. Though Tanema stood at the front head, he didn’t have his papers set up there. He gave the three heroes a grateful nod as they entered.

“Right on time,” he said. “Well, now that we’re all here, we can get this started. Thank you for your service, Desutegoro, Kamui, Eraserhead.”

The three of them nodded, the former two dressed more formally while Eraserhead remained in his usual hero outfit, settling into their seats. That drew a giggle from Lady Mercury, who was trying to disguise her amusement by pushing her round glasses up further on her face.

“Greetings, top heroes. I’m grateful that you all were able to take time out of your busy schedules to make it here this evening,” Tanema began. “While we with the police force hate to call you out like this again, much in the same sense Trigger is an unusual situation, so is the one regarding the Gray Men and the one codenamed Minute Maid. Such circumstances--”

“These are dire straights again, aren’t they? Yet he’s absent again,” Endeavor cut in, frowning, his arms crossed.
“Right. As you know, All Might’s schedule is unfortunately notorious for being subject to sudden change, so we were unable to set up a time that would accommodate as many heroes as we possibly could, “Tanema replied, his smile on the dry side. “Tsukauchi will be relaying the information from this meeting to All Might.” Tsukauchi nodded for good measure.

“Relaying? Was this meeting not meant to be a discussion board on protocol in regards to Minute Maid and those gray creatures?” Nightquake asked, one hand subtly playing with the end of the long plaited braid their hair curled itself into, the braid laying over the shoulder of their well-pressed suit jacket.

“Well, yes and no. We will be discussing what matters are to be taken in addition to attempting to apprehend Minute Maid, but largely, this meeting’s focus is on what precisely we’re dealing with.” Tanema gestured a hand toward the three heroes who arrived the latest. “Desutegoro, Kamui Woods, and Eraserhead were made aware of the situation prior so a test could be played out. The results will help us and the inspector come to a solid conclusion on the situation. She’s compiling their testimonies into her data set at the moment, but should be here very shortly.”

“To whom are you referring?”

Tanema opened his mouth to reply, but suddenly an airy, feminine voice sounded from the door to the left behind him.

“I am…”

Then the door opened quickly, a young woman stepping in with a bright, open smile on her face.

“Here!”

Everyone in the room froze, except for the police and three heroes, all of whom looked a tad exasperated. Endeavor’s teeth clenched. Lady Mercury nearly did a spit-take, her soft-blended blue bob of hair covering her face as she bent forward to cover her mouth and expression.

When no one said anything, she pouted, her eyes still closed. “Hmm, harsh crowd again, huh?”

She had fluffy, silver-gray hair down to the back of her shoulderblades shuffled into the room, humming some sort of tune under her breath. She wore a longsleeve, white dress shirt with vertical black stripes, a high waisted black pencil skirt, tan stockings, and white lace flats, the lace in flower designs along the shoe with white beads in the center of the flowers. Under her arm, she held several folders with brightly colored bookmarks and folded corners.

From the look of her, much to many of the heroes’ surprise, she seemed to be the youngest one in the room. Strangely, despite her youthful appearance, she had what seemed to be the slight development of bags under her eyes, but they weren’t dark, so it was hard to tell.

She cleared her throat for a second, the sound still cotton-soft and light. Then she smiled, bright and easygoing.

“...Who are you people?”

As the heroes gaped at her, Endeavor scooted his chair back, getting ready to leave. She waved her left hand absently at the man.

“Now, now, Todoroki-kun, please sit down, will you? It was just a joke, a joke.”

His flames lit up in an instant, eyes wide with rage, “What did you just--”
“My sincerest apologies,” Tanema said quickly, sweat running down the side of his strained smile, “Admittedly, Yayoi-san tends to be rather eccentric. I really should’ve warned you ahead of time. She means no disrespect, Endeavor. Please.”

Across the table, Midnight gaped at the woman before turning to Eraserhead, several, fast-paced questions in her gaze. The man shrugged back at her tiredly, already 500% done with everything

“So serious, you kids. No one can take a joke anymore,” she sighed, shrugging exaggeratedly.

Whether or not she heard the mental yell of **WHO HERE ARE KIDS?!** from some of the heroes couldn’t really be confirmed.

“Yayoi-san, may I remind you that jokes about your age don’t work well when you look the way you do?” Tanema offered, his tone a tad haggard.

“‘Age’?” Mach Barrier muttered, completely confused.

She seemed to understand what he meant though, her mouth opening in a little “o”. “Ah, you’re right, you’re right. My apologies, you all.” She straightened up, looking more serious. Well, as much as she could with her eyes still closed.

“I am Inspector Yayoi Gin, with the Japanese sector of the International Special Forces Unit,” her fingers touched each other’s tips as her face flushed with mirth. “But if I had a hero name, it would be ‘Gandalf’, so feel free to call me that, please!”

Many of the heroes felt sweat starting to run down their temples. Tanema had his pointer finger and thumb pressed against the bridge of his nose.

“International Special Forces Unit? I’ve never heard of that,” Ingenium said, a hand on his chin, “Is there a reason for this?”

“Good question, Ingenium! You see, the ‘special forces’ part of the name is less to describe us and more to describe what we investigate. It’s a little confusing I’ll admit, but what works simply works! There’s a lot of unexplained things in the world, and if we let just anyone know about everything, we’d all experience mass chaos and anarchy, so collectively, as different countries, we’ve all decided to withhold some of the less important news until absolutely necessary.”

*Didn’t you just admit the government’s hiding information?* they thought collectively.

“So then, this is the ‘absolutely necessary’ case,” Mach Barrier said.

“Considering the circumstances, yes,” she replied airily, “Especially since the Gray Man issue has gone so public. The appearance of Minute Maid is what really prompted the most action, since she’s the linchpin. Minute Maid is a ‘she’, correct?”

“From what we know, All Might said she neither confirmed nor denied her gender when he used she/her pronouns to refer to her,” Tsukauchi spoke up.

“Wait, All Might met her?” Mach Barrier asked, blinking.

“Yes, but this was before she began her vigilantism, and thus he had no need to bring her in for questioning.”

“Hmm...If you don’t mind, I still consider that as ‘unknown’,” she replied, looking a tad apologetic. “After all, Desutegoro, what kind of reaction did you say Minute Maid had upon meeting you?”
His head bowed a slight bit, “Like a fan meeting a celebrity. She--well, they--seemed to be distracted until they started thinking more clearly.”

“So that’s that. Now, not to say anything bad about Desutegoro’s popularity, but considering their reaction to him, I can only imagine how distracted they were upon meeting All Might. It’s quite possible they made no confirmation or denial because they were too starstruck,” she said, smiling.

“Ah, but they haven’t made any announcement to say otherwise,” Midnight said.

“To be fair, they haven’t made any announcement at all! Perhaps they’re the shy type. To keep your avenues of investigation open, I believe it’s best to leave your gender options neutral.”

They nodded, noting it down in memory or on paper. It finally felt like they were getting serious.

“So now, I’ve already taken the witness testimonies, information feeds, the test I commenced with Desutegoro, Kamui Woods, and Eraserhead—who were kind enough to go along with me on this—and personal data into account to come up with the unnatural phenomena I believe you all are being faced with.”

She clapped her hands together, the sweet, airy smile on her face the same as her tone.

“Japan is currently dealing with a Magical Girl Scenario!”

All feelings of severity left the room in an instant. Endeavor moved to stand again.

“Please take your seat again, Endeavor-kun,” she sighed, “I haven’t even explained my--”

“Do you intend to make fools out of us?” Endeavor seethed, his flames flickering bright and angry around his face, “What is this? ‘Magical Girl Scenario?’ Do you think we’re stupid? Do the police really have the time to be making such ludicrous jokes of us when we should be out saving lives?”

Before Tanema could cut in again, the smile Yayoi was giving him turned sickly-sweet. “Well, Endeavor-kun, you’re going to save considerably fewer of them if you don’t listen to what I have to say. If we don’t want a repeat or exacerbation of the Nessus Event, it’s imperative you humor me.”

“You’ve yet to take a single thing seriously since you’ve arrived here. Why should I listen to a single word you have to say?”

“Hmm...true. It’s a fault on my part,” she sighed, her head tilting to the left. “See, when you’ve lived as long as I have, things stop feeling all that serious. Still, I should be taking your feelings into account as well.”

“And exactly how old are you, since you find it humorous to make such a joke about it,” he said, his voice a low rumble.

She chuckled, “Oh dear, don’t you know it’s rude to ask a woman about her age? But, well, since you asked…”

With her smile still on her face, she peeked her eyes open.

They were surprisingly sharp for her vocal tone, thin and almond shaped with an upturn at the corners. Her irides were a mirage of kaleidoscope colors, shifting between red, yellow, orange, green, and blue with the simple shift of her head, one iris never seeming to be the same color as the other. At the same time, they felt a strange energy from her, one Desutegoro, Mach Barrier, and Nightquake all recognized. To a much more prominent extent, it felt similar to the glow Minute Maid
gave off.

“Old.”

She closed her eyes, and the feeling dissipated. Even Endeavor was silent in the aftermath, still frowning, but his beard was no longer flickering with angry flames.

Yayoi placed her hands together, smile saccharin. “Don’t mind this old woman, I can be a little senile. Please do humor me regardless.”

Endeavor seemed to consider this before nodding. “Very well. Continue.”

“Thank you very much~! Now, as I was saying, Japan would be dealing only with a Magical Event, but since Minute Maid has gotten involved, you’ve very clearly got a Magical Girl Scenario. This occurs when there’s something or someone leaking magical effects into the regular world. When the leak becomes too much, the universe appoints certain people to combat the leak, giving them magical abilities, much like the ones you’re seeing in Minute Maid. That’s what the test was for,” she said, reaching into her skirt pocket to pull out the remote for the projector. She turned the lights down and turned the projector on, showing an image of Minute Maid as seen from the Nessus battle. Other than their clothes or eyes, no one in the room could determine anything else about their appearance. “To prove invariably that Minute Maid’s powers are outside of the quirk system.”

“Excuse me, Gandalf,” Lady Mercury began, much to Yayoi’s very apparent glee, “What is the definition of ‘magic’ we’re using? And by magical girl, are you referring to those really old anime shows and manga, like Mahoutsukai Sally and Mahou no Princess Minky Momo?”

What? some of the heroes thought.

“Hoooh, you sure do know your ancient anime. The last anyone did anything with Mahoutsukai Sally was back in...uhm...1990, I believe, and it had started back in...what, 1966? A few centuries ago. Could it be...is your hero name a reference to the Sailor Moon character?”

Lady Mercury flushed with embarrassment. “Uhm...well...y-yes, actually. I always liked her, Sailor Mercury.”

I thought it was a reference to the planet, but she’s actually an ancient anime otaku! Mach Barrier thought, his shock open on his face.

Yayoi nodded, “I’m impressed by your knowledge! And yes, the term ‘magical girl’ was first popularized in 1966 with, as you mentioned, Mahoutsukai Sally. But you know what they say, ‘fiction takes inspiration from reality’. Truth be told, by the time that series came out, there were already magical girl events occurring in Japan. And, to answer your question, the ‘magic’ I’m referring to is an energy from an outside source that cannot be accessed under normal means. At one point, we would’ve considered some of your abilities as magic, but of course, the quirk event happened, and there was no need to think about magic anymore.”

“Magical...what? Events? So...girls with these sorts of powers were already existing even before quirks?” Ingenium asked.

“Precisely!” Yayoi grinned, “For example, the Great Earthquake of 1964.” She pressed a button to show a slide with the damage to Japanese lands after said earthquake. “It leveled several villages and caused a large mudslide that nearly took several lives, and the resulting tsunami should’ve taken even more. Yet, science couldn’t explain why the earthquake had occurred because the tectonic plates hadn’t moved, and there were very minimal amounts of casualties compared to what could’ve
“You’re saying this is because of...a magical girl...” Mach Barrier asked, sounding incredulous.

“I’m not saying it is, Mach Barrier, I’m confirming it is! Rather, it’s the aftermath of a battle.” She clicked the button once again, this time showing an image from the rescue efforts. Further away from the main focus of the picture, groups of people who were rushing to help and to be helped, was a girl dressed in red, a yellow sash tied around her waist. Her black hair was up in two ponytails with yellow ribbon and she wore knee-high, string-up boots. She had what looked to be two people in her arms as she jumped down the side of a settled mud slide. She was barely in the picture, very easy to be edited out or in. No one seemed to notice her.

She didn’t stop there. Yayoi proceeded to list several supposed unconfirmed natural disaster events, then showed pictures from the scene, all of which caught a glimpse of a young girl in some fantastical dress doing something to help out. Some of the girls could barely be caught by camera. Others, even when plainly in the image, mimicked the effect Minute Maid had, their features completely unable to be determined. At first, many of the heroes were skeptical, but others were much more accepting--namely Mach Barrier and Nightquake, who had started noting down dates and events, especially after the first undeterminable magical girl showed up in the slides.

She then showed slides of officially signed government documents--some of which were photocopied and passed around for viewing--that acknowledged or hinted at the existence of magical phenomena. By that time, more of the heroes were convinced, though very, very confused.

“Why aren’t there more recent accounts of magical girls?” Lady Mercury asked, looking over a photocopy, “The latest date you’ve told us is 1994, and that’s centuries ago.”

“Well, what happened in 1996?” Yayoi asked back. Endeavor’s eyes narrowed, “The glowing child was discovered in Quig Quig, China: the first person born with a quirk.” She smiled brightly, “Precisely! At that point, the much more public occasion of quirk-births and quirk discoveries became a more prominent issue than magic, and--this is speculation--but because the rules of the universe changed to include quirks, magical leakage stalled for a while.”

“Magic being...” Nightquake began.

“An energy from an outside source that cannot be accessed under normal means. That means, in this case due to the rules of our world, someone who has powers without a quirk factor.”

“Which is why you had Eraserhead help us test that out,” Kamui Woods replied, glancing over at the hero. Eraserhead simply blinked.

“Exactly~! With the lack of response Minute Maid had to Eraserhead’s quirk, we were able to confirm that they are, in fact, using magic! Magic essentially breaks the rules of the universe, and evidence that points to any breakage also points to the potential of it being a magical phenomena. We have the magical leakage--the Gray Men--and it seems the universe has already chosen a new warrior to fight against it. After all, magic is best against other magic, which would also explain their heightened affectivity against the Gray Men. Also, if you noticed, they’re the only one who can actually defeat them, while you all can only simply tire them out for a time.”

“So then, rather than looking for a highschool girl with an unusual quirk, we should be looking for a quirkless high school student,” Endeavor concluded.
“Not just high school. Late middle school to early high school is the more likely age range.”

Ingenium frowned, “But why? They’re just children.”

Yayoi’s sweet smile turned sour at the corners. “Because even when the adults are called on, it doesn’t mean they’ll act. Girls, young ones, who are often socially discriminated against, who have their emotions demeaned and caricatured, who are often told more what they can’t do rather than what they can, would fight tooth and nail to feel important, like the things they do actually mean something, like they can affect the world around them. It’s often the young girls that feel the need for power, and so the universe grants it to them, knowing they often will use it when given a target…” She brightened just the slightest bit as a thought came to her. “Ah, to be clear, I’ve been saying ‘magical girl’ for that reason—the term was initially for girls. Still, Minute Maid could very well be non-binary or a boy.”

“That is understandable,” Nightquake said, noting it down. “It would not be farfetched to conclude that the ‘quirkless teenager’ precisely meets the requirements of social discrimination and lack of power regardless of gender, particularly in this day and age.”

“Exactly,” Yayoi sighed. “Anyway, I heard there were orders to apprehend Minute Maid and bring them in for questioning, correct?”

“Yes, Deputy Chief Kawamura released that order a few weeks ago,” Tsukauchi replied.

“Right, well, he did a terrible job with the announcement,” she huffed. “When I heard about it, I automatically assumed he was requesting Minute Maid’s arrest.”

Tsukauchi sighed, Hashiro pointedly not looking up from her notes. They both knew that, and so did Tanema, if his tired expression was of any indication.

“If you want them to walk in, you all are better off revising that announcement, though, you might end up getting some really weird copycats. It would be easy to tell whether they’re the real one or not—you wouldn’t be able to comprehend their face. But just in case Minute Maid doesn’t come to the police themself,” she turned to the heroes again, “it’s up to you all to bring them in, unharmed.”

“Uh, excuse me, miss. Inspector Yayoi, uh…” Mach Barrier scratched at the back of his head. “I really don’t mean to be rude when I ask this, but...er...what was...the point of this meeting? Learning about magical girls?”

Yayoi turned to him directly, her arms crossed, for once, not smiling. “I’m not upset, it’s a good question. What I was hoping you all would understand was exactly how imperative it is to bring them in.”

All of the heroes paid attention straight to her then.

“As I’ve said, a Magical Girl Scenario cannot occur without a Magical Event. The Magical Event is caused by the leakage of inaccessible power into a system of accessible power, causing disasters of epic proportions. With all of the events I showed you before, there were several magical girls all fighting against the cause of the leak, whether it’s an object or another person. In this case, though, it appears as though Minute Maid is the only magician. They have no team. They have no one else in their corner. Until they can get the help they need, it appears that they are working completely and utterly alone.”

“Let’s also not forget the nature of the Gray Men. While they are currently restrained to the best extent we can muster, we’ve already seen evidence that the protocols put in place will not last
forever. I’m sure the Nessus Event was a good enough example.”

Nightquake looked down at the table, and Mach Barrier grit his teeth. They did not feel judged or shamed; rather, they felt the beginnings of a growing fear.

“How much longer can you all hold them in their cells? How many more cells do you have available before there’s too many to contain? Just as I suspect Minute Maid needs us for their own well-being, we need them to help put real progress in helping to fix the leak, whoever, whatever, wherever it is or they are. If not…”

Her eyes opened just the slightest, and a chill ran across the room. She still smiled, but it was frigid and foreboding.

“I have a feeling we’ll experience a Disaster that Japan will not be able to recover from.”

---

There was a banquet growing.

More and more it grew.

In cars and bars, they caged its food.

It needed patience.

Patience.

Those in there wouldn’t taste as good as the live magic they ate.

But it would be good enough.

Patience, patience.

It was almost time.

They wanted to be whole once more.

Once more.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, as far as my headcanon for the new character's voice, I can't decided between this one or this one this one... Maybe a mix of both, but I'm leaning towards Fil. I can't quite find the right tone I'm looking for.
...it's late <;3

i finished this at, like, 6 am, after staying up all night, so please be gentle

enjoy? plz

EDIT: Now that I'm actually awake 3 hours later (gosh I hate Sundays a whole bitty-bunch!!!), I had meant "please be gentle" about spelling errors and whatnot. It doesn't look like there's a bunch of them, if any, but hey, I'm runnin' on 3 hours. What do I know lol.

EDIT 5-23-18: Carbon fiber is not a metal. Carbon fiber reinforced metal matrix composites (CFR-MMCs) are part metal, though.

As May shifted into its late stage, Izuku stayed constantly busy.

Constant, save for Sundays: School.

Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, Sundays: Muay Thai Training.

Tuesdays, Thursdays: Dump Beach Visits.

Intermittent: Hero Study, Residue Clean-Up, Self-Study.

His sixth sense for Gray Men had been going off much more constantly as of recent, and he went out to destroy them as frequently as he could, but things had become considerably more...er, complicated. After all, the very heroes he would watch one day would become his pursuers the next. Just yesterday he’d had a run-in with Hield Hund, barely managing to avoid being wrapped up and subdued in a bent light pole. The crowd of people around them had been surprisingly helpful, providing a cover when he slipped away among them.

Much to his general displeasure, his hero notes were becoming more useful than ever, because now he wasn’t just studying how to move like them, but also how to avoid them, outsmart them, evade them. He’d felt like a villain--still did at times--but Handyman reminded him of what an asset he was to getting rid of the Gray Men, so he felt a little better about it.

Honestly, listening to Totoko’s take on it helped him out, too.

As he did his Sunday night magic note-taking and recovered from the fading aches of training with Shimizu-senpai in the safety of his room, he decided to listen to a podcast she had recently participated in. His desktop light shined down onto his notebook, keeping his handwriting well-lit. Meanwhile, his headphones were plugged into his phone, the podcast playing as background noise.

He’d already subscribed to her channel and listened to her own hero theory podcast as well--when she was out of her Totoko persona, Tomogara Kyouri was still very light-hearted, but her vocal tone
was lowered from the bubbly, light one to her usual contralto and her analysis over hero-related situations was fantastic. People who didn’t pay attention to her because of Totoko were foolish to be honest, because even as Totoko, she was inquisitive.

“As far as the new heroes, which one are you looking forward to the most?” the podcast owner, HP, asked.

“When it comes to effectivity, I’m looking forward to seeing what Blackjack can do! I heard that he makes his own cards out of carbon fiber--stronger than steel! I do wonder though, is his power related to controlling the cards specifically? What kind of quirk is that?” a popular YouTuber, one Izuku wasn’t familiar with, asked.

“It’s more likely that he has some sort of telekinetic ability, or perhaps the reason he makes his metal cards using some carbon fiber is because that’s the metal matrix he can control the best,” Tomogara cut in, her voice mirthful. “Or perhaps, if his telekinesis is best against metals, a CFR-MMC would be a good, lightweight yet strong metal composite to control while removing some of the cons common in fully metallic materials.”

“Ah, Tomo-chan, it, uh, wasn’t a serious question, haha.”

“OH, hah! Sorry~!” HP laughed as well, though it sounded awkward, stilted, a bit like a messed-up record. “Yeah, Blackjack does seem like an interesting hero! Speaking of which, you’d think we would’ve heard more about his exploits, but apparently he’s out of commission. I’m not sure what that’s about.”

“Isn’t he a new hero? Yikes, maybe he bit off more than he could chew,” the YouTuber said, her voice tilting low.

“It’s possible. Some new heroes tend to get hurt really quickly right out the bag because they weren’t as careful as they should’ve been. Anyway, here’s to hoping he’s alright! So, next topic...what are your honest thoughts on the vigilante Minute Maid? Oh, just in case you don’t know--”

“HP, there’s no way someone doesn’t know who Minute Maid is by now! Seriously, there’s entire petitions up demanding that pro heroes stop trying to arrest her after she finishes a Gray Man up! It’s all over the news.”

“Well, that’s true, definitely--”

“Of course, I don’t think the news covers it as much as they should. Like, the entire situation seems really suspicious, don’t you think? I think people are being a bit too shortsighted.”

“Oh, how so?” HP asked, sounding just the slightest bit exasperated after what had to be the sixteenth interruption in the whole interview.

“Well, for starters, we still don’t even know what the Gray Men are. Like, are they a part of someone’s quirk? Why and how does it steal other quirks? More importantly, why is Minute Maid the only one with the power to defeat them? Hell, I’ve seen videos where All Might apprehended several Gray Men. Keep in mind--‘apprehended’. Not even he and his ridiculously powerful quirk could destroy them. Just this glowing girl in a dress. For all I know, she could be the one causing them!”

Izuku paused on a word, blinking. His legs twitched without him thinking about it, knocking against his desk lightly—not enough to hurt but enough to feel the impact. If anything, the girl’s words hurt much more than that.
“That’s pretty speculative, Tazzy. What makes you think that?” HP asked.

“Well,” the YouTuber--Tazmine Gal, he remembered--started, “I mean, I don’t have a whole lot of ammo about it and, Tomo, I know you love her, but don’t get mad at me, okay? I just find it really suspicious that she and the Gray Men showed up around the same time. Like, first, you get a few reports of some static-faced people, then a few days later, people report that they see a pink girl destroying them. Also, pro heroes have now practically become villains to some people because of her! They’re just trying to protect us from an unknown threat, as they always have, and everyone is angry because they’re not letting her be a vigilante—which she is.”

Tomogara spoke up. “To be fair, Tazzy, there were reports of Gray Men before Minute Maid showed up. Remember police reports of strange quirk usage? Like claw marks against walls and stuff like that? That’s already been confirmed to have been Gray Men, and that was a good few weeks, not days, before Minute Maid showed up.”

“What if she was just tenderizing the crowd? Like, what if she waited until they became a problem so she could get rid of them and be seen as a hero? And again, that would tie in to making the heroes look like villains, too, and making her vigilantism look like it’s not a crime. Minute Maid’s actions are causing more problems than they’re solving, girl. I, for one, am always here for the heroes. They work day and night to keep our cities safe, and I don’t care if the problem is cute or not, she’s still a problem in the end.”

The knot that had formed in Izuku’s chest had moved up to his throat, and his breath felt constricted. He...he hadn’t meant to make the heroes jobs more tedious. He certainly hadn’t meant to make people look at them negatively. He knew they were only doing their job...but…

But he had to do his, too.

Maybe he should...he didn’t know. Turn himself in? But wouldn’t they just stop him from getting rid of Gray Men? Wouldn’t they just arrest him? Should he explain himself? How, though? If he made a video on the internet, wouldn’t someone just trace it to his home? If he did it at an internet cafe, wouldn’t that be too conspicuous? Was there no way to tell anyone what was going on? Sure, he didn’t know either, but at least he knew more than they did.

Wouldn’t that help people trust him? But...he wasn’t sure how. There was no really safe way to do it. They’d probably just have to hate him. It would be fine. He could handle that, if they were anything like Kacchan.

“...Well,” Tomogara began after a beat of silence, “here’s how I see it. When quirks started up all those years ago, no one knew what to do. People with quirks faced discrimination like we’ve barely seen in Japan, save for how we Ainu were treated back hundreds of years ago and sometimes still today. We, as a country, immediately fought against something we saw to be a threat, but in the end, it was only the evolution of mankind. Heck, I have a bat quirk. I have big ears and wings and a tail and can use echolocation and everything, and if I hadn’t been born at the right time, I’d probably be kidnapped and on a flat metal table being dissected for science.”

It sounded as though either HP or Tazmine started on something they wanted to say, but they choked, stuttered, then fell silent.

“Basically, what I’m say is what’s become the norm now was once just as mysterious as this Gray Man and Minute Maid business. And, if quirks don’t work as well on Gray Men as they do on people, then maybe, just maybe, it’s something new, just like quirks had once been, and to fight
something new, someone new has shown up.” Tomogara’s voice firmed up further, then. “Every single video I see of that girl fighting shows how inexperienced she is, but you know what? She’s gotten better, faster, and stronger since her first recorded fight. She’s doing her best. And if push comes to shove and this becomes the new norm, I want to be on the side that started cheering her on for doing what only she could do rather than the side the persecuted her because they were afraid.”

It was only when he felt something hit his shirt that he realized he’d started to cry. Then, he realized his eyes felt hot, his face going hot as well, and he sniffled, rubbing at his nose and cheeks to get rid of the growing mess on his face.

“I thought you were a fan of heroes, Tomo-chan,” Tazmine said.

“Well, I am. I’ll always support our heroes, Taz. I know they’re only doing what they are to keep us safe. So, if it makes sense, I support both the heroes we’ve always known, and the hero we’re coming to know.”

He pressed the pause button on the podcast, unable to hear much of what she was saying anymore over his own, chest-deep sobs.

--

When Izuku woke up the next morning, June 1st, he sat up in his bed, his covers pushed to the end of it. Already, first thing in the morning, there was a big, wobbly smile on his face, his face flushed with a giddy energy. He tried jumping out of his bed, but ended up tripping on the bit of his bed covers that laid across his lower legs and nearly fell on his face--his hands caught him in just the nick of time. He didn’t let that daunt him though, and danced over to the bathroom, humming the tune to All Might’s old cartoon show under his breath.

Oooh, look who’s in a good mood today!

Izuku nodded as he brushed his teeth, still humming as he shifted his shoulders from side to side, dancing to the tune. After a moment, he spit the suds out and washed his mouth.

“That’s because…” he looked up into the mirror, eyes bright, “I’m a hero!”

Oi, oi, who’s been telling you that from the beginning?

“No, you called me a magician! Those are two different things...sorta. Anyway! It’s different hearing it from someone else!”

Nah, I understand. Hearing that there’s others in your corner can be very liberating!

Izuku barely listened to the voice, nodding along as the mantra I’m a hero, I’m a hero chanted in his head. He didn’t snap out of it until he was sitting at the breakfast table with his mother, the woman giving him some extra eggs with a wide-eyed look on her face.

“Izuku? You seem really happy today. Did something happen sweetie?”

“Hmm?” He pulled the chopsticks out of his mouth. “Uhm...I mean, kind of? I just did a good job on a project. I’m really happy it’s turned out well.” He gave her a smile for good measure, half honest half worried.

“Oh…”

Izuku blinked in surprise at the soft smile his mother gave him back, relief flooding her features.
“I’m so happy for you sweetheart! You’ve seemed pretty down for a while now and I’ve been really worried, but knowing you’re doing okay…it’s a relief, sweetie.”

His heart floated and sank at the same time, the corners of his smile shifting more genuinely. She’d been worrying all that time and he hadn’t done a single thing to soothe her fears, but she kept going on, taking care of him and helping him. God, he really didn’t deserve her—kid, seriously, you’ve gotta stop with the–It made him hate his lie even more, but he couldn’t help but do so. He couldn’t let her get hurt from what he had to do.

Instead of saying anything else, he gave her a grin before putting his eggs between his toast, chewing it like a sandwich. She giggled back before giving him another piece of toast for the road.

Once on the streets to get to school, his mantra returned with less zeal than before, but it still gave him more energy than he’d felt for what felt like months. I’m a hero, he thought, I’m a hero! He skipped a little in his steps, a dance he made up along the way, returning to that lifted feeling from when he woke up. If he could stay that high for the rest of the day, it didn’t matter if the students he passed or who passed him gave him weird looks and mumbled amongst themselves. It didn’t matter if they gave him a wider berth than usual. They weren’t the only people in the world. There were others out there, and they thought he was doing his best!

If he could stay this high, nothing else could go wrong.

Or so he thought.

“No need to be alarmed, but you all will need to stay in your seats after your last class today,” Watanabe-sensei said, balancing his body against his podium at the front of the class. “There are going to be two police investigators here this afternoon to question you all about the class trip we took a few weeks ago. There’s nothing to worry about. Just be honest and tell them what happened, alright?”

No! Not alright! This is definitely not alright!! he thought frantically, trying to not vibrate out of his seat from how badly he was shaking. This is so very, very bad!

C’mon kid, you already made a cover story. Don’t worry about it!

He hugged his backpack tightly, trying to stave off the nervousness. B-But what if I don’t remember it when my time comes? What if I stumble too much a-and they get suspicious?! What if they realize I’m lying?! I’m not a good liar! I suck at lies! They’ll read me like a piece of paper! Like a fast food sign! They’ll tear my story apart and I’ll get arrested! I don’t even want to lie to the police!!

Dang, you just don’t give yourself a break do you?

Now is not the time!!

--

Tsukauchi and Hashiro arrived at Orudera Junior High’s gates after the school’s lunch period, only a few of the children still present outside for activities or just plain skipping class. The ones who did see them watched in awe as they entered the school building, heading to the office the principal had given them the directions to. They needed not worry about getting there though, since the principal was waiting for them among the smudged--and sometimes cracked--shoe boxes with slippers for them to wear. He greeted them with a wobbly smile, wringing his four hands together as he chattered incessantly about how wonderful the students were, passing through the worn halls.

Hashiro thought back to Hosu Junior High and its sleek doors and clean ceilings and couldn’t help
but think that sometimes, life was just unfair.

“So then, your third year classes went on their trips near the Yokohama area. Which class went to which city?” Tsukauchi asked, taking note of the classroom numbers.

“Well,” the man began, sweat dripping down the side of his face, “class 3-A went to Inagi, 3-B went to Sagamihara, and 3-C went to Yokohama.”

“Hmm.” Hashiro noted that down on the class rosters they’d been faxed earlier at the same time she noticed the cracked window looking over the baseball field. It was a small crack, but present nevertheless.

“B-Believe me! If we had been aware such a thing was going to happen, we would’ve never sent our children to those cities! Classes 3-B and 3-C have recovered well since the incident! Our teachers have been watching over their well-being especially closely, and none of them have shown any exacerbated signs of distress—”

“It’s alright, Ushiro-san,” Tsukauchi said, his hands up placatingly. “We aren’t here to investigate the school. We just want to ask your students a few questions about what happened while they were there.”

The man breathed a heavy sigh of relief before choking on it. “W-Well, you’ll only need to speak to classes B and C, correct? Their homeroom teachers have already informed them that you’d be here.”

“Good, thank you. If you don’t mind, are those homeroom teachers free right now? If at all possible, we’d like to get their testimonies in.”

“E-eh? Why do you need the teachers?” The principal looked pale, like he could fall over at any moment.

“Well, they were there, sir. We were hoping that if anyone has a gage on how the students are doing, it’s their teacher,” Tsukauchi replied, his smile minutely too tight at the corners.

“O-Oh, well, ahem, yes. That makes sense. My apologies.” The principal turned to an office room and opened the door. It was empty save for a foldable table, four chairs, and some bottles of water. It looked kind of like a proper interrogation room, save for the window. “I presume this room is to your standards?”

“Yes, it is. Thank you,” Tsukauchi said. He stood outside as Hashiro entered the room, looking around it.

“Please let me know if you need anything, i-inspectors! I will be in my office whenever you need me,” the man said before bowing, turning away before he could receive an answer. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll go get those teachers for you. Watanabe-sensei and Dan-sensei will very helpful, I’m sure!”

Tsukauchi allowed the man his escape, sighing under his breath.

“Other than the nervousness plain on his face, what else did you read from him?” Hashiro asked, setting her papers down onto the table provided for them.

“Hmm...might want to investigate this place for embezzlement later,” he said.

“Why?”

“I’ve seen this school’s tax forms. While they are on the lower bracket of the educational funding
budget, the school shouldn’t be as worn as it looks. The principal should not be afraid of us being here, except he is, exceedingly so. Still, there’s no solid proof of embezzlement. It would have to wait for another time, in someone else’s department, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, huh.” She looked up at the small fissures in the ceiling tiles, “I just thought their funding was that low and he was afraid of being charged for child endangerment. But that makes sense.” She frowned. “It’s really weird knowing you don’t have a quirk for analyzation.”

He smiled back, humor making it lopsided to the left. “It’s my job to make it hard to tell, after all.”

---

The teachers, it turned out, were not that helpful at all.

They were respectful and infinitely less scared of their general presence than the principal had been, but as far as knowing what their students felt or did, they were like strangers to their own classrooms. They didn’t know what their students felt, how they acted, what they were interested in—anything. At least, they acted like it to some extent, Watanabe-sensei exuding this much more than Dan-sensei, who at least expressed concern over some of his students’ growing interest in Minute Maid. In fact, he clammed up—rather casually, strangely enough—when he had to admit he’d lost contact completely with one of his students.

Midoriya Izuku, 14 years old, Class 3-C, noted behavioral issues, quirkless.

He wasn’t the only quirkless student in the school, not even the only one in third year, but he very quickly became the forefront of their minds.

“This is about that Midoriya kid, right?” was the first line to come out of Yusuke Hanato, a student in class 3-B.

Tsukauchi had blinked in surprise at their sudden assertion. “Well, no, it’s not. We’re here to ask you questions about your experience in Sagamihara during the Gray Man incident on May 11th.”

“Oh, really? Okay.” They leaned back in their chair. “I thought...eh.”

“Hmm?”

“Well, I mean…” There, they gave Tsukauchi a wry glance, eyebrows tilted up in false humor. “Midoriya is kind of a weird kid. I thought someone would’ve called him out or something.”

That was only the start of the strange comments regarding the child.

“Midoriya-san is, like, really creepy. He mumbles a lot, like, all the time.”

“I heard he’s a villain in training. Something about ‘equipment’.”

“Midoriya gets picked on alot, I think. I mean...I-I’m quirkless, too, but if I stuck up for him, they’d just get me, too.”

“I heard Midoriya from 3-C gave his class the slip. Probably revenge...ah, for the...uh, for the vigil.”

“I thought I handled it pretty well, I think. Especially after Midoriya disappeared. A lot of kids freaked out, but I think I was fine.”

“His hand slipped out of mine...or got knocked out of mine, or something. I don’t know. I just...I’m not his babysitter or anything so! I just! I wanted to be safe, too, you know!”
“Stupid Deku was probably writing in that dumb-ass book of his the whole fucking time.”

“She threatened me. I felt fear for my life, okay? I was more afraid then than I was when the Gray Man attacked!”

Though every student didn’t mention him, quite a few of them did, both on and off topic. Among class 3-C in particular, the testimony was constant: Midoriya Izuku disappeared from everyone’s sight from the time the alert went through Yokohama til the end of the incident, found in a building completely different from the ones his peers had vacated to. So, of course, they made sure they were very familiar with the boy’s face when his time for interview came up and, depending on his answers, for the future. Curly green hair, dark enough to be black, freckles--very unusual for a Japanese child, wide eyes, small build.

He was apparently just as nervous and fidgety as he looked in his class photo.

The boy had his arms wrapped around his backpack, looking down and to the side as he tried to stay calm. He, as the students before had warned, was mumbling under his breath. His big red shoes tapped against the floor every once in a while before stopping, like he was trying to hold back his stress.

They stared at him for a moment before glancing at each other.

“Hello, Midoriya-san. My name is Detective Tsukauchi, and this is my partner Detective Hashiro. We’re here to ask you a few questions,” Tsukauchi began cautiously, firmly enough to not be accused of talking to him like a scared puppy. “But first, are you feeling alright today?”

The boy perked up at that, looking up at the two detectives with the same wide eyes they’d seen in the picture. His hair was only a tad longer, and there were new dark circles forming on his lower eyelids.

“Ah, uhm...I-I’m okay.”

“Here, take this,” Hashiro said, pushing a bottle of water his way.

“Oh-a-ah, t-thank you!” he muttered, quickly taking the bottle before drinking it down to half its contents without choking. He wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve, face flushed from a lack of breath.

Tsukauchi smiled genuinely at the boy, “No problem. We’re here to ask you a few questions about your experience during the Gray Man attack on Yokohama on May 11th. I’ll talk to you about the circumstances leading to the trip, where you went while there, the instructions you followed during the attack, and the events following. I will also ask you about anything else which may become relevant during the interview in order to properly establish the facts and issues. Understand?”

“Oh...o-o-okay. Yeah. I mean, yes. I understand.”

“Alright, so now, please tell me the circumstances leading to the trip. To clarify, I mean how it came to be that you all were set for Yokohama.” To Tsukauchi’s side, Hashiro prepared her pen against her notepad.

“Uhm...” The boy squeezed his bag tighter, looking off to the side again, though it was more to think than anything if the ease in his shoulders said anything. “O-Our class rose a lot of money d-during last year’s cultural festival. We did a, uhm, h-haunted house.”

“Oh? That sounds fun. What did you do?”
At that question, the boy flushed red. “T-The others just...a-asked me a question and I s-started mumbling...we got, uhm, a lot of good feedback that it was scary. So we got enough to go to some places in Yokohama.”

*Ah, Hashiro thought,* that’s unfortunate.*

“The school didn’t pay for your trip then?” Tsukauchi asked, pointedly not paying attention to the knowing glance to the side of his head.

“Ah...uhm, I, uh, I guess not?”

“Alright. Please continue.”

“Uhm...w-we saved up a bunch from that and f-fundraisers. Watanabe-sensei s-said we could go some places, a-and everyone wanted Yokohama...uhm...t-that’s all for that, I guess.”

“What places did you go in Yokohama?”

“W-We had the option to go to a lot of places but, uhm, I went to the r-ryokan we were staying in and, uhm, Yokohama Museum of Art.”

The boy was starting to fidget, his leg bobbing just a slight bit.

“And that’s where you got separated from your classmates, correct?”

His leg was bobbing outright.

“Y-Yes sir.”

“Could you tell me about that, Midoriya-san? How did you get separated from your classmates?”

For a second, the boy sat frozen in place, like a bug pinned to a wall. He didn’t look at them for a moment, his gaze flitting around his shoes. After a bit, the boy seemed to snap out of it, but not before glancing at his watch.

“U-Uhm, I...we...it got r-really loud and people started to p-panic. I-I was holding hands with Yaomasa-san--sh-she’s a girl in my class--a-and then I got knocked into by th-this guy. I don’t know. Uhm, but...m-my grip was weak and w-we got separated and it was so crowded I couldn’t get back close to them and I got really really lost because everyone was pressing against me and it was really uncomfortable but I couldn’t do anything about it and--”

“Hey, hey, it’s alright,” Tsukauchi said, raising his hands so Midoriya could see where they were.

“Take a deep breath, alright?”

He did take one. Several, actually. Slow ones to fill his lungs and blow it out slowly. He did so in measured breaths, mumbling lowly a pattern to breathe by. One, two, three, four, five... Hold... One...two...three...four...

Eventually he steadied himself and flushed even worse than before, his freckles almost invisible in the sea of reddened flesh.

“I-I’m sorry. I’m r-really sorry.”

“It’s alright, Midoriya-san. You’re doing fine. If you are okay, would you like to try again?”

Rather than responding, the red-faced boy nodded, his hair blocking his eyes.
“Ah...uhm...w-we got separated from each other and...I just w-went with the flow of people. I, uhm, ended up in the big c-convention building with a bunch of others. There were a lot of scared and r-rowdy people, so I k-kept low. I was too scared to check my phone... I...I didn’t really want to know what was h-happening anymore...”

Tsukauchi nodded. “Yes, I can understand that. Which part of the convention center were you in?”

“E-Exhibition Hall A. It w-was weird being there...i-it being big and all.”

“I can certainly understand that, Midoriya-san. What happened after that?”

“Oh, uhm...a-after things calmed down a bit, I ch-checked my phone and saw all the messages. I, uhm, h-hadn’t even been th-thinking about them...”

“I see. You let them know you were alright though, correct?”

“Y-Yes sir. I, uhm, had to text my mom, too. And Shi--...Shimizu-senpai.”

For a moment, the boy had flinched on the name, his face nearly crunching up into a cringe. Tsukauchi acted as though he didn’t notice.

“How is that, Shimizu-senpai? Another student here?”

He shook his head quickly. “S-She’s my M-Muay Thai t-tea-teacher.”

Hashiro’s eyebrows rose minutely, but otherwise she managed to keep a straight face, noting down the name he’d said.

“Muay Thai?” Tsukauchi asked.

“Y-Yes sir...”

“If you don’t mind me asking, why are you learning Muay Thai?”

His head bowed further, and he was almost curling over his bag. “B-Because, I...I, uhm, I want to-to be...stronger. J-Just that.”

Tsukauchi nodded, though he knew the boy couldn’t see it. “I can certainly understand that. Did you start before or after going to Yokohama?”

“B-Before.”

“I see. Now, from what I understand, Shimizu-san is your trainer. That is all she is, correct?”

The boy looked up a bit at that, his eyes still covered, but Tsukauchi could feel his confusion from his seat. After a second, the boy’s head turned towards his watch, just a slight bit, and suddenly his body twitched. His shoulders went ramrod straight and something of a grimace twisted his lips. Then the boy was looking up at the two detectives, still hunched but not nearly curling in on himself.

It gave the two a good look at the fire in his eyes.

“Shimizu-senpai is big and her quirk is really strong and sometimes scary-looking, but she’s a good person. No matter what anyone else says, she’s a really good person.”

Tsukauchi blinked, and suddenly the fire dimmed, the gaze averting.
“W-When I was out with some of my classmates...uhm...sh-she just got...uhm...she’s not a bad person. Sh-she just thought they were...b-bullying me, a-and she got d-defensive, b-but it was nothing l-like that. It was o-okay, I explained it to her l-later, so it’s alright now.”

“Are you sure it’s alright?” Tsukauchi asked.

“Yes…” The boy winced directly afterwards, like someone yelled at him.

---

The sun colored the ground yellow by the time the detectives were done with all of the interviews, the two staying longer than planned to get more intel from some of the remaining teachers for the day. Tsukauchi drove the car while Hashiro took “photos” and saved them away just in case.

“So, out of the group, who do you find the most suspicious?” Tsukauchi asked.

Hashiro rose an eyebrow, not looking away from her work. “I’m pretty sure you know who. He disappeared from his group in the middle of a major crisis, one where a magical girl with fantastic powers that only a quirkless person can have appeared and kicked it into submission.”

“Given, the other four kids on the list so far got separated, too.”

“Right.” Hashiro turned to him then, knowing he couldn’t look away from the road. “But how many of those kids stopped stuttering in the middle of defending someone else?”

Tsukauchi hummed.

“I hate to say it,” Hashiro sighed, turning back, “but Harada-san was too stiff. Minamoto-san’s behavioral quirks, such as the hair curling, doesn’t match up with any of our in-person descriptions of Minute Maid. Toyama-san, while quirkless and absent, was also rather amicable, almost too much so for her to have the sort of nervous behaviors Mach Barrier and Desutegoro described. And Matsuno-san? Just...no. No. I refuse to accept him as a possibility. It’s unprofessional for me to say, but it’s true.”

“No, I second you on that.”

“But more than anything,” Hashiro circled a name on her list, “none of them had that fire I saw in Midoriya-san, if just for a moment. Had he not been so defensive of Shimizu-san, probably would’ve overlooked him, too. He never once mentioned the obvious bullying he’s facing voluntarily, even though others did, and yet he was up in arms in defense for someone else. He looked like he was going to try giving us a verbal lashing if we though about saying anything bad about her. It comes off rather...destructively chivalric is the closest I can think.”

“Reminds me of a certain hero Minute Maid seems to be a fan of,” Tsukauchi said wryly.

Hashiro snorted before shaking her head, her expression falling back into neutrality as she took more photos. “What about you?”

Tsukauchi nodded at her explanation before smiling.

“He’s the only one so far with a big yellow backpack.”

Hashiro paused as she stared at the papers in her lap. Then she looked up, realization dawning on her face.
“Ah.”

Chapter End Notes

...So...I think that went pretty well, kid.

"You don't have to try to make me feel better, Handyman..."

Hrmm...tell you what, I'll put you in panties. That'll cheer you right up.

"NO IT WON'T!!"

Ah, that was out loud.
Filling Time

Chapter Notes

Ah, hey, it's been a while.

I wanted to try writing a chapter where you got to see how Izuku would outsmart some heroes, but it ended up feeling like filler to me, so I'm probably not going to do this again for a while. <:3c
Or, at least, not in this story. Might make a side-story for those sorts of things.

Again, thank you all for all of your support!

Anyway, here's the next chapter! Sorry if it drags, the next one will be better. That I can guarantee.

There was an umbrella in the shop window.

It had a blue knob at the top, where it started white before fading down to baby blue at the bottom where some frills and lace were. It was fairly big, too, probably meant for someone with a large and muscular body but still wanted something casually cute in their repertoire. It gleamed in the sunlit window, beaoning the people walking along the streets to come in and buy it, to take it home for themselves.

Izuku already had an umbrella. A handheld one, black, simple, protected him well enough from the knees up, cost him $10. That one had to cost at least $30 or something, and he didn’t really get enough in his allowance to spend that much on something he already had. What did he have in his pocket then? Probably $40 if he’d counted correctly before.

He paused then, flipping his backpack around to take his wallet out of one of the many hidden pockets it had before counting what he had left. Yes, $40, plus some extra bills he'd carried over from last month's allowance. He sighed, flipping his bag back on. Really, it was for the best. He didn’t need anything else extraordinary about him--he got picked on enough as it was. If he walked around with an umbrella like that, he’d surely get ridiculed for it. It was too cute for someone like him.

The light filtered through the shop window at an even better angle as a cloud blocked a corner of the sun. The world around him went a little dark from cloud shade, but the umbrella stayed alight in its own special ray.

Izuku swallowed, his hands gripping his backpack straps harder.

He’d had these impulses several times before, the desire to buy something cute. When he’d been little, it had been in the form of stuffed animals that incidentally had nothing to do with heroes. Once he got older, it changed to bracelets and a hair accessory or two, his desire for animals firmly burned into submission. He’d resisted as hard as he could, especially after Kacchan and his friends had destroyed Kuma. If he thought on it hard enough, he could hear them tear the bear apart, smell the burning cotton, and feel the smooth plastic of Kuma’s one surviving button eye, the other lost in the
explosion.

He imagined, then, the umbrella, broken in pieces and strewn on the ground.

“I don’t need it. I don’t...I don’t need it,” he muttered, turning away with his head low.

It was better off going to someone who could take good care of it. It looked like a good umbrella. There was no point in him putting his hands on it only for it to get ruined. It would definitely be better with someone else.

“Oh hon, look at that umbrella! It’s so cute, don’t you think?” a feminine voice cooed behind him.

He hazarded a glance back to see a couple, two girls with their arms linked, looking in the very same window he had been just before. One girl, the one who spoke, was a pastel goth in a purple, sleeveless dress and black and white bone stockings, her brown hair peppered with fake verbenas to match the dress. Her girlfriend wore a beanie and a jean skirt, sneakers looking more on the used but clean side. The pastel goth had her hand on the window, peering in at the umbrella he’d been eyeing just moments before.

“Yeah, it looks pretty cute. You want it?” Beanie asked.

“I do, but, ugggh,” her black lipstick twisted with her mouth, “I can’t imagine how much that would cost. I have the parasol already, too.”

“A parasol’s not an umbrella. You’d get soaked.”

“Hmm...true...yeah. Yeah, I think I do want it!” Goth turned to her girlfriend, blinking doe eyes. “Could I have it? Pwetty pwease?”

Yes. She was exactly the kind of person who deserved an umbrella like that. She seemed like she’d take good care of it. Well, much better care than he could, anyway. He sometimes had to resign himself, he knew that.

But for some reason, just as she was begging her girlfriend for the money to buy it, he was walking into the store, already having taken his wallet back out, the impulse in full control.

Well, he wore a dress on a nearly daily basis, even if no one knew it was him. So, to be fair, some cute things survived around him. He could probably allow himself this one thing.

Just this once.

---

The umbrella, as it turned out, was very heavy duty.

It had 12 flexible, steel-reinforced fiberglass ribs supporting the surprisingly big and well-designed canopy. He was sure if he curled himself into a ball, he could hide behind the canopy of the umbrella with how big it was. It also had a cane handle with an extra long steel shaft, letting him keep his hand at his waist rather than near his chest to be under it comfortably.

While it usually cost $75, there was a special sale that day.

It was $53.93.

As he walked down the street with the umbrella carefully in tow, a part of him wondered exactly how he was going to survive for the rest of the week. But, holding onto the sleek, shining handle and
the bright colors on the umbrella made him unable to regret his choice. A giddy bit inside of him was much too pleased with himself, and it fanned out through his veins in a warm calm.

Gosh, it was so cute.

Hey, hey Izuku. Your adorable is showing.

“Sh-shut up,” he muttered, his face going very red, stumbling between crowds of people as he made his way to the train station.

Hmm...you know, you’re probably gonna hate me for suggesting this, but how about adding that to your artillery? You know, stuffing it in your backpack.

He blinked, putting his earphones in because he knew he’d really get to talking. “Why would I do that?”

I mean, we passed some guys in the arcade playing Smash Bros, and I started thinking. What if you went for a bit of a Princess Peach look? I mean, she does have a large artillery on hand, kind of like you, but what you lack is an umbrella.

“First off, Princess Peach has a parasol, not an umbrella. Second of all, I just spent the rest of last week’s allowance and most of this week’s for this umbrella, I’m not about to let it get damaged unless it’s from a typhoon or something.”

No, no, I get it, but the stuff you put your magic in becomes more durable anyway! If anything, using your magic on it will make it last longer.

He clutched his hands on the handle harder, his eyebrows scrunching together. “But I don’t want to use it for fighting! I just w-want to h-have...a-a cute umbrella, so unless there’s a good reason--”

Fall damage avoidance.

Izuku blinked. “...Do you seriously think this umbrella will hold my weight?”

It’s magic, kid. Anything’s possible. It’s better than screwin’ your knees up, anyway.

The crowds of people had only gotten thicker the closer he got to the train station, the boy dodging around them as well as he could, trying to not bump his umbrella. His face screwed up into an angry pout, knowing the voice was probably right.

“But...I like the way it looks as it is.” And it’s the first cute thing I’ve bought in years, he thought.

Hahh...alright, how about this? The next cute thing you buy, I won’t try to make it into a weapon, alright? Also, I’ll try to make your umbrella look extra cute when transformed. What do you say?

Izuku pondered it for a moment, looking down at his new prize with concern, before he sighed. Quietly, he pulled himself close and shuffled his way through the shifting waves of people to get to the nearest bathroom—the only place in the train station he was very sure didn’t have cameras.

The tile walls gleamed from the surprisingly bright overhead lights, but he was mostly focused on making sure the bathroom was empty. It was for the moment, the urinals free of awkwardly standing men, the stalls either partially or completely open for the most part. Izuku snuck himself over into the stall furthest from the curved and discrete open entrance. Without touching anything inside as he could help it, he took off his backpack and hung it on the small hangers on the inside of the door before using a partial activation, his hand only twisting the button on the top of the watch rather than
pressing it.

His body took on a light, yellow glow that was less prominent than it would be when he was fully transformed, his eyes turning yellow without changing shape. His backpack, though, transformed completely, the material becoming a brighter yellow as a rabbit-face clasp formed on the top flap. Izuku clutched the umbrella to his chest.

Hey, remember the promise. I won’t have you magick up your next cute thing.

“That’s if I buy anything else like this…” Mumbling, he opened the top flap.

The inside of his backpack had turned into a swirling void of purples from light, almost white, to dark as grape jam. Floating above the open bag were glowing yellow numbers, labeled 5 of 6.

Izuku sighed, his body sagging sadly, before he pursed his lips. Then, without thinking about it, he turned the umbrella right-side up and rose the handle before pressing a small button on the handle. It suddenly rose and clicked, its canopy flapping open and shading him from the fluorescent lights above. It left an ombre of light to dark blue on the ground under it, Izuku marveling at its appearance.

He wished it had rained before he gave it up.

Without further ado, though, he reached up and pulled down the gear, closing it. Then, carefully, he stuck it knob first into the dark, swirling abyss inside of his bag, yellow energy sparking along the part of the object that entered its lack of mass. Eventually, he just let it drop the rest of the way in, the handle sparking a bright yellow before it disappeared into his bag.

The number floating above went from 5 of 6 to FULL in big lettering with a static blitz of energy.

It’ll take about a day for me to fully redesign this one. I have a lot of plans for its versatility! ...Hey, Izuku, did you know that in some cultures, opening an umbrella on the inside of a building gives you bad luck?

Izuku’s smile took on a wry tinge, the corners of it not quite reaching his eyes. “I probably don’t have anything to worry about.”

Oh, c’mon, your luck isn’t that ba--

“I d-died from a chance encounter with a sludge villain. If that’s not supreme bad luck, I don’t know what is,” he muttered, twisting the button on his watch to end the partial transformation before flushing the toilet out of habit and leaving the stall. His hands trembled slightly after the joke, but he tried not to acknowledge it.

...Well, I mean, you’re not wrong, but--...eh, whatever. Uh, well, anyway. Time to get home.

Izuku paused in the middle of habitually washing his hands, eyes widening in horror. “...I barely have two dollars left. How am I going to buy the ticket home?”

...Dang, I guess your luck is pretty bad, huh? Good thing I’m around to help you out.

"When?"

OUCH, OKAY.

---

Afternoon was starting to shift into evening as Izuku hopped off the top of a compact building with a
cram school inside, before landing on top of a shop. Transformed and glowing, he quickly followed the GPS coordinates on his phone to get himself home, trying to avoid any potential viewers via the tops of the buildings around him.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this,” he muttered, eyes narrowed with embarrassment as he put his phone away.

Hey, there’s nothing to be worried about! I mean, what’s the point of having magic if you can’t just use it for general convenience?

“It’s illegal. We can’t use quirks for general convenience outside of the house, so how’s magic any different?”

Flip the rules, man! Magic exists! Ah, but seriously, you’ve gotta control your impulse buys.

“I know, okay?! I know!” he cried, his face flushing. “It was just this one--ah!”

He cut himself off, his eyes scrunched from a bright light suddenly shining into them. He lost his footing on the next landing, one foot tripping over the other, and he cried out, tumbling to the ground. The slight plume of dust settled and Izuku groaned, gravel pressing into his cheek.

Suddenly, he came to his senses, gasping as he quickly sat up, his gaze searching for whatever caused the light.

“What-What?”

_Huh. We have company._

At Handyman’s assertion, he scrambled to his feet, eyes still searching hurriedly. His fists rose to protect his face.

“A-A villain?”

“I may seem like one to you, Minute Maid, but I’m definitely not.”

He gasped at the sound of the low, rumbling voice right behind him, and turned quickly.

The relatively buff figure stood a longer distance away from him than he’d thought, a good seven feet even. They wore black boots with buckles and a white, hooded jumpsuit with black lines on the seams that was zipped up to their chest. From there, a black shirt was visible underneath. They wore buckles with pouches around their waist, one crossing over the other in an X, and black gloves. They wore their hood on their head, and the half-face mask covered their eyes from view. On the hood that draped over their head, there was a big black eye design, with two lines forming the lashes, and a circle in the middle for the iris and pupil.

“A few days ago, I got a notice that I needed to bring in a glowing girl in a pink dress if I ever saw her. I didn’t think I’d actually meet you, to be honest. But hey, lucky me.” He smiled, reaching for one of his pouches.

Izuku didn’t wait to see what it was, turning around to run away.

But instead of getting away, the figure was suddenly right in front of him, and he felt a sudden pressure punch him in the stomach like a cannon shot. He coughed out the breath in his lungs, tottering back, but not falling down. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he rose his fists.

“Oh, tough one, are you? Aaah, I don’t mean to hurt you, but I can’t let you leave. Of course, I’m
not going to kill you—that’s not what heroes are supposed to do in the first place—but I do have to take you in, even if you’re kicking and screaming. Okay?” Fraction posed, a thumb on his bottom lip with his pointer finger sticking out, the rest of his fingers curled in. He tilted his body in the direction of his finger, his torso bending to the side with his other hand on his hip.

Izuku shifted in on himself, making himself smaller. Even whilst feeling scared, his feet shaking in his shoes, he frowned at the hero, eyes shining.

“N-No...not yet.”

“I, ah,” he stood up straighter, “I didn’t mean for you to answer that. But anyway, since you’ve rejected being taken in...”

Suddenly, he wasn’t standing there anymore. He was to Izuku’s left. Then his right a mere moment later. Then to his right again, this time closer. The man’s body flitted around him like an afterimage, getting closer and closer, Izuku’s eyes trying to follow in a panic.

Then Izuku gasped as he was kicked harshly on his back, sending him stumbling forward, nearly into the guy’s chest. He caught his balance though, backing up as quickly as he could before the man could bear-hug him into submission. While trying to back up, he stumbled a bit and ended up going to the side.

The young man clicked his tongue, then crossed his arms, shaking his head.

“Then we’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Then again, he was gone, his form flitting around Izuku’s, getting closer and closer with each afterimage.

Oh shoot, who’s this? This very “punch first, ask later” kind of guy.

“This is bad this is bad this is bad this is bad--ghh!” Izuku’s arms barely protected him from the kick to his front, sending him stumbling back before he punched forward, hitting nothing but air, his fist not even touching the afterimage. “It’s Fraction.”

Fraction?

“A recent Ketsubutsu graduate. Superspeed quirk,” Izuku mumbled, his voice low as he tried to trail the images, “He can’t move long distances, but that doesn’t matter. All he needs is a fraction of a second of cool-down and he can jump again. It’s why he’s jumping around the way he is.”

Izuku’s torso took the brunt of another hit, but accompanied with it was the feeling of someone grasping for his arms, a hand curling around his wrist. Izuku yelled, twisting his body to kick forward, the magic around his legs sparking, and the hand disappeared from his senses.

Hey, hey, hey, reign it in! You don’t want to use those kinds of kicks against humans! Focus!

The boy’s eyes widened, a cold horror running down his spine. “Ah, ahh, I-I’m sorry!”

“No need, Minute Maid,” Fraction replied, shifting with each frowning afterimage, “You just reminded me how dangerous you are.”

The cold was turning colder, his eyes starting to water. “I-I’m not used t-to facing humans! I-I’m sorry! I d-don’t want to—”
His pleading turned into a cry, his back hit full force, enough to send him stumbling forward a few steps. Then another hit had him stumbling to the side. A hand grabbed his shoulder, and Izuku punched at the area instead, only to get hit in the stomach by something--a knee?

Izuku stumbled backwards, his body flitting with pain, but still remained as much in position as possible.

“Hey Minute Maid,” Fraction began, his form flashing around the other, “You know, some grown men would already be bent over and begging for mercy with the kind of hits you’ve been taking.” His voice paused as Izuku defended himself as much as he could from a hit to his side, right on his arm. “Seeing you fight the Gray Men in video and seeing you stand up to me now are totally different experiences. I can see now how you’ve faced off against them for so long.”

Izuku didn’t reply, watching the images with a barely concealed fright. His body throbbed dully with pain, his magic focused on defense after Handyman had reminded him of how dangerous it would be to go full-force against a human. It was hard, though, trying not to kick when most of his training was in kicking. His punches were already fairly weak, so he felt no qualms about doing those full force, but still. It was like...it was like...like trying not to explode an egg in a microwave. Or maybe, like needing to flick an egg and not crack it where he’d usually crush it full force. It felt so constraining.

And Fraction wasn’t giving him enough time to think. Every time he tried to find a way out, he’d find himself defending against a fast-paced barrage of hits, some of them grabbing at him to begin a restraining move. He couldn’t go left, right, anywhere around. He couldn’t run away. He was stuck! He was going to get caught he couldn’t escape!

No...no! He couldn’t let himself get caught up. He had to focus. He had to shake off the anxiety clogging up his brain and focus!

Huh.

“W-What…” he muttered, eyes trying to trail after the flitting forms, waiting for another bout of punishment.

When he hits you, it’s all from the same direction, isn’t it? Well, when it’s fast.

“Huh?”

Before he could ask, another hit came at his shoulder, the man’s figure fading directly afterwards. He quickly turned to punch again, and Fraction came back, right in front of him, grasping towards his extended arm. Izuku pulled his limbs in so quickly he almost hit himself in the chest, and backed away, just as the figure faded.

Izuku frowned.

A moment later, he felt another hit on his back, but this time he quickly turned around, punching. Again, where Fraction had faded off a moment before, Izuku watched as he quickly shifted back into place, grabbing for his arm again. Izuku let some of his magic flow in his legs again as he backed away, putting them at a bit of a greater distance.

“Izuku frowned.

A moment later, he felt another hit on his back, but this time he quickly turned around, punching. Again, where Fraction had faded off a moment before, Izuku watched as he quickly shifted back into place, grabbing for his arm again. Izuku let some of his magic flow in his legs again as he backed away, putting them at a bit of a greater distance.

“Oh no you don’t!” Fraction said, suddenly behind him.

Izuku jolted and turned, punching at Fraction, but instead, the image shifted and disappeared, and he was hit on his back. On his back...why his back? He was facing that way before when he backed up, and now Fraction hit his back instead? And just before...why would Fraction come back to almost
get punched just to grab his arm.

Something wasn’t right.

He turned around and punched at nothing, Fraction flitting around further away from him, but quickly coming closer with each burst of speed. A punch and kick came at his left side this time, and he turned to punch him back, the form flitting away as a strange, shaker-like sound reached his ears. A second later, the shaker noise sounded again, and his knee buckled with the kick aimed at the back of it.

He pitched forward onto his hands and knees, but he rolled off to the left, picking himself back up before Fraction could knock him down again. He bent his knees more as he posted up that time around. Fraction’s frown grew, but he said nothing as he started jumping around again, surrounding Izuku in a circle as he came closer.

Cautiously, Izuku turned himself in a circle, trying to keep some sort of eye on the encroaching hero and keep from staying still, the gravel below him shifting with his weight.

Wait. Gravel. If he paid enough attention, he could hear the stones bump against each other loudly depending on how much he moved. Just to test it, he hunkered his body down, closer, shifting his feet. The stones slid and scraped against each other, not unlike a shaker. Just like the noise he heard just before he’d get hit.

His gaze trailed down toward Fraction’s feet. Fraction’s soundless feet, that didn’t disturb a single rock in the gravel below him. Not even the air from him jumping from place to place moved the rocks.

Because he wasn’t there.

Suddenly, the gravel shifted, and a heavy punch against his back pushed him forward. This time, though, Izuku turned, clinging to the idea of flicking an egg and not cracking its shell, and kicked with as little magic involved as possible.

The solid weight of something there where he saw nothing was well worth the way Fraction suddenly appeared in front of him, grabbing his leg as he kicked his other one from under him. He fell with a gasp, the gravel digging into his back, but he managed to keep his head from knocking into the ground. The hero kept a hold of his leg, visibly digging for his handcuffs.

The hero huffed. “This time for sur--”

Izuku didn’t let him complete the thought, his free leg kicking up in between the hero’s legs. The other had been lucky to notice his leg shift, and he backed up, but Izuku hadn’t intended to kick him there anyway, his ploy successful. He used the shift in his weight from the kick and his newly freed leg to turn himself onto his hands and knees, scrambling to get up onto his feet as he turned back to where Fraction had just been standing.

This time, even though Fraction started flitting around again, speeding from place to place, Izuku kept his determined gaze straight where the hero had been before. Fraction looked irritated, his lips curled up to show gritted teeth.

Ohhh, different game now, huh?

“Uhm...M-Mr. Fraction...that doesn’t stand for ‘fraction of a second’, does it?” Izuku said, keeping his eyes forward. Then his gaze dropped down to the ground.
Despite the flitting image all around him, there was only one set of slight footprints heading towards him in the gravel. He had to watch closely to see where the gravel flattened and turned, but he could still see it.

“Fraction actually stands for refraction. R-Right?”

Somehow, a tremor of magic told him that The Handyman was grinning.

Izuku didn’t bother looking up to see what they were grinning at, watching as the footsteps came closer. He held his arms up as the kick hit across them, and backed away further, gaze locked onto the ground where the young man had just stood, his experiment complete. Surely enough, Fraction pursued him, the gravel shifting light, but shifting nonetheless. He couldn’t tell how Fraction would hit him, but at least he knew which direction he’d be coming from.

Still, Fraction was fast—not as fast as he’d fooled others into believing, but fast enough Izuku wasn’t sure he could escape without incapacitating him or something.

Then, he got an idea. It would be cruel, honestly, but...

Hey, not to cause you extra stress, but you might want to get going. There’s a really, really good chance he called for backup.

He nodded lightly, keeping his eyes on the ground. “Y-You’re actually much slower than you make yourself out to be, but...but then you th-throw the image of your body around to make it look like you’re in a bunch of different places in quick succession.”

Izuku could hear Fraction curse under his breath. His eyes stayed on the ground, the gravel shifting, his body circling to keep the still invisible man in front of him.

“I-If you think about it, it makes s-sense. It’s how you got me to trip and fall. Y-You refracted light through your body and into my eyes. Now you’re refracting your own image, making yourself completely invisible in the process. I-It’s an amazing quirk.”

“Quiet, you! Dang kid… It’s not like we’re trying to hurt you too bad! We just need to talk!”

Fraction said, his voice echoing all around him.

“Ah--a-and your voice! Y-You do that with ventriloquism, r-right? To make it seem more real. Y-You have the vocal control skills to rival Present Mic.”

Fraction huffed, and the gravel shifted. Izuku backed away, and he heard wind blow near his head where he’d dodged. He kept up his strange circle of dodging around the hero, talking all the while.

“I-I think it was really smart, t-to make it look like you had a speed quirk. A lot of people have speed-related quirks in d-different ways, whether it’s leg strength that causes it, or bursts of air, or gravitational pulls. Y-You could’ve easily fooled anyone. B-But…” He grinned, his lips unable to keep from trembling around his teeth. “Y-You made two mistakes. O-One, you didn’t take your environment into account. H-Had we been on a concrete roof, I p-probably wouldn’t have been able to notice your image wouldn’t move gravel.”

“I said quiet!” Fraction yelled right in front of him. His feet shifted the gravel again.

“A-And two…”

Izuku’s eyes finally left the ground, flicking up to one of Fraction’s still flitting images. The young man was leaned back a bit, his left leg rising.
He heard Fraction gasp when he grabbed it. He looked up at the hero’s face, who had stopped using his quirk, his body finally visible again. The hero looked down at him with shock, eyes wide and jaw dropped. The Handyman’s grin grew wider in his head.

“R-Refraction isn’t reflection, so if you’re not careful, you telegraph your moves without thinking.”

Izuku rose his fist. Don’t crack the egg, don’t crack the egg, don’t crack the egg.

“I-I’m really, really sorry for this.”

---

“Motherfucker! I swear, if I see that little shit again, I’m gonna--ah! FUCK!” Fraction moaned as Xtra helped him up, taking his entire weight and turning her head away so her waist-length brown hair could disguise the way she was a mere second away from laughing.

Hashiro sighed as she opened the door to the roof twenty minutes after the fight. “I could hear you even in the stairwell. You might want to quiet down just a bit.”

“For publicity’s sake, babe,” Xtra added, wrapping her extended arm around his waist to better support him.

“Awww, try talkin’ to me when you’ve got that smug-ass grin off yer face!” Fraction seethed, teeth gritted in pain.

“Ah, don’t drop the act!”

“Like hell I can keep it up--shit! What kind of fist does that kid even have?! Made of fuckin’ bricks?!”

Hashiro watched as Xtra, still trying to hold it all in, helped him over to lean on one of the metal vents at the top of the building, just as the police started coming through the stairwell. A medic followed closely after, bringing a medical kit with him as he headed over to Fraction’s side.

Hashiro brought out her notepad. “Well, since we’re here, I hope you don’t mind giving your report on the incident? You said it was a Minute Maid encounter, correct?”

“Incident? Hell yeah, I’ll tell you the incident!” Fraction pointed down between his legs with his right arm, his left still clutching over Xtra’s shoulder. “They punched me in the bloody dick!!”

Xtra, still holding him up, absolutely lost it, sputtering before her laughter echoed along the rooftops.

Chapter End Notes

So...remember that shade you threw earlier? "When," you said.

"...Sorry."

Ah, it's all good, you don't have to apologize. I was never mad, just joking. Besides, you did most of the analyzing yourself, I just gave you a point to focus on. You're a really amazing and smart kid.
"Ah! Uhm..."

Aaaah, so cute~ Heh, also, might I say. Good job not cracking the eggs!!

"..."

...You know that was a good pun, stop looking at me like that.
Mmmmm fek there's a lot of freaking html this time around...

HI! It's been a few weeks, but I have The Content™.

I had too much fun finishing this off, so now I'm going in tomorrow with a fewer hours of sleep, but honestly? No regrets.

So first off, FAN ART!!! There's a crapton of it because you guys fuckin spoil me.

From medaloop
From taloreliz
From olive
From spriteisbetter
From tokaxiy
From isla-miyano
1/2 from sticker
2/2 from sticker--this one has a Shimizu!
From jess

*prayer hands emoji*

Thank you all so much qwq

I thank EVERYONE for all the support you guys have shown me so far! I'm extremely grateful and am looking forward to your feedback from here on. Thanks again!!

Ah, just as a note, if you want to listen to the interactive music, please remember to open it in a new tab. <:3

Now then, enjoy the suffering.

The gym smelled heavily of musk and salt and thicker-than-normal thatched flooring. The sounds of impact echoed alongside the low, beating music of the gym, like it was alive and filthy with body grease, a contrast to the bright lights and clean mirrors. On the main floor, Daishi taught his class, which had grown a little smaller over time, their kicks kept medium to low and their balance occasionally teetering. Off to the side, on a well-padded mat near a lot of equipment in a place Shimizu had forcefully etched out for them with her height alone, Izuku kept his balance and kicked high.

Izuku huffed under his breath as he kicked the pads that Shimizu-senpai wore around her waist and forearms for “protection”—he knew she didn’t need them, rather, it was more for his own benefit.
Shimizu did a small, powerless kick by his left leg, and he rose his left to block, bent at the knee and shin straight down. Then, as he’d practiced, he followed it up with a kick from his right leg, his body hitting against the pads with a low thud. He’d already done nine of those sorts of kicks before, so Shimizu stood up straight, nodding.

“Drills done. Your form’s been getting better.” She started taking off the pads, her tail swishing slightly behind her.

Izuku nodded back, breathing heavier than usual with exertion, before shuffling over to the bench they’d piled their things on, picking up his small, white towel to pat off some of his sweat. He turned to Shimizu to ask her a question then, only to find the woman’s gaze flitting around her forearms on the side he’d kicked on.

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah,” she replied, not looking up from her inspection, “It just really occurred to me you weren’t lying before. About the difference between arm and leg strength when it comes to you.” She looked up at him then, sharp teeth nearly sliding against each other as she spoke. “Your punches have improved, definitely, but your kicks are getting closer to bruising strength. You’ve improved a lot faster than I’d expect. Your kind of improvement only comes with a lot of practice.”

He felt sweat completely unrelated to exercise start to trail down his temple. “Ah. Yeah. I, uh, try to practice outside the gym.”

If by practice you mean beat Gray Men faces in on an almost daily basis, then yes, you practice. A lot.

Izuku hushed the voice inwardly, his eye just barely twitching with an aborted wince.

It was then that he noticed Shimizu was staring at him, pupils small in interest as she focused solely on him, as she tended to do when she had a question she was pondering over asking.

“Uhmm...Shimizu-senpai? What is it?”

She blinked both of her eyelids before she answered, her head tipping downward as she approached him, all muscle and green eyes.

“Why did you want to train in Muay Thai again?”

Izuku wasn’t really sure where she was going with that.

“To get stronger.”

“Why?”

“To...protect others. I want to become the kind of man who can be relied on...a-and I know you don’t like heroes—”

“Correction: I don’t like their necessity, their methods, and with some of them, their attitudes.” She pushed her bag to the side on the bench before having a seat, moving other things so Izuku could sit if he wanted. When he didn’t, she didn’t seem to take any offense. “Continue.”

“Ah...well, I know you don’t like how necessary heroes seem to be a-and that other stuff, but...but I want to be one.” Izuku closed his eyes, fiddling with his sweat rag. “I...I-I’ve wanted to be a hero since I was a little kid, but, you know, with me being quirkless, no one has ever told me I could. No
one believed--ah, believes something like that can happen. Still, I think...maybe a part of me didn’t believe in it either.”

When he opened his eyes, Shimizu’s were still looking directly into his, but the pupils had relaxed, as had the stiffness in her shoulders. She stayed quiet, listening intently.

“I would talk about how much I wanted to be a hero no matter what, even to the point of annoying Kac--everyone around me, but I never took any actions toward it. I mean...I didn’t really ever start training my body until this year. Until...uhm...I-I uh, almost died.”

Izuku startled when the woman’s gills shifted and she jolted to stand. Her eyebrows were scrunched, her expression severe, but he could see the concern in the way her hands twitched to take a hold of him, but held back.

“‘Almost died’? When?”

Her voice left no room for pussyfooting, an interrogation different from the one he’d faced from the police. He sighed, glancing off to the side.

“I was attacked by a sludge villain. It wasn’t publicized because I, uhm, was in an alley away from everyone else when it happened. If it hadn’t been for...” He shook his head, fighting to push the lie out between his lips. “If It hadn’t been for All Might, I would’ve died that day. I think that’s when I realized I was given a second chance. I...just want to make the most of it. No matter what.”

Shimizu tilted her head to the side, not looking at him. Her lips pursed, one of her teeth sticking out from them, as she seemed to throw a question around in her mind. A moment later, she seemed to gather the resolve to ask it.

“Why not a policeman?”

Izuku bristled immediately, a stab of pain piercing his chest, but he paused when she rose a hand.

“I’m not saying you can’t be a hero, I just wonder why specifically a hero. Being a policeman is just as good, if not better, than being a hero.”

“Why?”

“Because they won’t put you to heavy work until you’re the right age.”

“...What?” he asked, frowning.

Shimizu sighed as she reached into her bag. She pulled back with two cold water bottles, one much bigger than the other, and tossed Izuku the smaller one. He caught it easily, then watched as she patted the open seat she’d made on the bench. This time, he took the invitation, sitting beside her. She looked...irritated, but he could tell it wasn’t at him. She never got irritated with him.

“With these provisional licenses they give at hero schools, they have 15 and 16-year-olds involved in life-or-death situations day by day where grown adults wouldn’t be involved. I’ve seen it, too--times when I was told to run to safety while a kid with a provisional license rushed into a war zone. And no one saw a problem with it, like it was normal to set a dangerous situation into the hands of a young teen. You understand there’s something wrong with that, right?”

Izuku swallowed at the plead unhidden in her gaze, her wish just as plain and simple as her question had been. He opened his mouth, trying to reply, but then let his teeth click as he shut it, turning away from her.
He couldn’t give her the answer she wanted, and from the tired sigh she gave, she knew he couldn’t. Shimizu turned away from him, staring forward at the class on the main mat.

“It’s just that...well, I guess I wouldn’t be so against it if there were easier ways for adults to become heroes later in life rather than just being stuck out the industry. They start so much younger now than before, from what I know, and it’s harder to become a hero once you’re out of highschool, and that just doesn’t make sense to me. But anyway, that’s...just to say...I just don’t want you to think about becoming a warrior when you’re too young. Being a hero is life-consuming work. You can protect all the people you want, but...” She sighed, putting a hand on his head, rubbing so it messed up his hair. “Be a kid first, alright? Before it’s too late.”

Izuku chewed lightly at his lower lip as he nodded, unable to tell her it was already too late.

Shimizu cleared her throat, closing her eyes with a flinch. “But enough about what I think. Why a hero?”

He pressed his pointer fingers together and kept his eyes on them rather than having them trained on her face like he had before. “Well...uhm...I, I’ve always dreamed of it, and…”

“And?”

“...A hero found me suffocating, not a police officer.”

She didn’t reply, and he didn’t feel the need to say anything else. They sat in silence until her eyes supposedly reopened with a heavy breath. Even without looking at her, Izuku noticed that something about her seemed to have slouched, like she’d been defeated.

“Well. Fair point, I suppose.”

---

Thursday, July 30th, 10 days since summer break had begun.

Izuku had his earphones in as he listened absentmindedly to a musical break on Gangam Hero on the radio, wearing a loose-fitted tee and some shorts turned pink in his partial transformation. He was moving trash around using only his muscle strength, trying to have as little magic involved as possible aside from the magic that kept him from being cut so easily...and kept him alive. He wanted to build up natural strength too, after all—it’d be no good to rely too much on magic all of the time. Besides, it was good practice so he could do what he’d done against Fraction and balance his magical output.

Sweat rolled down his body from the increased heat of the incoming afternoon sun, and neither the salty tang of ocean air or the cicadas chirping from the off-beach trees helped in the least. After putting down a small fridge, he wiped the back of his left wrist against his forehead, then ran his fingers through his hair. Blinking at the length of it, he played with the hair against the nape of his neck, it being thicker and longer than before.

“Maybe I need a haircut…” he muttered, turning around to head back to the pile he was dismantling.

For a moment, he paused, looking over the progress he’d made thus far. While there were still some piles of trash he had yet to get to, he’d worked his way around a good third of it, the piles closer to the stairway much more organized and cleared out than the others. Still, every part he’d touched now had at least one strip of visible sand going through it, so he let himself feel proud.

“I have extra time for the rest of summer, too, so if I keep coming and spending most of the day here,
maybe I can be halfway done by the end of summer. I could use magic to get rid of it all, but that’d defeat the purpose so...but maybe I could designate some piles for magic training and others for weight training, so I can gage how much stronger I’m getting on both sides, though I could ask Shimizu-senpai about my strength levels weight-wise, but I still can’t tell her about the magic, so I don’t know how good of a comparison I’ll be able to get from only half of the data, unless I evaluate how she quantifies strength and replicate it, but then she might get suspicious—”

I’m pretty sure she already is.

Izuku blinked, then lowered the music to hear the voice better. “What do you mean?”

That conversation you two had a few weeks ago? About the whole ‘not growing up too quickly’ and being a kid while you can? I’m pretty sure she’d have no reason to say that unless she suspected you were doing something.

“Ehh? N-No way,” he muttered, eyes wide as he quickly picked up a tractor wheel, shifting to hold it up above his head. “I mean, you said it yourself--showed me, even--that I can’t be seen on electronic screens. I can’t even be seen well in person.”

Well, under certain conditions.

“What conditions?”

Well, the key to seeing your face even while transformed has three cuts. First, one has to know who you are--Midoriya Izuku. Second, one has to know that you are Minute Maid. Third, one has to witness you transform.

“But, Shimizu-senpai only knows my name!” he huffed, placing the tractor wheel with other rubber products he’d gathered. “And even if she did know I was Minute Maid, she hasn’t seen me transform!”

Well, those are the requirements to see you, not to suspect you.

Before Izuku could argue his case back, the music on the radio cut out.

The radio’s introduction music didn’t play, and the host’s voice came on instead, deep and soulful as usual, but with some strange, warbly hint to it.

“Hey, sorry to interrupt our usual programming, but I’ve just gotten an alert being spread between police forces in the metro area. It seems there’s a Gray Man rampaging near downtown Musutafu, harming citizens indiscriminately and indirectly through property damage. Trains to downtown have been stopped for now until the situation is absolved. Until then, stay inside the buildings and do not go out. If you stay inside, you’re more likely to stay safe. Several heroes have been called out to try and subdue the Gray Man and it will be resolved as soon as possible. I repeat—”

Izuku didn’t need to hear the repeat. With a split-second notice, he pressed the button on the top of his watch and transformed completely, running past his backpack to pick it up and flip it up onto his back. He kicked off of the sand, nearly slipping, but landed onto the concrete walkway above the beach. Then he was off, sprinting toward downtown.

Huh, these guys really like populated cities more recently. I guess they upgraded from the backroads.

“Not a good time to talk about that!”

He felt pretty stupid. There he was, thinking about spending his summer cleaning up trash, but Gray
Men were still a deal. He had to stay focused! In fact, didn’t summer give him more time to make patrols? It was very obvious he should be doing that instead.

---

Izuku knew he was close to the scene when more people were either running away or, foolishly, starting to crowd around. He could hear a call or two of his magical girl name, but he didn’t pay attention, focused solely on finding the street where the fighting was the worst.

He realized the closer he got that he didn’t really have an escape plan. Once the Gray Man was destroyed, all of the helping heroes would be going after him, wouldn’t they? Yet he didn’t have a single clue on how he was going to bypass them all. Still, he couldn’t sit there and do nothing. The Gray Man would be better off destroyed than captured. He’d just have to wing his escape, just as he always did.

Shoving that thought to the side, he tried to tune his inner, disgusted feeling to where the creature was, swallowing as though he could get rid of the knot developing in his chest. This one…it didn’t have the same noxious feeling that Nessus did, but it was a step-up from the usual Gray Man, a cloying, grasping fog that stretched in his direction. Was it...had it eaten already? Why was the feeling stronger?

Suddenly, he heard a large crackling bang and screaming people, and he ran towards it, turning down the different, trailing roads as the inky chill of the presence of a Gray Man slicked down his spine.

That’s when he saw the crowd. People were starting to run further away, or backed away with their cameras still trained on the street, the crowds dispersing into large swaths of people rather than a gathered group. Up ahead, he could immediately recognize at least two heroes--Mt. Lady and Kamui Woods.

The office building was tall, grey, foreboding. At eleven stories high, it was too high for even a full-height Mt. Lady to tower over it. The best she could do was stand behind the building, pressing top half with all of her strength to try to keep it on the bottom half, the building partially split by the large crack that grew intermittently on its concrete walls. In the meantime, Kamui Woods spread his branches out from the ground, catching boulders and desperate workers alike, the workers taking precedence.

Suddenly, some glass on the front face of the office broke, and Izuku watched, startled, as a human was flung out of the building. They looked unconscious, and, from their garb, were definitely a hero. Kamui’s branches tried to reach for them, but he was overextended as it was. He couldn’t reach for them in time.

Izuku felt himself move then, his feet cracking the ground with the amount of force he’d jumped off with. Sailing through the air, he landed once more, in front of the widened group, and kicked off even harder, eyes trained solely on the falling hero.

The impact had them both rolling in the air a bit, but Izuku quickly stabilized them, reaching back to his bag with his right hand to summon one of his utilities.

As they fell, Izuku impressed his will on his weapon, and the canopy of a big pink and white umbrella popped open, their descent slowed in a matter of seconds. The white color ombred into a deep pink at the bottom with lace on its edges, and the very top had a bright yellow, four-pointed star for a knob, though it lay flat on the top rather than sticking out to poke into the air. It caught the air under its canopy and slowed them down safely, Izuku keeping his body curled upward to cradle the
human in his care.

It was then he noticed the hero’s condition.

He couldn’t say he knew this one, probably a new hero, but the v-neck of their bright green hero outfit couldn’t hide the black veins traveling through their body, starting at their chest. It was then that he noticed that the hero felt...*emptied*. Not completely, but just from touching them, he could tell they’d lost something important, like a cup with some of its water poured out.

The Gray Man had taken something from their quirk, and he didn’t know what it was.

“*Minute Maid!*”

When he looked down, a paramedic was approaching them, her hair pulled back into a braid at the back of her head, two horns poking out from the front of her forehead. Once he landed, he quickly handed the hero over to her, and watched as she cradled the hero’s head as she set him down. His legs trembled anxiously as she called for others to come help. He didn’t want to ask, but...he needed to.

“U-Uhm, e-excuse me, miss, but...uhm...d-o-do you know their quirk?” he asked, closing the umbrella before holding its cane tightly.

The paramedic looked up at him, eyes narrowed in confusion, but then her eyes landed on and trailed the darkened veins. Suddenly, she understood, her gaze dimming before turning to him, resolute.

“This is Terra Terror, a new hero. His power was to harden and soften his body at will, able to deform himself—*erh*—kind of like puddy, in a sense.”

A transformative quirk that changed the elasticity of their cells, probably, leading to hardening or softening. Depending on what else it had eaten, this could be harder than he’d ever wanted it to be. Either way, he needed to get inside.

He nodded quickly at the woman, stuttering out a thanks, before he turned quickly and ran towards the building. His ears caught the butt-end of the woman’s “watch out”, heard Kamui Woods yell something like “dangerous” and “wait”, but he couldn’t quite hear it, his mind already running a mile a minute over how the Gray Man could be using whatever it had stolen from Terra Terror. How he could stop it before it got any stronger.

---

“Mt. Lady is barely keeping the building together for the other employees to escape. Kamui Woods is catching as many of them as he can—seems the stairwell might be too damaged for safe travel, so all of the people in the upper levels might be trapped. Terra Terror, who was initially supposed to subdue the Gray Man on the inside is reported to have been defeated. He’s been marked and is currently unconscious,” a voice said over the phone, leading Hashiro to grit her teeth tightly as she rushed through the police office hallways, flanked by policemen already geared to get on-scene.

“Understood,” she turned her head to one of the police officers at her side, “Call to see if Cementoss can get to the scene! We need to give the employees on the upper levels a way to get out. And if not, call for someone with a metal or fire quirk—melding the building back together might be the best we can get.” She turned back to listen, “Anything else?”

“There are a few other heroes on scene trying to escort the rescued employees away, and others keeping them back from the fight, but it doesn’t like anyone else is much suited for the situation. We need other heroes here!”
“We’ll get them on the way to you as soon as possible. In the meantime, treat the employees that get rescued and keep them bac--”

“Oh! Wait, I’m sorry--we just--ah--it seems that...right, okay! It seems Minute Maid ran into the building just a few moments ago. We’re not sure how much they’ll be able to help with the evacuation. We’re not sure if they’ll cause extra damage, either.”

Hashiro felt a headache begin to throb at the front of her head. As helpful as Minute Maid was, she wasn’t sure if the kid would understand the implications they were faced with. Inside a teetering building, too much movement and destruction could make Mt. Lady lose balance on the weight that already strained her muscles. Not only could the employees die, but Minute Maid could as well. As much of a saving grace as Minute Maid’s presence was, it was also the worst-case scenario; no one knew what the kid would do.

Suddenly, as if answering to the situation, her phone vibrated with a text message.

Not ending the call, she glanced at the screen of her phone, hoping it was good news.

Once she saw who it was from and what the very brief message was, she had to hold herself back from sagging in pure relief. The strain in her shoulders relaxed minutely against her will, and she held the phone back up to her ear.

“I just got some intel from Detective Tsukauchi. We have another hero on his way. He’ll be able to take care of the rescue efforts.”

---

An office worker and two of her colleagues stood stock still in the walkway etched between their lines of connected tables, chairs capsized, balled and crumpled papers strewn all over the ground, the electric lights above them puttering in with sparks of light every once in a while. She had them surrounded by a translucent green half-globe energy shield from her antennae that jittered and sparked with her waning energy, the woman and others inside staring in fear at the monster just a few meters away from them.

The Gray Man had shifted into a new form just a bit ago, turned into a human-like lizard. Four, padded, spindly fingers twitched on six different hands as it stayed stuck to the walls, thin, knobby knees and elbows shifting as it did. Its long tail slithered against the wall, leaving behind a bloody trail, and a human-shaped head with a static face seemed to stare in their direction. Contrary to before, its body now thrummed with a dull green energy that swirled amongst the nearly black-gray of its form like constantly shifting marble.

It made no sound, patiently waiting for her inexperience with her quirk to run her dry.

For a second it almost did, but she splayed her fingers and forced more energy from her body, antennae twitching. Sweat soaked her shoulder-length black hair and the back of her shirt, her green shoulders visible underneath the cotton, and her teeth cramped from gritting them so hard. More than anything, her completely black eyes winced almost constantly from the terrible migraine coming upon her.

“Oomori-san, d-do your best!” a woman with wings folded against her back begged, tears trailing from her owlish eyes. “A hero should be here soon! Pl-lease do your best!”

“Don’t you think she is? Quiet, Sanae-san! She’s gotta concentrate!” Uoda, a black haired man with four eyes, hissed back.
The field flickered violently for a second, and both of them stiffened. On the wall, the creature shifted, angling itself on the wall so it had to bend its neck upward to see them. If it jumped off of the wall from there, a fast enough dash would lead to a direct collision.

“I...I...I can’t...keep this up...for much longer,” Oomori gritted out, blood dripping down her jaw from her nose.

“O-Oomori-san--” Uoda started.

But before he could finish, the woman was wracked with a jarring pain, blood spurting from her nose, pattering on the ground. She didn’t even cry out, simply going limp and falling backwards, her antennae falling just as limp as the rest of her body. Just as the two caught her, calling her name in concern and fear, they heard a sharp crack and a whoosh of air. The lizard had disappeared from the wall, and they could barely see it as it headed toward them save for how it displaced the papers on the walls and floors.

Desperate, Sanae quickly pulled the other two close and spread her wings to protect them with thin bones and downy feathers, screaming in terror even as she did.

It was only because her eyes were shut so tightly that she couldn’t see the figure heading towards them from the other direction.

The two conscious workers heard the sound of crumpling paper and impact, but Sanae realized a moment later that her wings weren’t being crushed under the weight of the creature polluting their office. Uoda blinked two of his eyes open first, then the other pair opened, and he finally noticed the glowing light behind Sanae-san’s wings.

“C-Can you move?” a voice called, and Sanae finally opened her eyes, tears running down her cheeks in fresh waves. She turned then, lowering one of her wings to peek over it, the man doing so as well.

The Gray Man screeched static in fury, its body blocked by the wide canopy of a pink and white umbrella, the wielder holding the handle and middle of the umbrella’s cane to support it. The wielder was a glowing kid in a pink dress, yellow energy sparking around their savior’s legs. With a harsh shove, the Gray Man was sent flying back, but it landed on its feet against the ground and scuttered away amongst the desks.

“Mi-Mi-Mi-Minute Maid!” Sanae sobbed, clinging tightly to Oomori’s unconscious body.

“Y-Yes, we can move,” Uoda replied in her place, somewhat dazed. He kept his hand steady on the floor as the whole building rumbled and shifted, but kept his eyes on the girl in front of him.

“O-Okay,” the girl replied, eyes still searching the room, waiting for the Gray Man to make its attack, “Is there anyone else alive on this floor? Anyone you know of?”

“N...no. The Gray Man...a lot were able to run, but...when the hero arrived, it killed us to get to him.”

The pink girl—at least, they looked like a girl, he couldn’t quite tell past the white gleam on her face—sagged, shoulders dropping. For a moment, Uoda saw a very haunted look in her eyes. But then, she shook her head and stayed determined, the stars in her gaze hardening, even though he could swear there were tears budding at the corners of her eyes. Never taking her eyes off of the surroundings, she inched closer to them.

“I...I understand. T-The stairwell. Can you get to it? I-I mean, as long as I’m guarding you guys
against the Gray Man. Do you think you could get to it?"

Uoda turned away from her to look for the exit sign leading to the stairwell. It was down their hall of desks to the back of the room, a good five extra rows to the left. It looked so far away with the tunnel vision he was getting.

The building rumbled menacingly, some of the cracked windows breaking, and for a moment, he could hear the screams and sirens outside, just out there, waiting for them.

“Y-Yes, with your guard.”

“Uh, j-just as a warning,” she stuttered, “I came up through the stairs, and, uhm, Mt. Lady is doing her best to hold the top of the building to the rest of it, but it’s still unsteady. Th-heres a gap in the stairs you might have to jump over.” For a moment, her eyes flicked over to Sanae. “If you can fly, do you...could you help them get over the gap?”

It was plain and simple. Minute Maid couldn’t help them once they were through the door, but it was better than being in the office. If they got to the stairs, then they could run down and get to the other heroes. But the girl had to stay behind and fight the creature that killed their coworkers and broke the building.

Sanae couldn’t help but think, if Minute Maid was facing the creature without hesitation and she was young—so very young in person, younger than she’d expected, she looked younger than her niece—then she could do something as simple as help.

“I-I can! I can do it!” she sobbed, eyes wide as she cried.

Minute Maid’s wobbly smile brightened, “Okay! T-Then let’s—”

Suddenly, her expression became very severe, eyes narrowing as a frown colored her features. She closed the umbrella with a quick motion, and swung it to the left over Sanae’s head. Just as she did, the Gray Man came hissing over the desks, only for it to be smacked in the face. It screeched angrily as it fell back, Sanae screaming at the monster’s sudden appearance.

Minute Maid kept her gaze at the place the creature had fallen over, her entire demeanor changing from steadfast yet meek to something firmer and filled with determination. For a moment, she seemed to consider something, then her eyes narrowed with realization.

“It’ll be bad if we’re all in a group. I’ll distract it while you guys go! You need to run, now!”

Uoda nodded and moved to pick up Oomori’s body, but Sanae, in a fit of flurried panic, stood up quickly with the woman cradled in her arms, eyes wide and watery. Deciding not to think on it, he stood as well.

Before they could get going, they got caught up watching Minute Maid raise her arms over her head, near her back. The pin on her backpack opened up, and the umbrella disappeared in a flurry of golden ribbons. Instead, more came from the purple depths of the bag and curled itself around her wrists and hands. With the sudden lowering of her fists into a defensive stance, the ribbons solidified into pink gloves with a design on it they could only sort of see, something like a rabbit.

The Gray Man ended up appearing on the same side Minute Maid was facing, and, rearing back as it approached her, she gave it a hard punch to the face.

“Go!”
That jumpstarted Sanae into action again, the winged woman whining with fear as she hightailed it down the rest of the hall of desks in her low heels. Uoda followed closely behind, making sure Sanae knew where she was going.

As they ran, trying not to trip themselves up on the computers and papers and overturned chairs around them, they could hear the desks upending, crashing against each other in a cacophony of metal and plastic. Streams of irate static curled through the air, but it would sometimes be interrupted by the sounds of impact, Minute Maid’s covered fists smacking against non-flesh. Uoda hazarded a glance back, just to see what was happening.

He watched as the Gray Man forced its way across the desks to get to them, knocking over computers and coffee, cracking the tables beneath its weight, but Minute Maid scrambled after them, body sparking with whatever strange energy she’d managed to utilize. Before it could get too close, she grasped its tail as firmly as she could with the gloves on. Its tail was strong though, and instead it rose the appendage and swung the girl towards one of the walls. Her grip was just strong enough to not slip immediately, and he turned away, deciding it was best to worry about himself first.

The exit sign was not glowing any longer, but the door was still a saving grace. Sanae made it first, her legs and wings shivering as she held Oomori close to her chest.

“Hurry hurry hurry! O-Open the door! Hurry!”

Uoda scurried over, almost tripping on someone’s arm—don’t think about it don’t think about it—and he quickly pushed on the stairwell’s long handle to press it open. Immediately, he started noting the danger that Minute Maid had talked about before.

The lights inside were off, completely dark save for the stream of light filtering in through the crack in the walls a floor down. The concrete of their escape route was cracked, severely damaged, and he could hear pieces crumbling and falling below.

For a moment, both he and Sanae couldn’t bring themselves to move forward. He shuddered at the destruction before him, then turned to Sanae, who wept openly while holding Oomori.

Then, in the midst of weeping, she sniffled, breathing in heavily, then pushed herself past Uoda to get through the door. He reached for her shoulder, eyes wide.

“W-Wait, Sanae—”

He was cut off by a screech behind him, and he found himself turning around despite himself.

The Gray Man was running straight towards him, scurrying along the ground on all six of its limbs, its tail whipping wildly behind it. He heard Sanae scream behind him, but his legs had locked up. He couldn’t move, despite his will to do so. He was stuck by his own fear.

Before it could reach him though, he watched as Minute Maid twirled in the air behind before sticking her leg out. The heel of her foot slammed into its back like a jackhammer, pinning it to the floor, and it screeched loudly, yellow energy starting to bleed into its form.

But Minute Maid didn’t stop there. Still on its back, she looked up at him with wide eyes, and, without words, rushed toward him. He opened his mouth to cry out, but instead found himself being pushed through the door. He almost stumbled on himself, but kept his balance on the other side.

He couldn’t bring words to his lips, but the scared, contrite look on his face must have said enough. Minute Maid’s determined look was polluted by apology, smile wavering and nervous.
“I-I’m sorry.”

Then, she took a hold of the handle on the door and pulled it shut, just as the Gray Man got up behind her, plunging them into near darkness.

---

I’m a terrible hero.

Izuku thunked his head against the door he’d shut, the man’s expression numbing his veins as he breathed heavily against the metal.

I’m the worst hero they could’ve gotten.

He heard a loud hiss behind him, and slowly turned around, hands still pulling the door shut, just in case the man or woman tried to get back in.

I didn’t get here on time to save everyone, and I showed fear in front of them.

The Gray Man was up on all six hands, grumbling and hissing in static tones he couldn’t understand. Izuku kept his hands on the handle, glaring at the creature as it seemed to gage its odds.

I shoved someone and I stuttered and I cried in front of them like a little kid.

Izuku kept glaring, even as he grew more fearful of the Gray Man before him, the green under its skin thrumming with a sudden boost of energy. He could see its flesh ripple, and it took on a shape more geometric, like its skin had solidified into square-shaped scales. Even the ends of its spindly fingers became more box-like. His fist still throbbed with pain from when he punched it.

Did I tell them the right way to escape? Or did I just kill them like their coworkers?

Its back and tail took on square shaped spines, like razors that gleamed in the sparkling light of the malfunctioning bulbs above them. The tip of its tail was covered with them on four sides—top, bottom, and the two sides. With its new skin texture, he could understand how the monster had gotten the blood on its tail. The blood that made him slip off before. The blood still staining the palms of his gloves.

Why can’t I do anything right?

It screamed at him, and he finally let go of the door. Rather than getting into a defensive stance, he ran at the creature, screaming back as hot tears started streaming from the corners of his eyes.

...I’m the worst.

Then, he shut his thoughts off as the Gray Man twirled around, swinging the sharp tail at him like deadly whip. He dropped to the ground, avoiding the tail as he slid forward feet first. Before he could land a hit on it, it jumped away, its body thumping against the floor in a heavy landing right after the entire building shook with its loosening balance.

It surged forward before he could stand all the way back up, but Izuku rolled himself under one of the desks closest to him, pushing the chair aside. It was under there, he noticed the body of one of the employees of the company on that floor. He was laying in the small walkway between the row of desks he was under and the next, his arm laying out in the middle of the floor along the back of the desks. His body didn’t move, blood pooled under his torso.
He’d already shut away his ability to think too much, but it left a solid ball in his chest that would surely drop the instant he had the chance. Right then, he was getting that weird, floating feeling he sometimes got, like he wasn’t quite inside of himself, like he was turning into a cloud of consciousness right outside of his skin. He was present enough though, to realize the scraping sound he heard above the desk he was under could be bad.

He rolled from under it, near the dead man’s shoes, and the Gray Man’s tail stabbed through the desk, right where his torso had been. Izuku kept rolling, even if he had to shove chairs and fallen computers out of the way. The Gray Man climbed above the desks, swiping at him furiously, hissing and screeching with slicing fingers.

Izuku stopped before he could roll under the next desk, turning his body vertical to them instead of horizontal like he had been, angling his legs up towards his chest. The Gray Man, too caught up on moving, stretched itself between two rows of desks, just as Izuku had hoped. With as much force as he could muster from his position, he kicked upwards onto its stomach, and distantly felt irritation at the minor bleedthrough of yellow energy into its reinforced skin. It yowled as much as it could with its only voice being static, scrambling to get its stomach away from him.

Quickly he kicked again, and an even smaller bleedthrough struck into its skin, barely giving him any advantage, before its stomach was out of his reach.

He quickly turned himself horizontal again, hoping to try doing the process again, but the Gray Man ripped that possibility away from him, grabbing the desk he was rolling under and throwing it behind itself, hissing with fury. With that possibility gone, he rolled onto his hands and knees before running forward, trying to distance himself from the creature. The building rumbled again, and Izuku stumbled with the loss of balance. With his disadvantage though, it swung its tail at him again, this time catching him against the back as it flung him at the wall.

Pain lanced through his back first, then through the front of his body as he was slammed into the wall. He couldn’t feel himself bleed or anything of the like, but he could feel the sharp, grounding cut from the razor’s injury. The back of his dress was cut through, but he realized it was probably what kept him from being sliced in half with the force he’d been hit with. As long as it didn’t hit the same spot again, he’d probably be fine.

He would live.

So he turned from the wall to the destroyed, imbalanced room, fists up as the Gray Man screeched again and lunged at him.

---

Uoda clenched his phone with relief as the darkness of the stairwell gave way to the dusty light filtering from the first floor entryway, somehow much more effective than his phone’s flashlight had been. Sanae started crying a fresh wave of tears upon stumbling from the doorway, rushing to get Oomori to the flashing lights of the medical truck outside. As they passed Kamui Woods, they could hear him announce their presence to the heroes behind him, and quickly found themselves being escorted away from the crumbling building by other heroes that protected them on their way to the gathering of ambulances.

“Ma’am! Can you understand what I’m saying?” a paramedic asked Sanae, making her shudder out of her teary-eyed daze.

“Y-Yes! I—Oomori-san! Oomori-san!” she began to sob, trying to give her injured, unconscious friend to the people who could help her most.
“We were being protected by Oomori...ah, Oomori Kanna. We’re coworkers,” Uoda answered a paramedic as the cut on his hand was inspected. “In the office, she used her quirk as much as she could to protect us from the Gray Man. She couldn’t get everyone.”

“I--” Sanae choked on a sob as a medic with a healing quirk began to check her over, “I strained my wings, w-we almost fell, the stairs, I carried them, but Oomori-san! Will she--will she be okay? Is she okay?!?”

“Minute Maid helped us off our floor. She, uh, closed us out after we got to the stairwell. There was no other way to go but down… But I don’t know if we could’ve gotten out any other way. I wasn’t going to jump out a window.”

“She’s so young, why isn’t anyone else inside?” Sanae choked. “Where is everyone else? She’s still inside!”

“We were on the ninth floor. Our building, uhm, skips the fourth and sixth floors, so maybe I’m wrong. I think…” Uoda’s voice started to become a bit airy, like he was losing the grasp on himself. “I think my boss is dead.”

“Someone save Oomori-san! Someone get inside! S-Someone...someone get that little girl out of there!”

Before the two of them could say anything else to the people caring for them, they felt a gust of air pass over them from someone jumping over their group. Sanae and Uoda looked up after the figure, and almost immediately recognized the golden yellow of the world’s greatest hero, body clad in red, white, and blue. Uoda felt himself sag completely as he succumbed to his shock, feeling safe enough to do so, and Sanae finally felt herself cry in genuine relief. Around them, the spectating crowds began to cheer loudly, like the voices of angels rose up and clouded the airways with unadulterated passion.

It would be okay. Everything would be all right.

---

The loud yelling from outside filtered in through the broken windows, but Izuku wasn’t sure why. He was too busy trying to stay on his feet.

He didn’t realize he could still bleed, but blood dripped down and off the skin of his uncovered forearms, where he’d been nicked several times by grasping, sharp fingers. Even on his covered body, he could feel blood leave his skin from thin gashes where he should’ve been sliced into. Bruises had formed faster than they could be healed, and his body ached from being hit against the walls, the floors, the ceilings.

The room had been utterly destroyed. There were barely any desks left standing after the Gray Man saw fit to get rid of them, using them as weapons against its enemy. Keyboard keys were strewn across the ground amongst reports, destroyed chairs, and dead bodies. There weren’t as many as Izuku had thought, but there were too many for him to be back in his body again.

If he slid back into his skin, he’d probably puke, so he stayed out, right above his head, watching as his body moved, shifting with the shaking building, but kept his defensive stance as he faced the Gray Man on the other side of the room.

It was littered with spots of sparking yellow from the times he’d managed to hit it, its hardened body not completely impenetrable. Its stomach was covered with it, and its arms and legs also had yellow
bleeding into it, like spots of a virus flowing through nonexistent veins. Its back was completely free
of such pollution, the razors doing their job at keeping him away. The green magic within it
thrummed dangerously.

You’re running out of time. The building’s not going to last too much longer.

Izuku could hear himself breathe. His eyesight wavered slightly, but he didn’t stagger.

There’s only so much longer I can hold back your healing. You’re going to get tired. You need to
hurry.

He nodded at the voice’s assertion, but he didn’t have a plan. He needed something. Anything.

But the Gray Man refused to let him think too long. With a streaming hiss, it charged him again. He
managed to dodge out of the way, but again, its tail swung at him. He turned to his side, where more
of the cloth was still intact, and felt the razors on its tail cut into his skin, but not deep enough to
cause any extra damage. He barely managed to keep himself from crying out as he was thrown back.

He fell amongst a pile of rubble--a collected pile of computer screens and discarded tables. The metal
and plastic bit into his back uncomfortably, teasing against bruises and other injuries spread on his
body.

The building rumbled again, tilting to the left, and stayed tilted, unable to be set back up again. He
really was running out of time.

Breathing heavily, he tried to get back up so he wouldn’t be prone, but as he did, he noticed
something gleam in the pile he laid on. When he realized what it was, he was thankful he hadn’t
fallen on it, but even moreso thankful he’d noticed it. Now he had something he could do.

Instead of trying to move, he laid back down and watched the Gray Man with a tired, but determined
gaze. The creature hissed against the wall it had thrown itself onto when it charged him, and it
crawled onto it, leaving little cuts in the plaster from its sharp grasp. It turned its body towards him,
never taking its static gaze off of him.

Izuku stayed lying there, watching.

Waiting.

Then it jumped at him right off of the wall, screeching loudly with its arms outstretched.

Midway between the wall it jumped off of and the pile Izuku supported himself on, it switched the
razors from on its back to on its stomach, startling the boy it was attacking.

With the sudden change, Izuku decided not to wait on his plan any longer, and desperately reached
for the object he’d found gleaming in the pile. With a great amount of force, he pulled it from the pile
and stuck it out in front of himself.

It was the broken leg of one of the tables, the metal cut jagged and sliced into by the Gray Man itself.

The sharp end of the metal leg bypassed the razors it had summoned onto its chest and pierced it
right where a heart would’ve been if it had one, the razors just barely grazing the front of Izuku’s
body. Izuku could feel the skin give, softer there than the rest of its body from the fatigue of using the
magic so much, and the Gray Man cried out in indignation--then with pain as Izuku sent his magic
through the jagged metal in sharp yellow sparks.
The metal transformed just slightly, taking on a pink hue, and finally, like a lightning strike, Izuku’s yellow magic struck into its body, lichtenberg figures trailing from its stomach to its back.

The Gray Man screamed again, but the yellow magic didn’t stop sparking through the creature’s body, and the noise cut off suddenly with the screen of its static face turning yellow. Then, a moment later, the screen cut off, and the thrumming green energy inside of it stopped beating.

Izuku finally felt his fingers again, his consciousness no longer quite floating above his head, now trying to settle back into his skin. The Gray Man above him began to shatter, and the soot of its body started crumbling down onto him, but he kept laying there, trying to catch his breath. With the process of his resettling consciousness, he started to feel even more the injuries inflicted on his body. His hands were riddled with painful cuts only a hair deeper than paper ones, his gloves a saving grace just as his dress had been, even if his own blood was starting to stain it. He felt like he was a bruise himself, and he could’ve sworn he’d hit his head at some point a bit too hard.

Still, he was alive.

And with the next jolted teetering of the building, out of time.

Tired but determined, he pushed himself up, just as the Gray Man finished breaking down, two crystals, one deep gray-green, the other a pale gray, floating just a bit above the air. He staggered onto his feet as small black hands reached out from the watch and grasped the crystals, quickly pulling them in.

Izuku felt his body thrum with a boost in energy, but with that same boost came a droopy-eyed tiredness. His body was starting to heal, and he...probably didn’t have enough energy to stay conscious.

The building tilted enough in the next rumble that the few things standing up were starting to drift towards the broken windows, including Izuku’s own body. He tried, though, to keep his balance and inspect his odds. Keeping his fatigued body as upright as he could, he glanced back at the stairwell he’d entered through.

*No...not a chance. The stairs must be too broken by now.*

He glanced at the window he was being progressively forced towards from the breaking building.

*The heroes are waiting outside. There’s no guarantee Kamui Woods is still helping catch employees anyway. Mt. Lady might just be waiting for the people outside to back up before she drops it.*

There was no way to take an elevator. He wasn’t sure he had enough energy to break a wall. He was loosing track of which was was up as the building tilted further. He was woozy, and his body thrummed with the warm energy of healing that the Handyman couldn’t keep from him any longer.

This time, when the building jostled, Izuku did lose his footing. The building tilted dangerously, so much so that Izuku could see the beginnings of the concrete ground, could just barely see the crowds outside being pushed back.

The building was going to fall. Mt. Lady couldn’t hold it up much longer.

He had to...had to…

He didn’t know what to do.

He stayed on the ground, clinging to the floor as the building felt like it was tilting further the more
the giantess lost her grip, and more than anything, he just wanted to cry. He was so tired, and he didn’t know what to do. He didn’t know what to do!

...I’ve made a mistake.

Izuku felt panic start to build in his chest. Hot tears started streaming down his cut cheeks, making them sting.

“N-No, I, I can...I can think of something. I-I can do it. I just…” he huffed, trying to crawl to get as far away from the cracked windows on the other end of the room as possible. “I just need--need to think. I can do it.”

What? No, it’s not about you. Well, it is about you, but not about choosing you.

“I c-can do it. I just--I just need to break a wall, right? I just need to escape, if I could just...just…”

I don’t think I could’ve chosen a better guy to give access to their power. But, the way I’ve let you continue on like this is my fault completely.

“N-No, it’s okay! It’s okay!” he cried, pulling himself further up. He choked on his own breath as one of the bodies of the people he failed to save started to inch past him, sliding on their own blood. “I-I...I failed this time, but I can--"

You’ve never failed. You did what you could. But now, you need an adult.

Suddenly, against his will, his magic coursed through him, heating his cells, but not to strengthen him. Instead, his body began to glow brighter than he’d ever remembered it before, so much so that he had to squint at his own body. The light from his body bounced off of whatever was left in the room, shrouding the room in yellow.

He didn’t dare tell Handyman to stop. They were probably disappointed in him enough, he didn’t need to give them any more of a reason to be.

Then the building tilted again, and several things lost their grip on the ground, sliding its way out of the windows and onto the ground below. Izuku managed to stay floored, only sliding a bit, but the remaining desks and chairs in the room were falling past him, breaking the cracked windows with the force of their weight.

Izuku then heard an ominous creak, rumble, and slide in front of him. He opened his eyes to see what it was, keeping his body as close to the ground as possible.

The pile of broken objects that had saved him before were now sliding down. If it hit him, he’d surely whatever grip he’d managed and fall out the window becoming progressively closer to being below him.

But he didn’t have the energy to move anymore. He was too tired to try to dodge it, and even if he did try, there was no guarantee he wouldn’t slip and fall anyway. Maybe if he used his umbrella...but he didn’t know if it would still work well with stuff falling on top of it.

He was at a stalemate, one quickly becoming a checkmate.

He...really didn’t want to die again. But just like the first time, there wasn’t much he could do about it. Despite his power, he was still so, so weak.

At the next jolt, the pile completely detached from the grip it had on the ground, sliding and falling
towards him. He cried out, terrified of death, and closed his eyes as he waited for the pile to carry him with it out the window.

But then a thump sounded beside him, and he heard the pile be stopped by something. The magic in his body also calmed, and he no longer felt the heat of glowing like a beacon.

“‘You will be alright, Minute Maid!’”

Izuku’s eyes snapped open, gasping. He knew that voice anywhere. He’d recognize it even if he one day went deaf.

“Why is that?”

The rubble before him was held back by the strongest arm in Japan. Then it was shoved to the side and allowed to let gravity take it to the broken windows and out onto the concrete. He watched as that hand dug its fingers into the tilting ground—of course, why hadn’t he thought of that, he could’ve maybe done that—but found himself being picked up by his backpack. Izuku managed a squeak as he was adjusted until an arm was wrapped securely around his waist. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he looked up into the smile that kept him living.

All Might smiled back down at him, teeth gleaming in the hero’s self-made aura, one stronger than Izuku could ever imagine his own to be.

“Because I am here!”

He tried to respond with the hero’s name, but instead, could only choke out a sob. All Might didn’t seem disturbed by this, rather, his smile became softer around the edges.

“Well, I believe we’ve overstayed our welcome. I am going to get us out of here. Are you ready?”

Izuku nodded and wordlessly let himself be adjusted further. He being cradled into All Might’s left arm, his torso against his bicep, knees bent over his forearm. Trying to not cry too hard in relief, he wrapped his arms around the hero’s neck and clung on. He couldn’t help the flinch that ran through him at the next rumble, one he felt even through the steady body he held onto.

“It’ll be alright. You are safe now.”

He kept his eyes closed against the man’s chest, not nodding out of fear of trailing snot against the man’s uniform.

“Alright, I am ready!” he called to someone, not loud enough to be a yell, but enough to be heard by someone.

Suddenly, the building rumbled, creaked, tilted, and didn’t stop tilting, and Izuku realized Mt. Lady must’ve let go. He couldn’t help the fearful cry that puttered out between his lips, and at the same time, he felt himself and All Might leave the ground. He clung tighter, hoping, praying, wishing he’d still be alive by the end of it all.

“San Francisco Smash!”

The wind pressure he felt released was amazing, and it wasn’t even blowing down towards him. He heard something break apart above, and something like dust started landing on his hair and skin. The darkness against his closed eyes became a bit brighter, and his entire body was free of gravity, only grounded by the arm holding him close.
The yelling from before, Izuku realized, had been cheering. The citizens were cheering because the greatest hero had arrived to give them all hope.

Everyone was safe.

They’d be okay.

*He’d be okay.*

He wasn’t going to die again today.

Those words followed him steadily into unconsciousness.

---

The crowds outside watched as Mt. Lady struggled with all her strength to keep a hold on the building. Watched as All Might made quick work to save every single living person still inside, carrying them out in bunches of 10s and 15s. Watched as, near the end of the rescue, a bright yellow light started to shine from the seventh floor. As soon as the others were out, All Might had rushed into that floor, and the glow lessened.

When Mt. Lady let go of the building and began to shrink, Kamui Woods quickly pulling her out of the danger zone onto the roof of another building, the crowd had gasped in horror. Suddenly, the upper half of the building was engulfed with a tearing wind, and the concrete holding it together, unable to withstand such pressure, started to disintegrate. First, big chunks of concrete broke off, but the slicing wind reduced it to dust in a matter of moments. It was broken down until it was smaller chunks of building and soot, and what would’ve been a catastrophic crash was reduced to a small shower of fist-sized meteors near the building that had already been evacuated.

After the huge blow, the wind dissipated into the air, stirring the clouds like a spoon before its full departure.

Once the dust settled, the crowds looked up at the building, now reduced to a mere six stories from the eleven it was before. They stared up with wide eyes as they watched the figure of All Might’s body approach one of the edges of the cut-off building, holding a glowing kid in one arm.

For a moment, they though that her glow was getting brighter, but then they realized that it was just that the sky was getting darker.

One drop of rain fell. Then another. Then a few more. Then it was raining lightly, the clouds rolling with thunder.

They all stared in shock for a bit longer, but a murmur started up among them.

“No way, did All Might just...destroy five stories of concrete building?”

“It’s raining...it was supposed to be sunny today.”

“Did that punch change the weather?”

“Did All Might just change the weather?!”

“Holy shit!”

The murmurs evolved into loud cheering once again, their praises rising up to the heroes on the rooftops. Even though the rain was starting to fall harder, it was harder than ever for the police and
heroes below to get them to disperse, the citizens too hyped up on the sheer, raw power they witnessed.

Above them, All Might rose a fist in victory for their sakes, though he did not feel as victorious as he wished he could.

But with Minute Maid, bruised, cut up, and injured in his arm, splattered with his own blood, he couldn’t help but feel as though he could’ve done more. If what Tsukauchi said was true, then the boy was 14--now 15--and shouldn’t have had to fight so hard at all. The boy in his arm should’ve had a whole year of training at a hero school before being involved in hardcore heroics at all, but he’d gotten involved in a situation so dire he could’ve very well died.

Before he could address the boy though, he felt the arms around his neck drop, one falling into the boy’s lap, the other hanging from his hold. When he looked down, he realized the boy had fallen unconscious, eyes closed against white cheeks, breathing softly from sleeping.

*He must have exhausted himself,* All Might thought.

Looking closely though, he realized the boy wasn’t just sleeping. The cuts on the boy’s cheeks were actually starting to heal, the cells sparking just barely as they closed--the lighter cuts healing faster than the deeper ones.

‘Magic’, huh?

All Might sighed. He checked over to the roof that Mt. Lady and Kamui Woods had landed on, watching as the two heroes made their way down, medics rushing forward to check on them as they were clearly fatigued from their efforts. Kamui’s arms looked thin from overuse, and Mt. Lady was nearing unconsciousness herself.

Then, with a slight huff, he jumped off of the building to land down below, avoiding the piles of trash there.

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In the midst of the chaos, a city or two away, Fraction and Xtra were being interviewed by the media as the police forced a six-foot Gray Man with legs like a bird save for the lack of feet and balls at its wrists instead of hands into the back of a police car, the creature secured with heavy armaments. Fans of the two heroes cheered loudly, so much so that the reporter had to cover one of her sensitive ears to interview the heroes waving back at them with big smiles on their faces.

“I’m here with two newer heroes, Fraction and Xtra, graduates of Ketsubutsu Academy High School, who recently managed to capture a Gray Man in Hosu! It had given them quite a run for their money, but not only had they managed to prevent casualties and large injuries, they also were able to keep damage to a minimum! How did you two manage something that many pro heroes are currently struggling to do?” The reporter asked, holding a mike to Fraction’s face.

He smiled warmly, “It’s all about good team work, and I like to think working together as teens has helped us develop a good system.”

Xtra leaned in, grinning, “That isn’t to say other heroes aren’t doing their best! To be honest, I think we got it pretty easy this time around. It certainly helps the more citizens help us help them! Remember guys, stay back from the Gray Men during battles, alright? The real heroes here are you guys!”

“Haha! Don’t sell yourself short, Xtra! You were great out there,” Fraction cheered, patting her back.
The reporter nodded at them with a smile, mouthing her thanks before she went back to reporting, turning to the camera. Fraction and Xtra went back to waving at the cameras, staying close to each other.

“Hey, when should we contact the investigators and tell them that it didn’t really attack all that much? It was kinda weak, too...” Xtra muttered under her breath, still smiling.

“Eh, we can shoot them somethin’ later. Heard they’re busy with some building in Musutafu.”

“Oh, word? Lemme check.” She reached down into one of the pockets on the utility belts tied around her waist, pulling out a phone. She searched the web for a moment as she looked into the situation, thumb shifting as she scrolled. “Yeah, a Gray Man was there, too. Honestly, I think we’ve been facing more Gray Men recently than actual villai--” She cut herself off, surprised. “...Oh.”

“What?” He turned away from the pictures the crowd was trying to take of him.

“All Might was there, too.” She looked up from the screen then, eyes wide behind her mask. “So was Minute Maid. I...think he caught her.”

Fraction’s jaw dropped, shocked, hand pausing mid-wave at the crowd. Then he gave Xtra a grin, a wide one that showed all his teeth.

“You know which station they’re going to? I’ve gotta see this.”

Further behind them, the Gray Man’s head remained bowed as police closed the back of the new, reinforced armored car, metal doors and bars sturdy, but with more holes for insulation so moisture wouldn’t build up. The restraints around the creature were heavy and its body drooped visibly from it, but it managed to be upright enough to not knock itself against the other side of the car. It stayed mostly still. Just minutely though, it turned in the direction of Fraction’s voice, but it did nothing as the doors closed.

Chapter End Notes

...You feel it, too, don't you...
Oh hi. Yeah, I got buried under real life work stuff, so it's unfortunately been a month, but here's the next chapter!

I've gotten a lot of fan art, but I can't link it up here at the moment. You won't be seeing a beginning chapter note on the next chapter or two, by the way, but I'll be sure to link it up soon.

Anyway, thank you for your patience and support over this long month! You guys have no idea how much I appreciate it.

Feel free to talk to me @ studiostatic.tumblr.com for cool chats and mildly inaccurate fic update alerts.

Anyway. Onward.

Things are gonna get a bit complicated, unfortunately.

Izuku woke up slowly. First, he felt the rough sheets and thin bedding of whatever he was laying on. Then, the icy chill of the overactive air conditioner. Then the cool metal below his bedding. He blinked his eyes open slowly, and found he wasn’t simply on a bed.

It was made of metal, bolted to the side of the gray, foreboding wall. That told him exactly where he was even before he looked toward his feet and saw the steel bars of the jail cell.

He wanted to throw up.

His hazy memories decided to punch in the fact that his previous location had been in the arms of his favorite hero, cradled like a child. But he couldn’t blame him. Would never be able to blame the hero for anything. All Might was just doing his job, and taking in vigilantes just happened to be a part of it, especially when the vigilante was doing as bad of a job as he had been--comparatively. The Crawler and his team were much more effective and efficient. It was only fair he’d be taken in.

Slowly, he turned onto his side and hoped desperately that the guard standing outside would think he was still asleep, but even as he turned, he briefly saw the cat-headed man’s ears twitch before he started to turn his way. Izuku shut his eyes and curled up further, trying really hard to suddenly turn
“Midoriya-san,” the guard called. Izuku heard the bars click and shift with the opening motion, but he elected to stay put and stare at the inside of his eyelids. “Midoriya-san, please come with me.”

He almost wanted to shake his head, but he wasn’t exactly sure how well that would go over with the police.

So, wordlessly, he took a breathed in shakily and sat up, still facing away from the door and the officer. He turned back towards them with his eyes on his feet, and stood, leaving the sheet in a messy pile on the increasingly uncomfortable bed. He’d probably have to get used to such a bed, he realized.

Eyes kept down in complete submission, he followed the officer’s direction to exit the cell and follow him.

The officer stayed to his side, leading him and watching him at the same time. He had no idea what kind of quirk the man had--other than the obvious cat features--but he wasn’t about to try anything. He was arrested—that was the end point for him. Everything else would be dictated for him from then on, and he had to get ready for such a future.

Even so, he found himself rather confounded. Even outside of the cell, he didn’t feel the chilled metal of cuffs around his wrists, or any pressing anger or negativity from the officer directing him—not that he had a quirk to be able to tell, but he took at least a little bit of pride in his ability to read faces...given, a cat face was harder to read. As submissive as he was trying to be, he couldn’t quell his curiosity.

“Aren’t I supposed to be in handcuffs?” he muttered carefully, staring at the gleaming linoleum flooring below him as he walked, listening intently for the man’s response.

“You would be if you were under arrest.”

“...Eh?”

The officer sighed—tired, low, but not irritated—and replied. “You aren’t under arrest, Midoriya-san. Rather, you’re just here for questioning.”

That didn’t make sense to him at all, and his nose scrunched in his confusion. He was a vigilante. He had unlawfully used his abilities to do the act of heroes, and he hadn’t even done so very well. How was he not being arrested? What was it? Was it because he was a minor, or because of how he faced the Gray Men? As bad as he was at his job, he was the only known person able to get rid of them. Maybe they were trying to cut a deal with him somehow? But how would that work? He wasn’t sure if that was possible, considering the circumstan--

“I get the feeling you do that a lot,” the officer laughed.

Izuku, forgetting himself, looked up at the man, recognizing the clear amusement on his face, accent by forward-facing ears, mild pupils, and a Cheshire grin. He was about to ask the man what he meant, but then Izuku realized his mouth was already open. He felt his face flush red and hot, and resisted the need to cover his face by simply looking down at the floor again, keeping it there as he fought to crush his curiosity under his feet.

Once the linoleum tiles turned into low-budget, easily cleanable carpet, it didn’t take them too much longer to reach the interrogation room. The officer--Tamakawa, his nametag said--opened the door for him, and he peeked inside before entering.
The room was nearly empty. There were cameras in the corners of the cool blue, tiled room, a heavily bolted-down table in the middle, and two metal chairs, one on each long side. There was a mirror behind one of them—a one-way one, obviously, he’d seen enough police shows to know that—so he took his seat on the other side, adjusting to the chill of the metal with a startled hiss.

“They’ll be with you shortly,” Tamakawa said, then he turned around and closed the door behind him, leaving him alone with the echo of the clock’s ticking, and the dim reverberations of his metal chair.

Izuku stared at the door for a bit, before glancing at the mirror. They were probably already there. It felt weird, he decided, to know he was being watched but not being able to watch back. Well, there was Handyman, but that was something completely different. He’d gotten used to their constant, comforting gaze.

Just to check, he looked at the watch, and surely enough, the eye inside stared back at him, Handyman’s many-pupiled eye flitting around his face, as if checking for injuries.

Speaking of which, for someone who’d gotten his ass beaten into the walls, he didn’t feel very achy. He patted the cheek the Gray Man had cut into before, and felt the phantom of slightly uneven skin, like it was already completely healed over, and just needed to adjust to the rest of his face. He checked his arms, too, and found the same effect, though this time he was just barely able to see it.

The cuts on his arms had completely scarred over already, leaving light lines in his skin, almost invisible had he not known where to look.

Ah, right, he’d gone to sleep. Handyman had said his magic worked faster when he was unconscious. Maybe waking up was what made it scar or something. He’d have to ask the...what were they, a spirit? A guardian? Voice from Beyond only described so much.

Before he could follow that train of thought too much longer, the door opened again. He looked up to see who it was, and immediately tried to sink further into his chair, the chill of the room feeling a little bit colder.

It was time, then. This time, he’d tell the truth.

---

Tsukauchi smiled as he entered the room, and noted the sharp, instantaneous nervousness that stabbed through the boy on the other side of the table. His lips were drawn tightly, body hunched over where he’d be hugging his backpack, and eyes quickly fixed onto the table rather than on his body. Right, sufficiently cowed then.

“I take it you’re doing well, Midoriya-san,” he greeted.

“I’m...s-so sorry,” the boy whispered back, eyes wide as he stared at the table like he hoped it would eat him.

“While I would like to tell you that it’s alright, I’m afraid it’s not. It is a crime of perjury to lie to a policeman when you’ve sworn to be in accordance to law. Not to mention the crime of vigilantism and the connected property damage.” He paused, noting how the boy had started to cry, but refused to look anything other than accepting. Midoriya had been at least somewhat prepared then.

Tsukauchi took his seat. “But, that’s not what I’m here to talk about, not yet. After all, while you are being detained, you are not yet under arrest, considering the circumstances of your rather special situation. While legal action will be taken, we first need to understand what’s going on as much as
possible. Only then can we truly weigh your options.”

Midoriya spared him a glance, surprised.

Tsukauchi gave him a more genuine smile, one softer at the corners. “That’s where I was hoping
you’d be able to fill us in.”

“Oh...uhm...” the boy sniffled, looking off to the side as tears still trailed down his cheeks,
“...Okay.”

“So, you’re going to tell the truth this time?”

Midoriya gave him a full headed nod, trying his best to show how earnest he was. Tsukauchi didn’t
doubt him.

“Alright, good! So, I’m going to ask you a few questions regarding your abilities, your current
situation in regards to the Gray Men, and any particular data you have that would be useful in their extermination. Are you ready?”

“Yessir…”

“Great,” he said, pulling out a notepad and opening the folder he’d brought with him, full of notes with photos as well as information both speculated and confirmed. “Now, first and foremost, please repeat your name, age, and quirk status to me.”

The boy played with the hem of his sweaty t-shirt. “M-Midoriya Izuku, fourte--fifteen years old...uhm, q-quirkless.”

“Oh right, your birthday was a few days ago, wasn’t it?” Tsukauchi brightened. “Happy Belated Birthday.”

Midoriya looked at him then, eyes wide and a little dazed, like he thought he was dreaming. Then the boy flushed red, his head bowing down though his eyes stayed on his face. “Uhm...thank you.”

“Alright, Midoriya-san, can you tell me what powers you have?”

The boy looked down again, hand still on the hem of his shirt. “I...it’s called...m-magic.”

Tsukauchi shifted, pulling over the notes he’d taken during Yayoi-san’s presentation. “Right, magic. What are the qualities of ‘magic’?”

“Eh? Ah! Uh...I-I can...uhm...a-accelerated healing and physical performance. Uhm, specialized weapon usage. Full and partial transformations that accelerate both of the former physical improvements, protective clothing included. A m-magic sense that lets me gage where a magical being might be, and...uhm...I don’t know the term for it, but...I don’t...need...to breathe?”

Tsukauchi’s notes paused. “Elaborate, please?”

The boy had started sweating, “I...I, uhm...don’t actually need to eat or breathe. M-My body’s...” He winced, like the next words hurt. “C-completely regulated by my magic. A-All I need is to sleep sometimes.”

“When transformed?”

“In...I-In general.”
“So, right now, if you had the desire to, you could stop breathing?”

Midoriya nibbled at his lip, his expression pinched. “Uhm...y-yes, but...i-it’s...uncomfortable. I...I like breathing.”

“...Huh.”

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In the observation room, Yagi Toshinori in his deflated, skeletal form, Yayoi Gin, Centipeder, and Manual watched the proceedings. Manual’s eyes widened considerably at the confession, whistling under his breath.

“No need to eat or breathe? Sounds almost too good to be true?”

Centipeder nodded in agreement with him, taking his own notes to take them back to Sir Nighteye.

“But it isn’t,” Yayoi interceded, sharp eyes open just slightly as she held a hand to her chin, “It’s...rather uncommon, though. A magical girl is usually only partially regulated by magic, and that only occurs through transformation. For his whole body to be completely regulated by magic to such a degree of only needing sleep...”

Yagi hummed under his breath, sharp blue eyes settled solidly on the child in the other room.

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“What of your healing factor?” Tsukauchi asked, pen noting down information quickly.

“U-hmm, i-if I g-get injured, I’ll, uhm, i-it heals slowly or quickly s-sometimes. I-I can’t rea-ally determine the healing speed, s-so it j-just kind of d-depends on how s-severe the injury is.”

“As far as speed, how fast would you say is quickly or slowly?”

“S-Slowly is, like...uhm...r-regular healing speeds f-for humans. Quickly c-can be from four to five seconds. O-Only on smaller injuries, though. B-Bigger ones take longer.”

Tsukauchi hummed. “Do the Gray Men have a similar healing factor?”

Midoriya shook his head. “N-No sir. O-Or...maybe?” He tilted his head then. “I-I’ve never actually been in an encounter wh-where I didn’t finish off the Gray Man I f-fought. S-So as far as studying their h-healing abilities, I-I’m not sure if it’s possible or not. I-If their powers allow them to steal from o-others, then I imagine it m-might be possible for a Gray Man to steal s-someone’s health instead of some part of their q-quirk? It’s not something I’ve p-personally encountered, and Gray Men are st-still a bit of a str-strange area to evaluate and study, especially since they’re so h-hostile all of the time, or at least all of th-the ones I’ve met so far are, b-but I wonder if there’s ever a case in which a G-Gray Man could be docile since I-I do know they can be surprisingly subtle, they’re a-actually quite a bit smarter than s-some would think, considering how brutish they can act--”

The boy cut himself off abruptly, lips pressing shut. He sat like that for a second as his face turned red, then he bowed his head, embarrassment coming off of his body in waves.

“I’m...I’m sorry.”

“No, Midoriya-san. It’s okay, and it’s rather informative.” Informative was putting it lightly. The boy seemed to be studying his own powers as well as his opponents. At least he knew how the boy
probably dodged those heroes for the past few months. “Did you come up with this information by yourself?”

The boy smiled, a wavering thing that barely reached his eyes. “Y-Yes. I’ve, uhm...had a lot of free time, s-so I...studied.”

Tsukauchi nodded in reply, but his mind was a bit elsewhere. If he came up with all of the information himself, then it sounded like he didn’t really have a guardian. That, though, would go against everything Yayoi said: a magical girl--or magician--always has a guide. Not once so far had Midoriya even mentioned having a companion to his quite plainly fantastical magic. Was it a case of an absentee guide?

Speaking of guides and guardians...

“That’s quite a bit you’ve come up with by yourself. It’s rather commendable. Though, I have to admit, I find it hard to believe you’ve never told a single person about this before. Are you sure you haven’t gotten help during all of this?”

Midoriya looked up at him, his head still low. “Y-Yes sir…”

“Hmm… You mentioned before, when I interrogated you at the school, that you had a Muay Thai teacher named Shimizu. What is her full name?”

The boy’s lips thinned as he started to nibble on the lower one. “Sh-Shimizu Mako.”

“Do you know how old she is? What her quirk is?” he asked, noting down the name.

“Uhm...I-I don’t really know how old she is...uhm, like, m-maybe twenty-something...she has a mutant-type shark quirk.”

“Is she aware of your status as Minute Maid?”

The boy looked down into his lap. Then, slowly, shook his head.

Tsukauchi rose an eyebrow, but the boy continued.

“Uhm...I-I never told...a-anyone. Nobody knows I can...do this. I-I wanted...to keep attention l-low. Uhm...I-I never told her, but sh-she might suspect something? If she d-does, it’s cause I-I didn’t hide something well enough, o-or she j-just noticed something. She’s really smart. But it...w-wouldn’t be because I told her.”

“You say you’ve told no one? Not even your mother?”

The boy’s bottom lip turned white with the pull of his teeth as he shook his head again.

“I see.” Tsukauchi noted that down, though he didn’t feel too happy about that. He would’ve hoped the boy would’ve gone to someone at least to assist him, but with the lack of that, all responsibility for his actions essentially fell on him. He was a minor, which would help him, but at the same time, it didn’t look good for his pursuit of vigilantism. Even vigilantes knew when they needed a team. “Now then, Midoriya-san. Do you mind telling me how you came into your magic?”

The boy stiffened up sharply, shoulders going stock still and eyes clenching. Tsukauchi sat in shock when a trail of blood started leaving his bitten lip.

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“That’s a...troubling reaction,” Yagi muttered, watching as Tsukauchi got the boy to stop biting his bleeding lip.

The others hummed in agreement, though Centipeder frowned.

“While I doubt it, just to play devil’s advocate...perhaps he’s putting on a show to feign innocence. He seems to have too much knowledge of his actions to be fully genuine.”

“I...do not think that is correct, I’m afraid,” Yagi replied, blue eyes turning towards the hero without turning his head. “Considering young Midoriya’s struggles being alone, it’s quite possible that his magic stems from a traumatic event. He was, after all, fourteen when his magic came in. Being so young yet deciding to fight creatures not even pro-heroes can stand up to...it makes me wonder exactly what caused his decision.”

The man nodded, “Well, that’s an astute observation. Perhaps so.”

“I don’t know about that.” Yayoi interrupted. She’d closed her eyes, but her mouth was pursed, one of her hands tapping her arm. “There might be an element of accuracy to your devil’s advocacy. Midoriya-kun failed to tell us about his guide when it came to ‘people he’s told’ or ‘people who have helped him’. Either he’s hiding it, or it was the wrong kind of question to initiate the right answer. After all, a guide isn’t a person.”

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Tsukauchi watched in awe as the boy’s healing went into action right in front of him.

The boy was dabbing the napkin against his bleeding lip hurriedly, muttering apologies. Then, minutely, his broken skin sparked with yellow energy. He watched as the blood suddenly started to flake up, drying seconds after leaving contact with his skin, and it crusted over so severely that the beads of dried blood cracked by themselves and started to fade. Tsukauchi’s eyes trailed up from the healing process to the boy’s expression. He didn’t look fazed other than his already present panic; instead, his gaze seemed to have lost some of the earlier light, still partially stuck in whatever bad memories he was living in.

It happened in four to five seconds, just as he’d said. Tsukauchi couldn’t help but wonder how he’d studied that.

“Midoriya-san.”

The boy blinked, then looked up at him, his eyes partially lidded.

“I take it this sort of reaction is normal. With your temporary injury, I mean.”

Midoriya seemed a little slower on the uptake, but he understood, eyes opening fully. “Y-Yes. Sometimes Handyman heals me quickly, so this happens when they do.”

Tsukauchi’s eyebrows rose, and he turned to another sheet in his notes. “Handyman?”

Midoriya paused, then he realized what he’d said. Despite that pause, though, he nodded, “Uhm, w- whenever you get magic, apparently you get a g-guide to help you in using your magic. Mine is c-called Handyman.”

“I see. And Handyman can heal you from a distance?”

“N-No, they’re with me all the time. In the watch,” he said, raising his right wrist, showing off the
black-banded wristwatch. The very one the police hadn’t been able to remove from his body.

Tsukauchi remembered then All Might’s confession of the delayed deactivation reaction on Midoriya’s magic, the boy staying transformed until All Might had taken him to an EMT. Perhaps the boy wasn’t the only one who controlled his own magical output then. And with his whole body being regulated by magic as he said, then...exactly how much power did this “Handyman” have over Midoriya?

“In the watch, you say? How is that possible?”

“Uhm…” Midoriya lowered the napkin from his nearly completely healed lip, the only evidence being small reddish trails of naturally drying blood and a new, lighter strip of skin. “Well, m-magic is inaccessible potential, like entropy. E-Everyone has it to an extent. What a g-guide or companion does is give a person a-access to their entropy, allowing them to break the rules of the universe and obtain fantastic powers.”

“And what does that have to do with the watch?”

“The...The watch is the way Handyman stays in contact with me.”

Tsukauchi thought back to the boy’s strange habit of glancing at or looking at his watch during the previous interrogation, like he was in a hurry to get somewhere else. Yet, even though he’d look at his watch, he never seemed to say things any faster unless he was nervous. He answered the questions concisely, even if some of them had been lies, and hadn’t given off the behavior of a hurried person outside of the watch-checking. And the whole time they were there, not once had the boy looked at the watch until Tsukauchi himself brought attention to it.

So that was why. It wasn’t just a watch.

It was a being. Something conscious and thinking. And controlling.

“You stay in contact with Handyman, you said. How do they speak to you?”

This made the boy pause, looking up and to the side, trying to think. “Uhm...i-in my head, I guess? I don’t really know. I’ve never really thought about it, so I...don’t know.”

Tsukauchi’s eyes narrowed just the slightest bit. “And has this voice ever compelled you to do something? As in, has it compelled you to fight against the Gray Men?”

“Uhm…” The boy started to sweat. “I mean...k-kind of? J-Just the first time.”

“I see.”

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“That’s an inaccurate statement,” Yayoi sighed, “All companions are compulsive to some extent. After all, their main goal is to get rid of the magical disruption polluting the physical realm. What matters is how it’s been compelling Midoriya-kun. More often than not, they choose a form with which to interact with their ward. Back in the 1990s, those forms were physical, often like small animals. The fact that this particular guardian saw fit ignore that culture and seal itself to his skin feels rather telling, but perhaps we still don’t know enough.”

“Let’s say then, as speculation, that the guide has somehow been forcing young Midoriya into this
vigilantism. How then could we proceed? What options do we have in ridding him of his guide? Is that even possible?” Yagi asked, eyes bright with a growing concern, turning to Yayoi. “How could All Might help?”

Yayoi smiled at him.

“He wouldn’t be able to help. Not with this.” She turned back to the mirror without addressing the shocked look on his face. “That boy’s made a contract with whatever guide he has. We can’t breach it, and we don’t know the terms to it. Often times, a magical girl never realizes the terms. They stay fighting until the problem is resolved, then they lose access to their magic. It’s said, it’s done, and no one can intervene.”

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Tsukauchi nodded, a small frown on his face. If the guide really was compelling Midoriya, then that could be a pretty big problem. Still, the guide had decided to heal the cut in Midoriya’s lip, even with him sitting there, which prompted the start on the conversation of its existence in the first place. Was it...were they trying to be known?

“Midoriya-san, would it be possible for me to speak with Handyman?”

The boy shook his head. “N-Not directly. I-I could relay their answers to you, b-but only I can hear them.”

“I see... Well, if you don’t mind doing so, I would appreciate it. I would like to see what they know about the Gray Men, if that’s alright with both of you.”

Without waiting on an answer from the being only he could hear—no glance to his watch, no fidgeting, nothing—Midoriya nodded. His gaze was a bit more resolved than before, his back straightening.

“Right then. What are Gray Men?” Tsukauchi asked, looking straight at the boy in front of him.

“G-Gray Men are soulless beings made of abandoned magic. Something happened...what that something is, we don’t know, b-but whatever it was, it pushed all of the magical potential out of the human it belonged to.”

Tsukauchi’s eyebrows raised, still writing, “So the Gray Men were human.”

“W-Were a part of a human, yes. T-Technically, whatever happened to them...” Midoriya looked down at his lap, then, without moving his head up, looked up at the detective. “If you were hit by whatever is causing it, you could end up making a Gray Man, too. T-That’s what Handyman said.”

“Hmm...does Handyman know what’s causing it?”

Midoriya glanced at his watch. “...No, they said they don’t.”

“Do you know, Midoriya-san?”

“H-Handyman knows everything I know and more. I-If they don’t know it, I don’t either.”

“So, what happens to the bodies they were once inside?”

Midoriya looked cowed, sweating and embarrassed, “I...neither of us know...”

“I see,” Tsukakuchi frowned, noting to check the missing person’s list. “Right then. So these Gray
Men steal people’s quirks. For what reason?”

Midoriya sat up, “Th-They don’t steal quirks, j-just some of the p-potential to use them. Quirks and magic cannot be a-active at the same time in one body… S-Still, magic, as untapped potential, exists underlyng in everyone. A Gray Man can take the p-potential of someone’s ability to use their quirk. F-For example…” The boy’s head tilted just slightly to the right. After a second, his eyes widened, then darkened as a solemn look came upon his face. “T-Todoroki-san…h-he lost his ability to control his body temperature, but n-not the ability to create ice. The Gray Man t-took the potential to control body temperature b-because it was essential to creating ice and s-surviving its effects, b-but it didn’t take his ice control b-because it didn’t have enough time. I-If it had, it would’ve been able to control the d-direction of the ice better.”

Tsukauchi stared at the boy. “How did you know the person Nessus took its ice creation from was a Todoroki?”

Midoriya looked up at him under his lashes, face still angled down. “I-I didn’t know.”

“Handyman did.”

“Yes.” After a beat, “I… I’m sorry…I-If I had found it and gotten rid of it earlier then--”

“Don’t worry about that now, Midoriya-san. You couldn’t be everywhere. Now, about the reason for taking potential…” Tsukauchi trailed off, his face carefully neutral as he wrote “potentially dangerous” by Handyman’s notes.

“Eh?”

The detective looked up from his paper to find the boy explicitly looking down at his watch—the boy’s caution was in the wind now that he was aware of the guide’s existence, it seemed.

The boy’s brow furrowed, “Wh-Why do you want me to…huh? B-But…w-word for word?”

“Midoriya-san?”

He looked down at his watch a little longer, worry making his leg start to tap, but he nodded at the watch before looking forward. He carefully straightened himself out in his seat, shoulders pressed against the back of the cold, metal chair. His eyes met Tsukauchi’s, then trailed off to the side, then back, like he couldn’t quite decide to meet his eyes but was certainly trying to.

“Th-The Gray Men steal potential so they can become closer to being whole again. They can’t ever r-really be human again, b-but they’ll still search and hurt people. They’ll still obtain new powers from the people they steal from and appear t-to grow, but they won’t ever be human again. And…H-Handyman says that y-you don’t have to call them ‘potentially dangerous’.”

Tsukauchi felt his hands go cold, and let his pen go limp in his hand. As a habit, he’d had his notes fairly well covered from Midoriya’s eyesight, the solid top fo the notepad a good cover for the paper when held upright or at an angle. Then there was how the boy was slouched most of the time, preventing him from seeing much. There was no real way for the boy to know what he’d written.

Midoriya cleared his throat, then spoke again. “T-They say that, a-as a part of the World Voice, they know everything it wants to present to…the readers? Th-They say they know C-Centipeder, Manual, Yayoi, and Yagi are w-watching from behind the glass. That Yagi-san…works very closely with All Might. T-That you…d-don’t have an analysis quirk like you make it seem like you do. They say they d-don’t tell me these things often because i-its outside of my jurisdiction as a human… T-They say…that r-right now, th-they’re the least of your worries. Th-That we want to be allies.”
The detective couldn’t bring himself to reply, shocked into stillness.

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Yayoi’s eyes were wide open, kaleidoscope colors gleaming in her eyes. That hadn’t been the cause of the heavy air though, as the others were frozen as well, staring at the boy curling in on himself out of anxiety.

Yagi in particular felt a cold sweat run down his back. That voice...whatever voice the boy was hearing...they had cut him some slack by not revealing who he was to the boy or the three people he shared the room with. They were probably counting on him to realize that, too, probably counting on Tsukauchi to recognize it as well.

Midoriya’s Handyman, magic, all of it. All of it made no sense.

Yagi then noticed a light at the corner of his eye. He looked down to note that Yayoi had her phone out, eyes closed again as she sent a text to the detective in the room. He watched as she sent the text, then shut her phone with a click, turning to the others.

“Well, I believe that’s enough for now. We need to regroup and come up with new questions regarding the knowledge Midoriya-kun’s given us. I would allow Tsukauchi-kun to continue, but I have questions I’ve yet to word correctly. Urgent ones.”

Centipeder nodded slowly, putting up his own notebook. Manual kept staring into the room at the boy as Tsukauchi read his text, stuck in shock, but shook himself out of it as Sir Nighteye’s sidekick began to exit the room.

Even though they were all exiting, Yagi stayed standing there, looking in at the boy’s wide eyes as he nodded with understanding to Tsukauchi’s assertion that the questioning was done for the moment and that Midoriya would be returned to the holding cell for the time being.

That boy, he thought, eyes narrowing. What on earth has happened to him?

The world really didn’t make sense all that much anymore. It hadn’t made sense since Nana died, but especially now, life was twisting in coils of confusion that he wasn’t sure he could straighten out. Hopefully, with the boy’s help, they could work it out, but his heart felt heavy for the fact they needed the boy in the first place.

Sighing, he exited the room, hoping that their regrouping session would be fruitful. But before he could even get completely out into the hall, he heard the sharp, hasty tone of a young man.

“C’mon, I heard the brat was taken in! Can’t I help you guys fact-check her or something? I’ve actually encountered her before, after all!”

“Fraction, right now is not the time,” Tamakawa said, but the hotheaded fledgling hero huffed.

“How’s it not the time right now? This is the perfect time! Aren’t you guys going to need all the help you can get?”

Yagi hazarded a look outside of the room, brow furrowed as he witnessed the scene. Tsukauchi stood in front of the door with tired exasperation plain in his tight shoulders. Tamakawa had his hands up in front of the newfound hero, the other with his hands on his hips as he fussed with the policeman. Centipeder looked rather unamused, even ashamed, while Manual sighed, dragging a hand down the side of his face. He couldn’t see the look on Yayoi’s face, but the sideways cock of her hip and the low hum coming from her spoke of mild amusement.
“Fraction, while we do appreciate your involvement, you’ve already given your testimony, and as far as we know, you haven’t had any other encounter with Minute Maid,” Tsukauchi said, “So, unless you have any new information, you’ve done your part.”

The hero scratched at the back of his head, looking dissatisfied even through the eye-mask. “Oh c’mon man, let me help out at least a bit, alright?”

“This wouldn’t happen to be pride-related, would it?” Yayoi asked—and yeah, that was definitely amusement in her tone.

Yagi had also heard of that particular incident. That had been...an unfortunate encounter for the boy. He hoped he’d learned to remember to put on his cup from then on.

He heard a hiss of “Stop, that’s not funny,” just the slightest in his left ear, and turned back to the viewing room. Inside, he saw Midoriya pressed against the door, his ear against the solid metal as he listened to the other side. Tsukauchi’s body was probably doing little to stop the young hero’s boisterous voice, so it was likely he heard quite a bit of what was going on on the other side. Shaking his head, Yagi stayed where he stood, his slouched but tall form looming in the doorway.

“While I don’t mean to interrupt, it appears young Minute Maid can hear what’s being said. Perhaps you would like to move this conversation elsewhere?”

“Really?” the hero puffed up, “Then let her hear, ‘cause I actually do have some new info! Check it--Xtra and I took down a Gray Man in Hosu, no casualties, few injuries, very little damage! Hell, thing barely gave much of a fight! If we can find a way to destroy these things, maybe we don’t need this vigilante girl as much as we’d thought, huh?”

Yagi thought back to the damage the Gray Man Kamui Woods, Mt. Lady, and Minute Maid faced, thought about Terra Terror suddenly becoming unable to keep himself from softening into a pile in his unconsciousness and the panic the doctors went through to try and keep him solid enough to treat, and something felt...wrong. As much as he should be congratulating the young hero for his part in a successful apprehension, he felt worry pool in his absent stomach. As an afterthought, he glanced into the viewing room again, and apparently young Midoriya thought the same thing. He still had his ear against the door, but his eyes were wide open in shock.

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The voices were muffled through the door, but Izuku had heard it well enough. No casualties was very good, but few injuries? Very little damage? Gray Men were usually powerhouses that made sure to wreck everything in the way of its goal. In every encounter, at least one person had to go to the hospital for something, and the property damage, if not extensive, expanded over several cities as it traveled.

Something sick was settling in his chest, but he kept it swallowed down. He strained further, trying to hear over his own heartbeat.

“That’s fantastic! Thank you for your hard work, Fraction,” he heard Tsukauchi say, “Have you written your report on the incident?”

“Not yet, but I can tell you right now what happened.”

“Ah, not at the moment. We’re still occupied with Minute Maid’s information. If you finish the report then we can assess it later.”

“Oh c’mon, isn’t this a big break?! No casualties or serious injuries! Look, maybe there was
something we did that kept it calm?"

“I understand, Fraction, but as I said, we’re going to be dealing with the data Minute Maid has given us,” he heard an airy voice say—a woman, not anyone he knew, not Tsukauchi’s partner from the school. “If you don’t mind finishing the report, we can add that to our questioning.”

“Right, yeah, but what if we’re the ones that kept it calm because Minute Maid wasn’t around? What if the girl is actually an agitating factor? It was swirling, and it didn’t even use the energy inside of it!”

Izuku almost did a double-take.

“...‘Swirling’? What do you mean?” another man asked, his voice proper and accented by something clicking together—teeth?

“You know how Nessus had that weird swirling blue going on with its body? This thing had a really dark pink swirl! Well, not a swirl? It was more like it’s body would occasionally flash that really dark pink. I thought it would be using that against us, but if it did, then it was super weak. I’m guessing it didn’t! But anyway, every single time—”

Izuku stopped listening to him then, backing his head away from the door.

“...That’s not right. Something’s not right. No, no, nononono—something’s not right!”

His hands, previously palm-flat on the metal door, balled up, and he began to bang against the door with his right fist. His lungs started working faster, the sharp song of panic starting to force him into its dance. He couldn’t explain it, but his mind was running on every single bad idea that was possible in the situation, and he desperately needed to either confirm his horror or realize how stupid his worries were.

When it didn’t open fast enough to his tastes, his other fist joined in the beat, as did his voice.

“O-Open up! Open the door! Listen to me! Please!”

It took a second longer, but then the door’s knob creaked and it opened a few inches. Izuku didn’t try to pull it open any further, quickly shifting to practically stuff his face into the open crease of the door, peeking to the outside hall.

Tsukauchi’s body was blocking his view partway, but he could still see glimpses of the others under the bright lights of the hall—Tamakawa, a man with a centipede quirk, the Normal hero, Manual, a silver gray-haired woman, and Fraction. The last one looked a little like he’d been shot in the chest by the expression on his face, but it was quickly blocked out by the detective’s shifting body. Tsukauchi looked down at him, eyes set seriously.

“What’s wrong? Is something the matter?” the man asked.

“Yes! Yes yes! D-Did Fraction say it had energy to evolve and it...didn’t use it?”

Tsukauchi glanced at the young hero, “That is what you said, yes?”

Fraction looked caught off guard, and Izuku could hear him mumble something like “wait, I thought Minute Maid was a girl, who’s that?”, but whatever look Tsukauchi had given him made him pause that train of thought. He actually started looking a bit nervous, though it was hard to tell with the mask on his face.
“Uh, well, I don’t know if that’s right. But, like, its body occasionally flashed pink.”

Flashing? What did flashing mean? Had he ever seen flashing?

No, you haven’t. I know what it means, though. It ate someone’s energy, it just hadn’t integrated it yet.

Izuku choked, then looked up at the detective, “I-It ate someone’s energy! It just hadn’t used it yet!”

Fraction’s face scrunched up. “Right! That’s what I was saying! It didn’t use it while you weren’t ar-”

“Rather, I-I think it didn’t show it to you! Gray Men are clever! They may look mindlessly destructive, but they can be really smart when they want to be! So if it concealed its abilities, then maybe it had an agenda…”

“Can’t imagine what kind of plan would send it to Tartarus with the rest of the Gray Men us heroes have caught.” Fraction put his hands on his hips, glaring at Izuku despite the hushing and fussing from Manual.

Izuku’s eyes scrunched, confused. “Tar...tarus?”

Tsukauchi sighed, eyebrows furrowed in growing frustration with the young hero. His mouth twisted just the slightest, but he began to speak anyway. “Tartarus is the colloquial name for the maximum security prison we use to hold top criminals. After the potential effect Gray Men have on people was realized, a secondary sector was made completely separate from their sector. Gray Men have been imprisoned in there. Both are considered a part of Tartarus.”

“A-And that’s where you all put the Gray Men you take in?”

“Oi, Detective, I mean no disrespect, but should you really tell him all of that?” Fraction asked.

Tsukauchi smiled tightly as he turned to him, “Well, with what he knows already, we might as well give him the rest of the information. He knows more about the Gray Men than we do after all.”

“Besides,” the silver-haired woman began, her voice floating, “weren’t you the one who said Tartarus first?”

As Fraction choked on his own breath, Izuku focused, trying to find out what kind of plan the Gray Man could’ve had. It had absorbed someone’s energy for it to flash occasionally with the color of the potential it took in, but it didn’t...digest it yet. It went through the trouble of lashing out so...unless that wasn’t a real attack? A ploy? No one got seriously hurt, and they didn’t even do too much damage despite how much destruction the others would cause. So then it...planned to be taken in? Why would it do that? Tartarus had to be prepared to deal with quirks of all kinds, right? So--ah, but the Gray Men weren’t in the usual part of Tartarus. They were in a second sector somewhere. Was that place as ready to deal with abilities?

Abilities the Gray Man hadn’t shown them. Because it didn’t absorb the energy yet.

But why? Why would it wait to go to the jail before absorbing the energy? Was it waiting to get inside and then use its powers? So then, the Gray Man had to be aware enough to realize that whatever powers it absorbed, it would be useful against something on the inside of the jail. But how did it even realize what jail walls were made of? What were the walls of Tartarus made of? Did they use the same metal cuffs to confine the cellmates?
Cellmates.

Right, cause there were other Gray Men there, too.

Other…

Other Gray Men. Several of them, all of whom the heroes caught.

“Trojan Horse.”

Izuku startled when he realized he wasn’t the only one who said it, the airy voice in the hall dropping an octave as the air outside held an underlying thrum of a magical signature unlike his own. It wasn’t accompanied by static though, so he felt no reason to panic outside of what he was already doing.

The adults in the hallway, who had been talking and fussing about something or other that Izuku hadn’t been paying attention to, paused at their statement. Tsukauchi, still guarding the door, turned to the silver-haired woman who Izuku felt was looking at him.

“What was that?”

Izuku’s grabbed onto the door tightly, eyes wide as his heart strained in his chest. “It was a Trojan Horse! It’s saving its attack for when it gets to Tartarus! It just needed you to take it in!”

Tsukauchi’s gaze was firm, but Izuku could recognize the dawning light in his eyes. “Why would it want to be imprisoned?”

“That Gray Men can eat each other! Th-They can consume each other’s energy, just like how they take potential from people! L-Like the one Desutegoro and I caught--it didn’t have any special abilities, but it was bigger than usual because it had eaten other Gray Men! All Gray Men want is magic, and other Gray Men are beings made of magic! If you put it in Tartarus, it’s gonna have access to every Gray Man the heroes put in there so far! Even if it’s less than taking the potential from a human and it only gets a strength boost, if there’s enough Gray Men to eat, would it really matter?!”

When the horror of the situation dawned on Tsukauchi’s expression, Izuku’s heart stopped.

Suddenly, the feeling he had escalated beyond his control. He felt like he was back in the tunnel he’d walked through on that fateful day back home. The slime villain had already crawled his way up to Izuku’s neck. Izuku felt as though he were being squeezed relentlessly in its cold, slimy embrace, and his lungs couldn’t quite take in air like it should.

Then, a distant static echoed in his ears.

He felt a jab at his knees, and realized he’d lost the ability to stand up, eyes wide and unseeing as he stared forward at the blurry figures before him. One of them opened the door he was near and bent down to his position on the floor, holding his shoulders and calling what Izuku believed was his name.

The others around seemed startled, but he couldn’t see them very well, looking only forward.

The figure--ah, it was the detective, Tsukauchi-san--was joined by another, someone who looked like a skeleton. They both were trying to help get the cotton out of his ears and the cold ink out of his veins, but it wasn’t working. He could only very vaguely hear what the skeleton man before him said.

“Young Midoriya! What is the matter?!”
Izuku’s eyes trailed over to his blue-eyed gaze. He couldn’t think very well, so he prayed in his heart that he would understand what he was trying to get through to them through what little he could manage to say. Izuku opened his mouth, gasping.

“Oh...that’s not good.”

---

The banquet looked sufficient.

It initially wondered about the place the tasty ones were kept in, but minded its own business.

It kept to its idea, and was led to its cell.

Many of its hungering kind were caged in rows in the walls, wrapped up in metal and chains and heavy weight.

Their meager energies had returned. They were ready to fight and consume again.

But all of them had used their energy. Were confined based on their abilities.

They were known.

But it was not.

And so, when the tasty ones in suits and weapons wrapped its limbs tightly and attempted to keep it from moving, it let them.

It let them talk about how many of its kin there were.

Let them talk about how much they want them gone.

And when they left for long enough, it stretched.

The thrumming energy inside of it would wait no longer, and it let it run its course.

Felt the energy flow through its body until its body began to evolve and change shape.

A strange thing flashed before its unseeing gaze and for the first time, it began to understand what ‘pink’ meant.

Its arms shortened a little. Small spikes formed on its shoulders and the place the tasties called a forehead.

With its stolen energy, it twisted the and misshapened the metallic bonds confining it, broke its chains.

Then, with its strength, began its work on the strange glass before it.

It wasn’t going to free its brethren...no, its pawns.

Its food.

They were the banquet within the place the tasty ones called The Second Tartarus.
This is the worst case scenario. How does your magical girl plan to handle this, Handyman?

It's not worst case. Worst case would be it getting to the other humans.

What is he going to do to prevent that? The Realm of Reality relies on your boy.

Then how about one of you guys make another magical girl to help him out, huh?

There are already--

But are they ready? Are they even half-way as prepared as my boy is?

...

That's what I thought. Sit back and speak reality if you guys aren't going to do anything.
A guard in the secondary Tartarus blinked before immediately calling others to action when he saw a Gray Man walk straight out of its cell, the metal and concrete around it crumpling and damaged. Ten guards covered as much of their skin as they possibly could with leather and bullet-proof armor and armed themselves with guns to accompany their physical-type quirks. They immediately started taking the stairs, listening in on their headsets to the guard remaining in the observation room.

They shuffled ahead quickly, their steps echoing in the otherwise empty stairway, the lights starting to flicker the lower they went. Then, they stood in front of the fifth floor stairwell, the large 05 painted onto the double set of doors heavy metal doors.

[From what I can tell, it’s still at the leftmost corner. It’s broken into six cells so far, but I’m not seeing the Gray Men in those come out yet. I’m not sure why that is, but be careful.]

“Roger,” the leader, Suzuki, replied, all four arms flexing with his movements. He silenced himself on that channel before shouting back to his colleagues. “Once we’re through that door, remember! Shoot on sight! It won’t die from bullet wounds, but we can slow it down and subdue it! Don’t let it touch your skin, and don’t let it take your quirk! Understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir!” they echoed back, their voices reverberating through the stairwell. His right hand man, Tanaka, had a particularly prominent voice in the noise.

“Good. Get ready.”

The man then pushed the doors open as he entered the prep room, full of cuffs and hidden rifles to maintain the safety of the floor, the others following closely behind.

There were few halls on the 5th floor. From the stairwell on the rightmost side after leaving the prep room, one ran straight forward through a hall of cells. At the end of that hall, it split into a left and right sector, before running straight again, the halls leaving a square in the middle. At the end of the two halls, they reconnected before running straight again to the leftmost side of the 5th floor. That hall was were the Gray Man resided.

Suzuki pushed through the doors of the prep room with his team and immediately noticed something was off.

The Gray Men in the cells they were beginning to pass did not hiss static at them or fight against their bonds to reach the men like they usually did. Instead, they were docile in their holds, hands completely covered in their metal cuffs, bodies pinned to diagonal stands with chains and metal wrappings, completely and utterly still, not making a move or sound. But up ahead, echoing through the halls, they could hear the crunch and crumble of metal and concrete, and the low, ever growing hiss of the escaped Gray Man. It was occasionally accented by the high-pitched, needley screech of another, but it cut out sharply, as if a tv had been turned off.

With a hand signal, the group continued forward until they reached the split. There, Suzuki went left with four others, the other group of five going right with Tanaka. They separated from each other with a careful nod.

Suzuki watched carefully, listening as the sounds of destruction grew. The hanging lights above them had begun the flicker, and his hands tightened on his weapons. Along with the crumbling walls, he could hear something sharp tapping against the ground, almost like the clacking of heels
except it sounded wrong, more like a knife’s tip was doing it.

[Careful...it cut out more of the cameras, I can’t see where it is in the hall.]

Suzuki clicked his tongue, but said nothing else, body crouching as he slowly walked to the end of the hall. Beside him, the Gray Men in their cells had started to strain against their bonds, but not towards the people walking. They were straining away from the end of the hall, as if trying to escape. Concerned, Suzuki pressed the button on his headset.

“Tanaka, do you have any visuals on the Gray Man?”

[No, sir. Nothing yet. We’re approaching the end of our hall. Would you like us to proceed first?]

It took Suzuki a moment to respond, trying to understand what his colleague had said over the increasing volume of the escaped Gray Man’s screeching.

“Negative. Our side will approach the hall first. Your group can follow after.”

A beat of silence.

[Roger.]

Suzuki cut out his mic, then signalled to his side to get close and especially defensive. The clicking and hissing had gotten louder, closer, and he and his men put their guns up, prepared to shoot.

The light at the end of the hall was flickering erratically, the electric lines broken and disrupted. He waited, listening as the sharp click approached that end, waiting for the Gray Man to peek out or enter the hall. He kept his breathing measured, eyes peeled for movement.

The screech of static was becoming almost deafening, echoing loudly in the hall to the point he doubted he could hear anything else.

But suddenly, the cry stopped, leaving behind a too suddenly still silence.

Immediately, Suzuki was on edge, moving forward to the hall combining the left and the right, his men following behind. When he peered over into it, there was nothing there but the flickering lights that lined the ceiling.

[Sir?] Tanaka’s voice came through clearly. [Is everything alright, sir?]

“Stay in position. We’re going to check that hall. I’ll alert you when you need to follow. If you hear us shooting, follow immediately.”

[Roger.]

Suzuki turned his mic off once again, and waited a moment. He could hear the slight echo in the other hall of Tanaka telling his group to wait. So then, it meant the Gray Man wasn’t there with him, and it wasn’t in the connecting hall. It was still in the left hall, then.

The man clenched his gun a little tighter, took a deep breath...then led his men over to the left hall.

It was completely and utterly destroyed.

Of the hall’s twenty cells, the ten occupied ones were broken into, and shattered plexiglass littered the ground inside and out of the cells. The walls had crumbled until some of the metal skeleton under it was visible, those bars being contorted as well. The lights in the hall were completely off, save for
one at the very end that flickered intermittently in quick bursts of energy that puttered out just as quickly.

He gave his men a hand signal, then began moving in.

The glass below his feet crunched a little though he tried to avoid the shards. His eyes trailed along the insides of the utterly battered cells as they passed, noting the emptiness with a dull and growing horror, not knowing how they could’ve escaped. For a moment, he gazed at the double doors at the other end of the hall, wondering if, somehow, they’d found a way to open it. The light above the door flickered and puttered again, the same 05 looking more ominous than it had before.

Suzuki kept forward, passing by the dark, empty cells that his men once-overed with their flashlights, reaching the end where the escaped Gray Man had once been imprisoned, and the door leading to the other prep room.

Carefully, Suzuki reached up and turned on his mic.

“Endo, do you see anything in the other prep room?”

[...No, nothing’s there. Wherever that Gray Man is, it’s in that hall. I’ve got no visual on you, so be careful.]

“Roger.”

He reached up to turn his mic off, but then he heard the slight tinkling of a noise at the end of the hall, back where they’d entered in. When he looked back, he saw nothing, but one of his men turned to him.

“Sir, I think I just saw something go around the corner--”

Suddenly, the right hall back behind them erupted into noise. Suzuki turned around sharply, hearing the sudden rain of bullets and crackling sound of breaking concrete and bending metal, loud cries echoing with it. Quickly, he rushed forward, pushing his men aside so he could lead in front as they approached the line of fire.

“Follow now! Get to the others!” he bellowed, and the others followed suit, guns clicking and cocked to readiness. “Endo! Alert the heroes! It’s gotten past my group and is attacking Tanaka’s crew! Send an alert to the police and the heroes right now!”

Suzuki’s crew quickly shuffled over to the right hall, standing with their sides pressed to the wall right before they could see into it. They waited for a moment.

“Tanaka, do you read me?” Suzuki whispered into the mic.

Nothing came back, Tanaka’s mic still off.

“Tanaka, respond! Right now!” he whispered harshly. Still nothing. “Shit!”

Realizing that they couldn’t hear any more bullets—nothing but static screams and crumbling concrete—Suzuki did the hand signal, and he and his men rushed in, staying posted up at their end of the hall, and aimed straight forward to find the Gray Man.

Suzuki’s teeth clenched behind his helmet.

The floors and walls were starting to crack, the guards able to hear the groaning sound of metal being
bent. The Gray Men imprisoned in that hall hissed and screeched in a high-pitched whine, the clanking of metal an indication of their efforts to escape, to run away from the escaped Gray Man. Four of the five men were laid out on the ground, blood spilling out onto the floor from their bodies, their guns limp in their hands.

Standing above them was the creature.

It stood at least 8 feet high on stilt-like legs with no feet. It’s body was a dull, dark pink, the very slightest shade lighter of dark pink thrumming under its skin like a marble ball in a swirling glass. Its previously long arms had shortened down, not enough to look natural, but enough so the fingers weren’t dragging along the ground. In one of its long fingered hands, it held onto the front of Tanaka’s armor, his limp body dripping blood onto the ground.

“Tanaka!” Suzuki grit his teeth and cocked his gun. “Shoot! Shoot the fucker down!”

Without hesitation, he and his men began firing at the monster standing before them, the bullets flying from their guns towards the tall, thin being.

Where it stood, its head rose up a little from where it stared down at the body it held up in its hand. Suzuki’s mouth stayed open, eyes wide.

The bullets stopped short of the Gray Man, floating mid air a few inches from its body.

It turned its head towards them. Suzuki realized absently that the Gray Man seemed to have developed something of a cloud of hair, a short puff of flowing, dark gray energy that twitched and scattered occasionally before settling back into the flow.

Its forehead had developed two small horns that poked out, its face blank, absent of any static disruption at all. But when its mouth opened on its sleek face, he could see the fizzing mess of black, white, and deep, dark pink within its jagged maw.

Its head tilted curiously.

The bullets that floated before its body turned sharply around, facing the four armored men instead.

Suzuki could barely yell in fury, demanding that the Gray Man kept Tanaka’s name from its mouth, before a bullet flew through the air, much faster than a gun could’ve shot it, and pierced the face of his helmet with a loud crack, crushing his front teeth before sailing through to the back of his mouth, where it ripped flesh and muscle asunder, another quickly following that pierced the front of his neck, tearing through his windpipe, arteries, and finally, crushing the bones protecting his spinal cord.

Seconds later, the sound of five bodies tumbling to the ground in a wet bundle of blood, flesh, and brain matter echoed in the lifeless hall, the Gray Man still standing, still staring.
Chapter Summary

sorry for the delay, this arc is a hard one to write

Calls and messages began ringing in on Tsukauchi’s phone not even a few minutes after Midoriya’s revelation to them. The heroes in the building also found their phones ringing with messages from different heroes and police forces. More importantly, there was the urgent message from the lead guards of the second Tartarus.

One recently apprehended Gray Man had used its abilities to break out of its cell. So far, fifteen Gray Men had disappeared from their cells, and twenty seven guards had died in the line of fire. After resistance was beginning to be proven futile, they were on lock-down to prevent the escape of other Gray Men and prepare to subdue the escaped one, keeping it from leaving the underground facility for as long as they could. With its growing power, they weren’t sure how long they could restrain it, so all available heroes were requested on site.

Tsukauchi was caught on the words of his message before he heard something crack, a small sound in the quiet hall, and looked up from his phone. Fraction’s phone had a crack in it along the glass of its surface, his hand clenched down on the mobile device. His teeth were clenched, eyes trembling behind his mask.

“This is...shit...shit.”

Fraction shoved his phone into his pocket and turned to run, but Manual rushed over, taking a hold on his shoulder.

“Wait! Hold up. It’s better if the heroes here go together, alright? Don’t try to rush in alone!”

Fraction’s teeth grit harder, but he didn’t say anything, nor did he try to pull his body from the older hero’s grasp. Manual took this as acceptance and turned to the others.

“Centipeder, will you be coming, or do you need to report back to Sir Nighteye?”

The centipede sidekick placed a hand on his chest bowed lightly, his gaze regretful. “As much as I would like to participate, I do need to report back to Sir Nighteye. I am sure he’s also being informed of the situation, so if we can provide any support, we shall follow up as well.”

“No problem, thank you,” Manual replied, turning to the detective, the other man currently confirming something on the phone.

After a moment, Tsukauchi ended the call, facing the others in the hallway.

“I’ve told the Emergency Response Team that there are heroes here they can take with them. They’ll give you enough time to suit up, Manual, and Fraction, they’re going to be at the basement floor. You can head down and get in the truck with the rest of them. In the meantime, Inspector Yayoi, I’m afraid we’ll have to call this the end for now. We can review our notes at a later date, if that’s alright with you.”
Her arms were crossed, mouth a straight line, but she looked neither offended or pressed. “I’ve no objections.”

“Perfect. Yagi-san, please inform All Might of the situation and of who’s going to be on the way,” he said, turning to the man with a knowing eye.

Yagi nodded. “I’ll do my best to contact him and tell you his response as soon as you’re free.” Then he turned away with his phone in his hand, thick, boney fingers dialing his own home phone.

“Alright then. Tamakawa, please take Midoriya-san back to the--”

Before he could finish his sentence, the others already beginning to disperse, he was interrupted by a sputtering, hurried voice.

“I’ll go, too!”

The adults in the hallway paused, shocked, and looked back at the child still peering out from the interrogation room. Midoriya’s eyes were on the watery and wild side, his knuckles white from how hard he squeezed the door, but Tsukauchi saw the same determination in them that he’d seen when he’d interviewed the boy at his school.

The boy’s assertion, though, combined with the situation and the fact he was still in his summer t-shirt and shorts, had a more horrifying effect than it would if he’d been five years older.

“What the heck, you’re just a kid!” Fraction hissed, turning around. “What do you think we’ll look like, bringing a kid out onto a battlefield? People have died already! Don’t you get how serious this is? This thing that I--” He clenched his teeth. “--that was brought to Tartarus is killing trained personnel!”

Midoriya had choked at the mention of the dying people, and Tsukauchi opened his mouth, a reprimand on his tongue, but the boy closed his eyes and shook. “I know! I know! It’s really, really bad, but…” Then those eyes opened, tears just barely starting to escape, “b-but I-I’m the only one who can kill a Gray Man! Q-Quirks c-can’t kill it, not even s-strength quirks, but m-magic does!”

Fraction stepped forward, ready to reply, but then stopped. He stared at the boy before turning to Manual. The Normal hero’s brows were scrunched as he looked back at the younger hero, and Fraction realized that it was true. His hands dropped to his side, and he turned back to the young boy, some dawning horror in his masked eyes.

“You can’t i-imprison this one! Not again! I-It’ll be too hard to contain and i-it might get loose again! E-Everyone needs this one destroyed! So…”

Midoriya bit at his lip, looking down for a moment. Then, he ducked back behind the door, fingers loosening from it edge. Surprised by the move, Tsukauchi moved to open it, but then a flash of yellow light shined behind the door, filling the room temporarily with a golden yellow glow.

A moment passed, then a bright hand in fingerless white gloves held back onto the edge Midoriya had let go of before. The door creaked a little as the boy put his weight back onto it, and he peeked out from behind it, the four-point star of his eye gazing up at the detective, his nervousness visible even through the white sheen that appeared to take over his skin.

“I’ll go, too…”
Tsukauchi was stricken, mouth partially open to deny the request, but he knew the boy was right. Without him, there really wasn’t a viable way to get rid of the Gray Man. If they let the creature keep developing, then who knew what would happen.

His eyebrows scrunched, mind flitting through every single futile option to keep the boy away from the battlefield, to keep him out of danger and in the safe hands of heroes and policemen. Was there truly no way for a quirk to destroy the Gray Men? Perhaps there was something the heroes hadn’t thought to try yet, and that was the key to getting rid of them without needing the boy. But even if they were to try something experimental, if it didn’t work, it would just give the creature a longer, better opportunity to become stronger. So then, if there wasn’t something the heroes could do, what about police? They’d tried bullets, but how well would the rubber ones work? Then again, Gray Men were pretty tough. What if the rubber wouldn’t be enough? But…

A moment passed, then Tsukauchi’s mouth clicked closed and his eyes shut. He breathed in heavily, then let it out in a heavy, tired sigh.

“...What would you need?”

He could hear Fraction say “are you serious” rather incredulously before finally stalking off, Manual following the young man. Midoriya’s, no, Minute Maid’s eyes widened before he peeked out of the room more, a tad emboldened by his concedence.

“I’ll need my backpack. If you all t-took everything out of it, that’s fine. I just n-need the bag itself. Everything I n-need is already in it.”

“Alright. Tamakawa,” he turned to the cat-headed policeman, ignoring as best as he could the wide-eyed look he was getting from him, “Please escort him to the evidence unit to get his bag, then direct him to the garage and the ERT. Let them know I cleared it, but nothing else, for release.”

After a moment’s hesitation, Tamakawa’s jaw appeared to clench, but he gave a firm nod. “Yes sir. Midoriya-san, if you will, we need to hurry.”

Midoriya, realizing that his wishes were actually being listened to, pushed the door open more and slipped out, his body covered in a glow and magical clothing, the skirt of his dress brushing against his knee pads. His body shook with a nervous excitement, fists clenched.

“Y-Y-Yes! Okay! Yes sir!” He turned to Tsukauchi then, eyes wide. “Thank you!”

Tsukauchi nodded at him with a smile, but something about it seemed off. The boy’s joy muted a little at the realization as confusion started to take its place, but he shook his head and quickly followed after the policeman to the storage room. The three adults still in the hall watched as he stumbled off until he turned the corner, out of sight and ear-shot.

Tsukauchi let the smile drop off as he put his head in his hand, face carefully neutral.

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Tamakawa could feel the stares of his fellow policemen on him as he headed quickly over to the evidence unit. He knew it wasn’t because of his quirk--only the rookies ever stared at him like that anymore--but rather because of the boy keeping up beside him. Even from the corner of his eye, he could see the slight yellow tint the boy’s glow left on the pale walls around them, gleaming off the clear-covered pictures and anything else reflective or shiny. He ignored their murmuring as best as he could, ears pointed forwards.

“Uhm, Tamakawa-san?” the worried voice beside him asked.
He hummed, the only acknowledgement he could give while rushing. He turned another corner, the boy at his heels.

“Ah, I just thought...ah, that really thin man, he, uh...works closely with All Might?”

“Yes, Yagi-san is the head of the Might’s Productions Second Secretarial Office. He usually works with All Might’s private affairs, but he was the only one who could attend today, it seems.”

“O-Oh...but he does, uhm, speak with All Might in person, right?”

Tamakawa frowned, very briefly glancing at the boy--just a kid, just barely turned 15--before setting his gaze forward. “From what I know, yes.”

“Oh. Okay...yes, okay.”

Tamakawa wanted to ask why he’d asked, but decided against it. The boy was probably a fan of the hero, considering how he’d resorted to vigilantism--as great of a hero as All Might was, a fair few low-level vigilantes had started their work in the name of the honor of said hero. It was a minor inconvenience for the most part, but considering the child keeping up behind him started his work at 14, it was probably going to need to be an issue soon addressed. The boy probably wanted an autograph or something.

Not thinking any further on it, he approached the evidence unit with the boy behind him. The man at the window in the wall, Kenji, seemed to be rushing over from the back of the room. Their eyes locked, and he waved the two over.

“Tamakawa, I just got the message from Tsukauchi. Wait right there a sec!”

Without waiting for an affirmative, the man hurried from the window, going back further into the room. A few moments and some hushed arguing later, Kenji opened the door a bit beside the window, gloved hands clenched onto the glowing yellow backpack, the material a lighter shade than what Tamakawa remembered when they initially brought the boy in. It looked a lot fuller and heavier, too, Kenji using two hands to hold onto the sides of the thing.

“I wish I knew this thing could change. One minute it’s packed in with the rest of the evidence. The next, it inflated like a daggom balloon and knocked some of our other info on the floor. Tore your file box,” Kenji muttered, handing the full-looking backpack to Midoriya.

“Oh, uhm, s-sorry,” he replied, quickly slipping his arms into the straps. “I hadn’t considered that it does that when I change.”

The moment the bag was on the boy’s back, the straps tightened by themselves until they were a safe fit on the boy’s shoulders. Kenji let go of the thing like it had hissed at him, eyes wide in the same surprise that had widened Tamakawa’s. Not even batting an eyelash, he readjusted the bag on his back until he felt it was steady, mumbling under his breath, things Tamakawa just barely picked up with his quirk.

“...fully stocked...both sets of gloves...no bends, right?...bow and...only eight left?...will have to do...”

Kenji looked up from the boy, his face twisted in confusion, but Tamakawa didn’t really have an answer for him, couldn’t answer him even if he tried.

The mumbling ended with a firm nod before he turned to the other policeman, bowing.
“Thank you for getting my bag for me!”

Kenji looked a bit stuck, like he wasn’t sure how to reply, hands hovering anxiously. “Oh, no problem, kid…”

Without missing a beat, he stood up straight and suddenly turned to Tamakawa. He opened his mouth to say something, hands starting to reach back, he paused. Fidgeted, eyes glancing vaguely towards his right wrist. Then started to fluster all over again.

“I...uhm...I—I’m going to take something out of my bag, okay? It’s not going to hurt you, I just need you t-to please do one more thing for me.”

“...And that would be?”

The boy swallowed, then reached back again, fully this time. The clip on the flap of the top of the bag snapped open without him touching it, and streams of glowing yellow ribbons started to flutter around the boy’s fingers. Kenji’s face paled at the sight, and if Tamakawa had the ability to, he probably would’ve as well.

There was no way whatever he was doing was a quirk. It was one thing to hear about magic, but another to see someone use it.

Midoriya moved his hands back in front of him, something long and still ribbon covered settled in his palms. After a moment, those ribbons faded and revealed the object to him.

The energy around it made his hair want to stand on end, that unnatural energy sparking lightly around the thing the young teen held.

“Could you take this to Yagi-san, please? Y-You said he works with All Might, so...”

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Once Yayoi had gathered her things and headed to the garage herself, Tsukauchi and Yagi were left alone in the hall, both against the wall to make sure they weren’t impeding anyone else’s path. Tsukauchi flipped through the files in his hands, making sure he had all of his notes from the interview, Yagi beside him, sending messages on his phone.

“Do you need a ride, Yagi?” Tsukauchi asked.

At the skeletal man’s pause, he already knew the answer he was going to get. Still, deciding not to say anything, he waited for his friend’s reply.

“My time,” Yagi sighed, voice low with regret, “I’ve already used it completely today. I ran my last minutes out saving the citizens from the Gray Man attack in the office building.”

Right. Of course.

“I figured as much, you had a lot of work to do today.” He reached a hand out, patting his tall friend on the shoulder. “Don’t worry about it, Yagi. You’ve done your best. We’ll be able to handle the rest.”

He heard the man beside him grunt a reply, but he sounded low. Dissatisfied.

“I...I should have been more careful about my usage. Now something big is happening, and I can’t do anything about it.”
“Regardless of whether you can work at this time or not, you saved over two hundred people today alone. Don’t sell yourself so short.”

It wasn’t an exaggeration, either. That office building had been occupied by several small to medium-sized companies and organizations. With the fatigue Mt. Lady and Kamui Woods were hit with from fighting until the end, the people All Might had carried out of the building likely wouldn’t have made it out any other way.

Yagi, though, didn’t look like he could quite accept it, eyes narrowed at his own hand. There really was no helping the man once he started his emotional self-flagellation. The most Tsukauchi knew he could do was offer support. So he did, shaking the shoulder he held lightly. Yagi looked his way, despondent, but his expression warmed at the hand. It took a few moments, he steeled himself, taking a deep breath and releasing it, dropping his hand to his side.

“All right...yes. I’ve done what I could.” He smiled, a wry one that pulled oddly on his skin, but it shifted more genuinely after a thought. “I have faith in the other heroes and the police force. But more than anything, I have faith in you.”

Tsukauchi was about to reply, but then he heard a bit of a commotion down the hall. Both men turned that way to see what it was, and he felt more than heard All Might shift into an offensive stance, his energy gone from sorrowful to imposing; skeletal or not, he was a man prepared. Tsukauchi shifted his files into one hand just in case, one hand free, but it turned out to not be an outside source.

“Detective Tsukauchi! Yagi-san!”

He watched with a mute shock as Tamakawa rounded the corner, the cause for the commotion clear as day. He said nothing as the policeman stopped before the two, the man’s breath a slight bit harder from running.

“Yagi-san, Midoriya asked me to give this to you to give to All Might. Detective Tsukauchi, your permission’s needed.”

Both men looked down at the hand Tamakawa held out to him.

He held an arrow that sparked with magic. It glowed with the energy placed in it, the arrow point a bright yellow, while the shaft was colored pink. Tamakawa held the weapon carefully in his claws, as far away from his palm and fingers as possible.

“Is there a reason you’re not touching it?” Tsukauchi asked.

Tamakawa made a barely-there face, eyes scrunching. “It...It doesn’t sit well with my fur. It’s not hurting me, it’s just. Well, unnatural. Tingly.”

“Why does young Midoriya want to give this to All Might?” Yagi asked, shifting to stand closer.

“The boy said...” His lips thinned, but he sighed and kept going. “He said that he doubts that he’s strong enough to get rid of this one using his own power.”

Both men froze, Yagi’s dark eyes staring down at the arrow.

“He said that he’s not very strong or fast, so he doesn’t think he would be able to finish it off. If it happens that he’s too hurt to move, then he wants All Might to have an advantage when he arrives. His quirk can’t beat the Gray Man, but he can beat it into submission. All he would need is the arrow
Tsukauchi didn’t know how on earth he’d be able to reject such a request knowing what the boy said.

“Alright, permission given. I’ll make sure Yagi-san gets it to All Might.”

Yagi didn’t say a word as the arrow was carefully given to him. At the moment of transfer, a spark of magic tickled against the palm of the skeletal man’s hand, and he almost pulled it back, but he managed to resist the temptation, and took a firm hold of it. Yellow energy flicked around his hand, but he didn’t release it.

The fur on Tamakawa’s hand calmed—it had gotten a bit puffed, but neither of the men had noticed until they realized the difference it made—and the policeman bowed before hurrying off.

Tsukauchi waited till the man was gone before he sighed. While he wasn’t sure before that the day could get worse, it just did. He hadn’t been able to reject the request, but it didn’t mean that All Might was any closer to arriving at the scene. He hoped in his heart that Tamakawa wasn’t going to inform Midoriya that the arrow was taken.

“Tsukauchi.”

The detective was mildly surprised by the amount of force in the previously tired man’s voice. Wordlessly, he turned to face his friend.

Yagi looked...well, he couldn’t really say. The tall man’s eyes were shadowed over, not at all helped by the slight shadows the sparking magic created on his face.

“After the ERT and heroes have left...do you think you can drive me over there, at least to get close?”

Tsukauchi blinked. “Wha...but you said you were out of time.”

“‘When All Might arrives.’ That’s what young Midoriya said.” The fingers of the hand holding the arrow curled in. “He’s expecting All Might to appear, in case he himself cannot complete a duty he shouldn’t have had in the first place. Without the faith in himself, he is putting his faith in me... I don’t know how much is left in me, and I doubt I have enough time left to fight if I get there myself, so...”

Yagi’s hand clenched on the arrow, the energy sparking between his fingers. The shadow over his gaze abated, and his bright blue eyes glowed with a fighting determination Tsukauchi hadn’t seen in a long time.

“I need to save the strength I have left to fight that creature.”

Tsukauchi gazed at his malnourished friend, a mild shock registering in his brain. Tsukauchi had been working with All Might for quite a while, and he’d had the unfortunate privilege of watching his friend’s constantly decreasing health affect the light in his eyes.

But right there, the fire in his sunken, blue-eyed gaze, was just as strong as it was when they’d first met. No...it was stronger. Like the old All Might was being rejuvenated right before him. Despite himself, despite knowing the man personally, he felt some of his teenage fanboy energy start to resurface. He hid it well with a smile and a nod.

“Understood. I’ll hang back, but get yourself ready. We’ll be leaving soon after they’re gone.”
The Kronia, Part 2: Battle at the Isle

Chapter Summary

Warning: Graphic Depictions of Violence and Gore.

All links are to music. Feel free to ignore those.

...Happy Valentine's Day :)

The police took the heroes who were at the police station in an Emergency Response Team vehicle, the van having a compartment in the back like a delivery truck with a bench and several seat belts lining each wall. There was enough room in it for some heavy-duty police to fit as well, so the heroes rode alongside them.

There were five available seats on each side. Fraction and Manual rode closer to the door on each end. On Fraction’s side, four police were strapped in, preparing their weapons (with rubber bullets this time). On Manual’s side, three police sat, but right beside the man, Minute Maid filled one seat with his small body, ever-present fidgeting, and mumbling.

Manual watched the boy worriedly, noting how he covered his mouth with one of his hands as a constant stream of noise left him.

“...Uh, hey,” he tried, raising a hand towards the boy--Midoriya, his memory provided.

He wasn’t heeded in the least, Midoriya’s wide, unseeing eyes staring down at his knees as he used his fingers to count something. Sweat was running down the side of his head, making his hair damp at the ends, and his body was shivering lightly--whether it was energy or fear, he wasn’t sure. It was probably both.

“Hey.”

No response, only mumbling.

“Hey, Minute Maid,” Manual tried again, putting a hand on the boy’s shoulder.

That finally got his attention. Midoriya practically hopped out of his seat in shock, eyes wide, a strangled squeak dragged out from his mouth. Manual put his hands up placatingly, a surprised laugh almost coming out of him, but he held it in with tightly pressed lips. The laughter in him was snuffed out with the idea that what was happening must’ve been getting to the boy. Sighing, he put his hands down onto his lap, but stayed looking at the boy, who turned to him, stilted and nervous.

“Are you alright, kid?”

Midoriya seemed to consider the question for a second, his eyes trailing off to the side before focusing back on him, a wobbly excuse of a smile in place. “W-Would you believe me if I said yes?”

“Absolutely not,” he panned back, eyes lidding.

“Ehh...ehheheh...”
“Do you want to tell me what’s wrong?”

Midoriya looked off to the side again, his mouth twisting at the corners. He hummed lowly, head tilting one way, then the other. He looked just about like he was going to start mumbling again, but before Manual could dissuade him from doing so, the boy spoke up.

“It’s just that… I h-have a lot of speculation on w-what quirk this Gray Man took from, b-but without confirmation, I can’t really p-predict how to take it down faster. I don’t know enough yet…”

That...had not been what he was expecting the boy to be worried about. He was expecting some crying about having to fight--ah, but then again, he’d volunteered to come, so really, that was a faulty expectation on his part.

Manual cleared his throat. “The report said that a Gray Man used its abilities to break out of the cell in the second Tartarus, in particular, that the metal framing had been bent, and when bullets were used against it, it controlled them.”

‘And returned them from whence they came’ was left unsaid.

“So it’s likely to be either metal, magnetic, or electromagnetic manipulation...does it have marble color?”

The hero blinked. “Yes.”

He watched as Midoriya put his hand on his chin. “So then, we can assume that its powers are stolen, right?”

“I suppose so, yeah...oh.” Manual felt himself brighten, because now he was getting it. It was starting to make sense how the boy had taken down other Gray Men without much assistance before. ‘So if we can identify whose power it’s taken from, we can identify the weaknesses as well. That’s what you’re doing.’

“Ah, well,” the boy flustered, “it’s a start, anyway? I think...uhm...b-but the thing is, it may have taken from a random citizen that it encountered, we wouldn’t be able to tell, so really, I’m just hoping it took from a hero…” He paused, flustering. “Ah! I-I mean! I don’t! Uhm!”

The Normal hero could feel Fraction tense in the seat across from them, but Manual didn’t think the boy had any rude or mean intent. “No, no, I understand what you mean. You don’t wish it, but it’s easier to identify if it’s a hero.”

Midoriya looked extremely cowed, his face red as he nodded. “I-I’m sorry…”

“You’re fine. What are you thinking, then?”

“W-Well...uhm…” Midoriya started to play with his fingers, though they fumbled when the truck bumped on something. “Th-There’s only...a-a few heroes with those kinds of powers...like Crankback, Iron Soul, Electronico, Disco Party, and Vico, but two of them are retired, one’s in another country for natural disaster assistance, one’s in jail, and one’s on maternity leave. If anything had happened to one of them, it would be big news, unless the information was hushed...then again, I’m not considering sidekicks, because there’s plenty of them that could’ve gotten hit, but they’re almost always around heroes, and even then, big news would’ve come out about them still because they work with a hero, and still, those five are big-name, there’s still some newer ones in the last two years that I haven’t committed to memory or been able to document since I’ve been so busy, though some of them I do remember! I do! Because there’s Metalika, Underformer, Cut-Lace, Blackjack, Major Ingra, Kazek--”
“Blackjack.”

Both he and Midoriya startled at Fraction’s voice, Midoriya likely since he was mid-sentence, and Manual, honestly, because he’d gotten stuck in the middle of all the information Midoriya had started rapidly spitting out. Fraction was staring at Midoriya like he had a third eye, but it wasn’t really as hostile of a gaze as before.

“Blackjack’s been out of commission for months. I haven’t seen or heard anything from him either.”

Manual was, unfortunately, not familiar with Blackjack. He realized that he’d heard briefly about an upcoming hero with that name, but just as quickly as the name appeared, it disappeared. He was a busy man, so the passing name hadn’t been all that important to him. Beside him, Midoriya’s eyes widened.

“The last I heard of him was in a p-podcast! That was...almost two months ago. Do you know what happened to him?”

“No. I didn’t know him personally or anything, so I never visited him when he got injured. They never specified what injury it was, though,” Fraction replied.

“Then...then that could be it. The Gray Man possibly stole a part of his quirk!” Midoriya turned back to Manual, wavering eyes eager. “I didn’t know a lot about his quirk, but I do remember it! He could control small metallic objects, though he preferred metals reinforced with carbon fiber! That explains why the Gray Man could only bend the metal bars rather than use them, yet it could control bullets! It’s the size that matters most!”

“Yes...Yeah, that could be it.” The weight of the unknown started to lift from Manual’s chest. He hadn’t known he’d been anxious about it, but having something solid to consider was rather reassuring. “Then a fire quirk like Endeavor’s will be effective against him.”

“Maybe a water quirk, too? I’m not sure how effective it is at controlling rusted or frozen metal.”

Manual grinned, “Well, while I can’t freeze water, I can shape it. Maybe if I can’t freeze it, misdirecting it will work.”

With the way the boy brightened, he felt more confident as well. His energy was a bit infectious after all. While Midoriya was still very much filled with nervous energy, the Normal Hero could see exactly how much effort he was putting into pushing through his fear. It was certainly commendable on the boy’s part. Still, he put his hand on the boy’s shoulder, making him pause his too-eager, half-panicked, theory-filled tirade.

“Don’t worry, Minute Maid. We’ll take care of the heavy work, alright? You can rely on us.”

Midoriya blinked, then he watched as the corners of his eyes filled with small, budding tears before he turned forward, rubbing his arm against his face.

“Mnhmm!” He said, nodding.

Manual hoped that would be enough to keep the boy’s nerves at bay, because it wouldn’t much longer… In the meantime, he sent a message to the heroes and police about Minute Maid’s speculations, hoping the finalized plan would be as effective as he hoped.

---

A makeshift island of rock, concrete, and metal sat still in the sea, the waters around it bustling with
an increasing strength. The top of the manmade isle was surrounded at each of its four corners with pillar-elevated guns, all rendered inactive due to what was inside of them, the pillars having stairways and elevators leading down to the underwater cells or up to the guns.

There was a place for cargo trucks to stop and be checked before entrance, tall cranes rendered still from the paused construction, and boxes and poles stacked against the walls and all around the open area near the main road. The two-lane road curved around at one point where the trucks could pause in front of the main office before turning back to become two lanes heading in the other direction. The main office stood tall and cube-shaped like the one at Tartarus, for check-in and corporate issues, which went up three floors down another two. A mere 15 miles to the isle’s left, the original Tartarus stood, taller, more well-made, and full of people with magnificent quirks.

The bridge leading to it from the mainland was becoming increasingly occupied by many different heroes, all of whom came at the call from the second island, some of them already starting to cross the bridge in armored vehicles.

Above them, the sky became increasingly gray with dark, rolling clouds.

Standing in a puddle of floating water, her poncho waving in the wind of the storm she was fending off with her quirk, Climantine watched the island with her binoculars, her transmitter buzzing with noise in her ear. She wore a white leather armor over her leotard, etched with orange designs trailing along the sides in the simplified Polynesian shark teeth and spearhead tattoo patterns.

For a moment, she lowered the binoculars, frowning down at the island. The idea that so many of those creatures were caged inside more than worried her, but the constant stream of noise in her right ear was reassuring. Above her, the clouds rumbled, and she smiled.

Back in the city, she had thought of the situation too lightly, but now? She was in her element.

[Climantine,] a voice rang in the earpiece, [What’s your status?]

She pressed the button on the earpiece, eyes not leaving the island. “All’s clear up here. The storm is a heavy one, but not so much it’s causing a strain. There’s nothing coming up to the surface on the island yet, but I’ll keep you updated.”

[Good. In the meantime, we’ve started sending a few heroes over the bridge. Gladiator, Gunhead, Copper Devil, Mr. Champion, and Snipe are going first for suppressive fire, while Ingenium, Fourth Kind, and Falcon will be on rescue protocol. Gang Orca, Selkie, and Anthozoa are monitoring Tartarus for activity.]

“Roger that,” she replied, clicking her side of the transmitter off.

She raised the binoculars again and continued monitoring the situation. A quick look at the bridge showed one of many big, black vehicles heading over, likely with said heroes inside. Nodding, she raised her view back up to the island and--

Her eyes widened, and she increased the zoom to try to see, just to make sure she hadn’t been imagining it.

Surely enough, there was a dark figure walking out from the main check-in station. It didn’t take long to recognize it wasn’t human, based on how its body thrummed with a dark pink energy. Before anything else, that stuck out to her the most.

She pressed her transmitter quickly, “Hey! It’s coming out! It’s exiting the main station right now!”
[What?!]

[We didn’t get a report from inside. Where are they?]

[Are communications cut? They should’ve said if--]

[Climantine, stay on standby!] a voice cut in through the chaos, Deputy Chief Kawamura’s voice ringing in. [The other heroes are almost there, just stay holding back the storm!]

She grit her teeth, but it wasn’t as though she had anything else she could do. This one was even stronger than the one that had almost killed her before. Even with her new armor, she knew she wasn’t a combat-heavy hero.

She’d just have to let them handle it, and report what she saw. That was it.

She didn’t have to fight.

“Roger…” she replied, clicking off her connection.

The clouds above her rumbled, and her lips pursed as she rose her binoculars to her eyes again.

---

The truck stopped short of the entrance platform, but that was more to protect the driver than anything else. From the back of the truck, the heroes spilled out, Gladiator’s hulking figure trudging out first as the truck bobbed with the loss of weight. Following out, Mr. Champion’s cape waved in the air, Snipe came out with his hand on his holster, Copper Devil grinned behind her long, coppery bangs. Ingenium hopped out, engines warm and ready, with Falcon glaring at the building ahead, Fourth Kind flexing his fingers, his golden rings removed, and Gunhead, his arms ready and armed with keratin.

“Remember the plan and stick to it,” Fourth Kind bellowed, “The second and fourth entrances have the stairs due to the lack of elevators at the moment, but the second one is our best bet. We’ll need to stick close”

“We’ll give ya cover by distractin’ it-ssu. So don’t worry ‘bout a thing-ssu,” Copper Devil said, peering over to the center of the island. “Falcon, I see a figure over there-ssu. Is that it?”

The hero stared over for a moment, letting his quirk focus on the target.

Walking out from the central office was a tall, dark figure. Its body had grown to the point Falcon recognized it was taller than even All Might. Sharp spikes poked out from its dark pink body, and long, slightly curving horns poked out from the front of its head like an oni. Rather than having a static face, it was a solid pink-black color like the rest of its body, and behind its head, a big brush of billowing, cloud-like magic flowed in the air, much like hair. Orbiting it were small floating pieces of metal, some of them easily recognizable as bullets.

He pulled an arrow from his quiver. “It sure is.”

“It works fast, doesn’t it,” Mr. Champion hissed, balling his fists.

“Its appearance has changed since the last report. We’ll need to work quick. Snipe, maybe you could give it a greeting?”

The hero nodded before raising his gun, focusing for a moment, then shooting, rubber bullets flying
out and sailing towards the monster ahead.

It didn’t move out of the way of the bullets, so it ended up struck in the face. It leaned back from the force of the contact, one of its longer-than-usual arms reaching up to hold onto its face. The creature screeched in a familiar static cry, prompting the heroes to further action, rushing forward to meet the monster head-on.

“Remember! Wear it out until they can bring assistance!” Mr. Champion yelled, before he shifted to run behind Gladiator as the others did.

The Gray Man hissed angrily before sending off some of its arsenal, metal shards and bullets flying at the heroes before they could cross under the arch at the entrance of the island. Faster than the bullets could get to the heroes, Gladiator used his quirk, and all over his body, even under his Grecian outfit, his skin turned into an exoskeleton of brown plates that slid smoothly against each other with each of his weighted strides. He rose his arms then, and the bullets bounced off of the plating without even leaving a dent.

“Try me again, little man!” Gladiator roared, his adrenaline boosted.

Once they were past the arch, Fourth Kind, Ingenium, and Falcon hurried over to the right, where one of the pillars stood tall, a number 2 painted on it in white. While Fourth Kind picked up the wooden top of one of the boxes around, using it to hide his body like a shield, Ingenium held onto the two heroes, keeping his elbows bent facing back, and used his quirk. In a quick gust of air, they were moving quickly over to the pillar.

The creature noticed this and got ready to attack them with a loud screech, the metal orbiting its body moving faster, but before the bullets could shoot off, Gladiator slammed into its body full-force, Mr. Champion pushing the man like a shield. The Gray Man hissed loudly, pressing its pinprick legs into the metal floor, but the two heroes were able to push it back all the way to the doors of the looming central office. They slammed into the plexiglas with a loud clang.

Behind them, Snipe hid behind some heavy metal boxes and prepared to take aim, Gunhead doing similarly on the other side of the road. Copper Devil crept closer as she could staying covert among the construction supplies. All eyes stayed trained on the building, trying to see what happened.

A moment later, Mr. Champion went flying out of the building, slamming into the ground with a loud cry. Gladiator followed the hero outside, but did so while holding the side of the Gray Man’s head, slamming it into the concrete below them, all the while, the orbit of metal tried to scratch and scrape against his exoskeleton. One of the sharp pieces flew out towards Mr. Champion, but Gunhead shot it, the metal and keratin bouncing off each other. For its trouble, Gladiator yelled as he rose the creature’s head and slammed it down again.

The headstrong man grinned down at the creature, but his eyes widened as he saw grey lichtenberg figures start to leak slowly into his fingers. With a grunt, he strengthened his plating, the figures slowing considerably. The creature breathed in heavily, and the hero could sense the monster’s legs moving, but he didn’t have to act.

The Gray Man’s left leg had risen up, but a coppery hand grasped the end near where its ankle would be. It tried to turn to look and see who it was, but it couldn’t do much with the side of its face planted into the concrete. At the monster’s legs, Copper Devil grinned.

“Gladiator, ya might wanna--”

“Go ahead and do it! I can take it!” the hero bellowed, pressing the monster down harder in
preparation.

“...Well, if ya insist-ssu...”

Still holding the left leg with her left hand, she reached her right one down to press one of the many
trigger buttons on her waistband. The next moment, she used her quirk’s advantage as the button
triggered an electric charge, shooting 45 milliamps through her victim. Despite not having internal
organs, the creature was still affected by the shock, though to a lesser degree than anticipated. Still, it
froze up and screeched, its mouth slotting open in an array of jagged darkness. Above it, Gladiator
clenched his teeth and fought to withstand the pain of the shock.

Once the charge ended, the creature was still for a moment, the orbit of metal near it disrupted, some
of the pieces falling to the ground in clanks, but the next, its right leg moved, stabbing forward at
Copper Devil.

She hadn’t even shifted a bit before its right leg stabbed through her bangs and into her forehead, the
“foot” getting lodged right where her brain was. Her mouth was open in an “O” at the move, and
Gladiator turned to look at her, eyes widening.

Her mouth shifted into an even wider grin than before, the leg moving as she moved her forehead.

“I’mma up the voltage, Gladiator. If ya don’t wanna let go, clench ya butt or somethin’-ssu.”

The hero laughed before he did as he was told, and grit his teeth as she pressed another button and
the voltage upped to 50 milliamps. Both he and the Gray Man were surrounded by jittering yellow
light, the electricity traveling along their bodies, but most of it was centered on the creature. It hissed
out static in pain, its body convulsing under the other hero’s hold on its face.

“How’d’ya like that, ey?” she jeered.

Copper Devil’s grin dropped for real at that point. The voice was severely distorted, but it had
something of a childlike tilt to it. A second later, when the electric charge faded, the Gray Man
moved its captured leg, kicking out to the side behind its body. The heroine cried out as her alloy
body lost its hold on him, and she was sent flying before hitting a pile of wooden boxes, some of
them breaking on contact. Gladiator moved to let go of the monster, but it reached up so that the
spike on its left arm caged the hero’s hand to its cheek, the right hand grasping higher up on his arm.

The heroes made it to the underground prison levels by taking the stairs, Ingenium’s quirk unable to
help them then. Starting from the first level of prison cells, they started to search the building for any
living soldiers as directed, the main building directed to be left alone until the second wave of rescue
heroes could arrive. When searching the observation room, they found no one, their headset and
communications mic laying on the seat in front of the static-filled screens. All of the cameras were
offline, nothing available to see unless they were actually there, so the group proceeded on.

The first floor’s lights weren’t working completely, some of the flickering as the heroes made their
way through the halls, hissing Gray Men kept solidly in their cells, struggling fruitlessly against their
bonds. Some of the cells, though, were broken into, the plexiglas door shattered, some of the metal
skeleton around it bent.
“Be on the lookout for any rouge Gray Men,” Ingenium muttered, looking for any bodies.

“Didn’t the creature outside eat them all?” Falcon asked, his bow drawn slightly with his arrow already in place.

“It’s possible that it did, but just in case some of these were broken without its assistance due to the chaos, we’d better still look out in case we must battle.

The first floor yielded very little. It wasn’t until they made their way through the stairway to the second floor that they did see something. Rather, someone.

In the suit-up section before the second floor, an armored man laid against the door, a bloody trail extending from the splatter on the middle of the door to the puddle on the ground, the man having bled out. Ingenium sighed before bending down in front of the man, taking in his nametag and open eyes. With a quick prayer, he and Fourth Kind moved him to one of the benches, then opened the door slowly.

Before they left completely, Falcon stared at the man before moving towards him. He rose the soldier’s helmet and closed his eyes before setting the helmet back on. Satisfied, he drew his bow tight and continued after his comrades.

The man had only been one of many. Where the first floor had been body-less, the second one had two others laying in the first hall. They were motionless on the ground, the lights above still flickering from some electrical mishap, a pool of blood around both of them, though one of them had a very clear injury right in his neck. Fourth Kind’s teeth clenched, but he still directed the others to follow, his eyes peeled for any sudden movements, ears filled with the angry cries of the Gray Men around them.

In their search on the floor, they found none of the ten bodies they found to be more than corpses. The third floor yielded much of the same results, only twenty eight bodies were found instead, some of them leaning up against Gray Men cells, leaving a bloody trail on it from where they slumped over.

“This is...too much,” Ingenium said lowly under his mask, the three making their way to the fourth floor. “I’ve never seen this many bodies since I’ve started...”

“Negligence is what caused all of this...negligence! Even though Gray Men are still an unknown issue, they brought them to an incomplete facility.”

“To be fair, the issue cropped up pretty quickly. They didn’t have time to finish,” Falcon said, growing wary as they made their way down to the big door with a large, painted number 4 on it. “And I’m guessing their floor plans were a little...off because of it.”

Fourth Kind said nothing in reply, opening the first door.

Much to their relief, there were no bodies in the equipment sector, so they continued on to the first main hall.

They froze there, shocked into complete silence.

Blood was splattered on the walls like a painting. The floors were covered with twisted, mutilated bodies, enough that there was a better chance at stepping on a corpse than the floor. Parts of the walls had bullet holes in them, though the guns were now against the ground, ruined by the blood. The smell was...cloying. It filled the air with its perfume, so much so that Falcon had to turn his head and gag.
Ingenium stood still, eyes wide under his helmet. Fourth Kind’s eyes steeled, but he swallowed thickly at the destruction in front of him.

“Maybe we should wait for backup,” Ingenium suggested, but paused. “...But if we do--”

“Then whoever’s clinging to life here would die,” Fourth Kind finished with a shuddered huff.

“To be fair, you two,” Falcon said, moving in front of them with his hand over his mouth, his sharp-eyed quirk searching the ground, “I doubt the Gray Man would’ve left anyone living.”

“Then a quick look-over won’t hurt,” Fourth Kind grit out, starting to step out into the hall. “Just be careful, and stay together in a group.”

“Falcon, maybe you could use your quirk to search the halls, that way we don’t have to linger too long, especially in the last hall.” Ingenium put a hand on his shoulder. “The faster we can get out of here, the better.”

The hero looked skeptical under his masquerade mask, gazing up at the taller man, but he nodded anyway, pulling his arrow taut as he moved forward.

The Gray Men in their cells hissed furiously at them, and they avoided stepping on bodies as much as they could. Still, their footprints made marks in the blood around them, and Falcon had to raise his hand again, severely at risk of getting sick. Ingenium put a supportive hand on his shoulder, helping him continue forward as the sharp-seeing hero confirmed the lack of movement in the second and third halls, the ones that connected again into the fourth one at the other end.

As they made it down the third one, ignoring the second, they saw three more broken cells, the chains empty and the dust from their occupants’ bodies burnt into the concrete. Fourth Kind frowned at the cells, but otherwise continued, checking back to make sure his comrades were alright.

The fourth hall was also full of dead bodies—fewer than the last three, but enough to be just as disturbing. Two cells there destroyed and full of soot. The lights above had been smashed out, the flickering there much less frequent, but that was to flicker on rather than off. The three heroes stayed at the opening of the hall as Falcon gazed in.

Falcon was just about to shake his head again, but then his gaze caught something. In the middle of the hall, there was one particularly big, muscular body laying on the ground, face to the side, her eyes open and unseeing. It wasn’t her body that moved, her muscles didn’t twitch, but there was something under her. Someone under her. He peered closer, and sure enough, there was another brush of dark brown hair under the woman’s head that shifted just slightly.

“Over there! The big one in the middle! That woman covered someone!” Falcon cried out, rushing forward.

Fourth Kind and Ingenium followed after him, quickly catching sight of the head of hair shifting under the woman’s body.

When they got closer, they found that the woman’s back was riddled with holes and scars, her body likely used to shield the one under her from the Gray Man’s attack. With that in mind, Fourth Kind and Ingenium moved her with quickly, but with care, shifting her heavy body off of the person below her.

Laying with their face to the other side was a smaller man, his short hair smudged with blood, his whole torso covered with it. He groaned with the relief of the woman’s pressure, but otherwise
didn’t move much more than the attempts of his twitching hands, one hazy eye trying to open and stay that way, the other closed against the bloody ground. As the other two heroes moved the woman, Falcon bent down and slowly turned the man over onto his back.

The man moaned in pain as he was, and Falcon readjusted the man’s body to cradle his broken left arm in his own lap. His breath came out as a slight wheeze, but he was still breathing, and trying his damndest to wake up.

“He’s severely injured! I think one of his lungs might be punctured? We need to get him out of here now!”

Fourth Kind rushed over from the woman’s body and took a look at him. “Looks right. I’ll carry him, you keep your hands on your weapon!”

Ingenium pressed the button on his speaker, walking ahead of the two heroes to the exit back to the other halls as he began to look for any hiding people, “Report! Have an ambulance ready! We found one person still alive in the 4th floor of the prison--”

“Maeda-san! Can you hear me, Maeda-san?” Fourth Kind asked, cradling the injured man his arms, the man groaning, trying to turn his head towards the one carrying him.

Fourth Kind and Falcon stood up from at the same time before moving to catch back up with the very watchful Ingenium. As Fourth Kind started moving away, Falcon followed closely, his hand pulling the string of his bow and the arrow taut, his eyes peeled for anyone else.

But suddenly, he found himself stopped, his ankle grabbed, making him stumble behind the muscular, four-armed man.

Another person! is what flashed through Falcon’s mind, before he realized that, well, that wasn’t quite likely. After all, he’d checked the hallway before they’d even walked in, and the one person that they had found was so close to unconsciousness and death that they hadn’t been able to do something as strenuous as grabbing.

That’s when he noticed that the Gray Men in their hall had gone silent.

The bodies on the ground near his wrist shifted, and plopped to the ground, falling off of the body rising up from below them. The hand stayed on his ankle, so he couldn’t turn as much as he wanted, but he did turn as much as he could in the monster’s grasp to aim his arrow down and back, eyes wide with fear under his mask.

A Gray Man with a nearly solid face peered up at him, its face jittering and twitching with static but staying more constant than he’d seen it on others. It was dripping liberally with the blood of the humans around them. One of them sat over its head like a bear’s skin pulled over a barbarian, only the body still had all of its insides.

It...hid? Did it mimic what happened to Maeda-san...?!

He could barely shoot off an arrow before the Gray Man moved, a big hand heading for his face.

He screamed at the same time he heard Fourth Kind and Ingenium call his hero name.

---

When the EMT got to the stop right before the bridge, their truck was stopped and opened, Deputy Chief Kawamura squeezing on the door handles with wrinkled, ashy hands. All inside were greeted
with the man’s stern, straight body, his cap baring his salt and pepper hair on the sides and back of his head to the winds of the constantly brewing storm.

“We’ve gotten a new report from the heroes fighting the Gray Man on the island. It’s too dangerous for police interference! You seven will join the force keeping the area deserted--we don’t need any civilians or media coming close!” he commanded, moving out of the way so the troops could get off and join the other police groups moving to secure the area. After a moment, he turned back to the other three in the car.

Manual had unbuckled his seatbelt and was getting out, but paused with the man still in the way. Fraction was out of his seat as well, standing and ready.

Behind Manual, Minute Maid stared wide-eyed at the man, his hand holding onto Manual’s arm.

The Deputy Chief blinked at the boy. Minute Maid blinked back.

“Sir?” Manual asked, frowning. “Sir, we’re kind of in a hurry.”

“Oh, right.” The chief cleared his throat. “You two can stay in this truck and I’ll send you both over as soon as we get a little more back up. Either get on rescue protocol or fight the main Gray Man. I’ll give you the map to the building, but a group of heroes is already on level 4 of the prison. You, on the other hand,” he said, pointing at Minute Maid, startling him, “are going to get off this truck and--”

Suddenly, there was an urgent noise on the other side of his earpiece, someone yelling loud enough that the heroes could hear their voice, even though they couldn’t understand what it was saying. The deputy chief turned his head slightly, “Hold on, Climantine, what did you--” He paused, his mouth still open as the voice continued on the other end. The heroes grew more impatient, Fraction starting to tap his foot while Manual tried his best to keep still, aware of the nervous energy Minute Maid was continuously giving off.

After a moment, the man turned back to the heroes, but his commanding presence had lessened, and there was a hint of worry finally visible.

“We can’t wait for more heroes to fill the truck. Do you mind going by yourselves until more arrive on scene?”

Manual shifted backwards at that to get back into the bed of the truck, Minute Maid stumbling back to give him room. “No sir, I don’t mind.” From the corner of his eye, he could see Fraction nod in agreement, and presumed, from the no-nonsense frown the chief suddenly had, that Minute Maid had nodded as well.

The chief glared hard at the boy, “Minute Maid, is it true that you can get rid of the Gray Man with your quirk?”

“Uhm...s-sir, i-it’s not--”

“Can you or can you not do it?” he repeated, eyes narrowed further in his demand.

Minute Maid’s body stiffened behind Manual, but he didn’t move to hide. Instead, he breathed in, steeling himself, then replied.

“Y-Yes sir!”

“Fine.”
Minute Maid squeaked as the man underhand tossed the three some ear sets like the one he had. He then handed a map to Manual, who quickly took and opened it to show the floor plans of the island ahead.

“Snipe, Mr. Champion, Gladiator, Gunhead, Ingenium, Copper Devil, Fourth Kind, and Falcon are already there. Like I said, there’s a rescue mission in progress on level 4 of the prison, and a battle right on top when you get there. The Gray Man is apparently proving an even greater issue than expected, so please be careful.”

“Understood,” Manual replied, getting back into his seat and strapping himself in. Fraction followed suit, then Minute Maid stumbled back to his seat, fumbling with the seat belt to buckle himself back in.

For a moment, while the heroes and the glowing child started talking strategy, the chief stood there. The idea of sending a kid in, just because they had a useful quirk... Seriously, he was getting close to retirement at this point.

“I can’t tell you two a damn thing, but for God’s sakes, one of you keep an eye on her,” the chief huffed, pulling the doors closed, “And shove her away from the scene if she’s being a nuisance. She’s your problem now.”

He shut the doors before he could hear anything else from them.

---

After the Gray Man screamed in its indignation, the fight started to shift.

With the hand that held onto Gladiator’s arm, it started to leech magic from the man’s body. His hand, pinned against the creature as it was, was useless, but he still had other limbs. With an angry yell, the hero grabbed one of the monster’s horns and yanked at it, it’s head turning with the force. He then picked up a leg and slammed his foot against the creature’s torso, making it release a screech at the contact which broke into the concrete below them.

“Let go of me!” Gladiator bellowed, slamming his foot against the creature’s torso again, then twice more in quick succession.

Finally, the creature lost its finger grip on him and its hand slipped. When it did, he returned his grip to the monster’s face and picked it up, swinging his body around in three circles before throwing the creature away from him and head first towards the recovered Mr. Champion, the latter’s fists balled and ready.

At first, it seemed as though the monster would stay limp as it sailed in the air, but then it jutted its head out towards the hero, its horns prepared to pierce the hero. Mr. Champion was prepared though, and dodged to the side before grabbing one of the horns, slamming the creature into the ground again. He let go it with both hands before he started to use both speed and strength to pummel it into the ground.

As he did, Gunhead darted out from his spot and, in a sort of quickly thought coordination, the two double-teamed the monster, keeping it from moving without a punch hitting it somewhere. At that moment, Gunhead’s keratin bullets became like claws that scratched and scraped at the creature’s skin, and Mr. Champion’s speedy hits came with the cry of Mighty Meteor Shower in his rush of adrenaline.

Gladiator, in the distance, caught his breath and looked over to see if Copper Devil was alright.
When he saw her pick herself up from the rubble and inch her way closer to the fight to interfere if necessary, he knew she was alright. He then turned back to the strong armed heroes, marveling at their work, his own energy boosting as he thought of a million and one ways to crack the creature.

As he did, he balled his fist and summoned his plates again, only to find that some refused to listen to him.

With wide eyes, he turned to his right arm, and noticed that his veins on his forearm had taken on a curious gray color. It was where those very veins were that his quirk didn’t quite answer as they should, the rest of his plating coming up with a partially revealed part on his forearm.

“What the…”

Back in his spot, Snipe noticed Gladiator’s hesitation to get back into the fray and looked over, only to see an almost fully covered hero, his gray-veined arm not quite listening. Under his mask, his eyes widened, and he turned to look at the two heroes still going at it on the monster’s body. Quickly, he pressed his earpiece, even as they worked at subduing the creature.

“Gunhead! Mr. Champion! Be careful! It’s taken some of Gladiator’s quirk!”

Gunhead gave a miniscule nod of recognition, keeping his fists moving. Mr. Champion, though, while his fists kept beating down on the creature, turned his head to check on his fellow hero to note, with a shocked gasp, that Snipe hadn’t been lying.

It was that moment’s lack of attention that the Gray Man latched on to.

The next punch that Mr. Champion pressed down came back with a yell of pain and a bloodied fist, his skin pierced on one of the horns on the monster’s suddenly turned head, it’s neck twisted unnaturally in a mere moment to catch him.

The loss of pressure on its body led it to put its arms back and bend its legs before pushing up, its body arching with enough speed and force to push both heroes back from its form.

“hi... t y h t y h U R T S!!”

With its hands firmly on the ground, it flipped its lower half over until it was crouched, and it looked ready to rush forward and attack before three rubber bullets smacked into its face and neck full-force, it’s body canting to the side as it screeched. Before it could get its bearings, Gunhead fired off some of his keratin bullets, hitting its face and neck the other way, making it tilt that way as well.

Mr. Champion backed up, groaning over his stabbed, bleeding hand, as Snipe and Gunhead fired off at the creature, making it tilt left and right and back up away from them, instead sending it towards the slowly creeping Copper Devil coming up behind it.

The two paused their shots once she was close enough, and the monster’s hands clenched before it tried moving forward, only for an arm to wrap around its waist.

A moment later, it was screeching with enough force for a jagged toothed mouth to open on its face, its body surrounded by yellow, sparking electricity. Behind it, pressing her cheek against its back, Copper Devil let herself start to melt against it slightly, her arm losing form as it started extending to circle back around to her face. With her other, formed arm, she pressed button after button of increasing charges, strong enough that the Gray Man’s billowing, cloudy head of hair was turning jagged and fizzled from the force against it.

In front, Gladiator got his focus back, and, despite the weakening of his quirk in his right arm,
moved into an open position, his hands and legs akimbo, large body foreboding and vast.

“Hhh...heheheh...to think that I would have to use this against a humanoid creature…”

_He took in a deep breath, one that expanded his chest even further than it looked he could with such bulging muscles. At the swift exhale, a hot steam came off of his body, and the plates that formed on him were visibly thicker, heavier, and shined bronze with a splendor only seen in the finest steel. Save for his right forearm, where only the normal plates formed, his very skin was an immaculate, shining suit of armor._

“Athena’s Revenge!”

With a loud battle cry, he barreled forward as fast as he could, his heavy steps creating foot-shaped craters in the ground. As he ran, picking up speed, Mr. Champion, even with his bleeding hand, went behind him faster than the man could move and, like before, pushed against him to make him move faster, their quirks joining forces. The Gladiator became like a gleaming wrecking ball, heading straight for the shocked-still creature.

Despite the incoming force, Copper Devil stayed where she was, peering around the creature’s waist at their approaching forms as she kept shocking her victim, her eyes narrowed below her hair. _Not yet...not yet…_

They came ever closer, so much so that the very ground shook below her.

_Now!_

When they were a mere four steps away, she let go of the creature and darted off to the side as quickly as she could, managing to dodge out of the way just in time for the impact to happen. When it did, it came with the clang of bodies, the loud cracking of concrete, and plumes of dust that burst out from where they hit. The pressure from their impact was strong enough to aid her escape, the wind throwing her out of the way till she hit the ground with a gasp, sprawled out on the concrete.

_Snipe, the closest hero to her, drew closer even as he stayed as in cover as possible until he couldn’t anymore. Then he ran straight to her side, trying to help her up._

“Copper, are you alright?”

“Ahh...” she muttered.

_Her body felt too warm, like she couldn’t quite gather herself all the way together. She felt too stretched out, weak. As she tried to look up at Snipe through her hair, she realized then that the underside of her bangs looked just a tad melty._

“I think...I shocked it a lil’ too much. Got too hot, I’m meltin’ a bit.”

“It’s alright,” the hero reassured, scooping his arms under hers, pulling her further away from the fighting zone, “we’ll take it from here, just--”

_The clouds above rumbled dangerously, the rolling puffs having long turned dark and murky. Around them, small patters of rain were starting to fall, just little sprinkles of it, barely noticable._

_The dust from the impact was settling, letting the others see their status._

_Mr. Champion, pushing still on Gladiator’s body, was sweating with the effort to do so, and Gladiator himself, his arms crossed over his chest, pressed against the monstrous creature. The_
Gray Man, though, was pressing right back with the effort all its own, its feet dug deep into the concrete, its hands pressed against the opposing hero. They struggled like that at a stalemate, Gladiator no longer able to push, and the Gray Man seeming to weaken in its pushing back.

Before anyone could move to help, the Gray Man, still struggling with its thin arms against the thick, bulging muscles of the hero, moved where it was grabbing to hero to tug sharply at his left elbow. It budged just a bit, but not enough, so it pulled harder, hissing angrily. It got pushed back a little further after a moment, Mr. Champion’s strength helping his friend with a cry of strain.

Then, where the monster had been opening its mouth in fury, it suddenly closed it. Then, Snipe and Copper Devil heard something creak and groan before screeching loudly, echoing around them. The noise was painful to their ears, Copper Devil covering hers as Snipe managed and pulled her away, his ear covers already present for the practiced use his gun.

As he did, she turned her head, trying to search for the source, before she noticed one of the building cranes shuddering with some sort of effort. When she focused her eyes against the dark gray, slightly raining sky, she saw little bits of metal flying off of it, plucked away like pulling a barbed needle from skin.

The screws...

Taking her hands off her ears, she tried to scream to the two that the monster was getting more ammo, but they couldn’t hear her over the sound of the screeching metal.

The screws flew down from the crane, but passed behind the heroes the Gray Man fought against. There, they shifted and contorted, bent by some supernatural will, until they formed something of a misshapen, jagged spike.

Copper Devil screamed for the men to watch out at the sight of it, trying to get their attention, but to her luck, she wasn’t the only one who noticed it. Gunhead, trying to recover from the terrible noise he was closest to, also saw the spike and ran at it. He then put his hands on the floating thing, trying to use his gun gauntlets to protect his wrists from cutting on it. But he could barely get a hold of it before it sliced past his skin, the man grunting in pain from its swift escape, leaving him with bloodied hands.

A second later, there was a loud thok sound, and a squelch.

Behind Gladiator, Mr. Champion suddenly went still.

A second later, the man’s body fell to the ground like a ragdoll, his head smacking against the concrete, a short, jagged pole of screws sticking through his chest, right where his heart was. He left a splatter of blood on Gladiator’s back.

Gladiator, knowing what happened, still able to feel wetness, yelled in fury and, by himself, attempted to push the Gray Man back further. But without the strength of his friend, his movements weren’t faster or more forceful anymore, and the Gray Man, with two more heavy pushes, managed to get the man to back up. That one movement made Gladiator step on one of his friend’s limp legs, his foot crushing the bone below him.

“No!” he bellowed, but lost his footing in an effort to stop hurting his friend’s body. He fell backwards, his arms shifting just enough for the Gray Man to attack, its left hand latching onto his right forearm and leeching.

Gladiator screamed as he felt himself lose control of something that was a part of himself, his right
arm losing even the effect of Athena’s Revenge as the gray polluted his veins. He was forced to watch as the creature’s strength grew, little armor plates shifting up its skin as it learned his ability.

Furious, he kicked. Kicked wherever he could, on its legs, its torso, its crotch, but nothing was making it budge anymore. As the veins extended to the right side of his chest, Snipe shot a few rounds of rubber bullets at it, hitting it in the face and side, only for small skin plates to develop where he shot and block the bullets off.

In desperation, Copper Devil pulled herself together and rushed forward despite the weakness in her limbs. She managed enough energy to run at the Gray Man, hitting its body full-force as she made it lose just enough balance to let go of Gladiator. Then, as quickly as she could muster, she pressed two of the charges on her belt, and a strike of electricity stronger than all before skittered along both of their skin, but instead of just the Gray Man screeching in pain, so did Copper Devil.

Gladiator tried to shift from under the Gray Man, sparks of energy striking against his legs, the heat past the threshold of bearable, but his body was starting to feel strangely weak, his body drained not only of part of his quirk, but also of stamina.

The Gray Man lasted through Copper Devil’s attack, but she couldn’t. Her body looked like it was halfway to melting into a puddle as she lost her grip on the creature. But it reached down and grabbed her head with its left hand, then it slammed her face against the ground with an angry hiss, still keeping a hold on one of her legs, as Gladiator couldn’t move to help. Right by the hero’s prone body, The Gray Man’s grip moved from her head to right in between her shoulder blades.

For a second, nothing happened. But then Copper Devil began to choke, her partially melted hands shifting and twitching. Then her whole body was trying to move, trying to get away, and she screamed and fought against the Gray Man’s hold, her head turning to the side seemingly against her own will.

Gunhead, despite his bleeding hands, ran forward then, and shot keratin at the monster’s head, only for its skin to plate up where he shot. Before he could get closer, the Gray Man’s head turned sharply towards the crane it had taken its screws from, and it reached into the sky near it and seemed to tug with a great amount of effort.

The metal of the crane creaked loudly at the motion, and a part of it, loosened by the loss of screws, bent at its corner, the little part the Gray Man was controlling, and detached. It started to fall in a scream of shifting metal. Gunhead saw this and dodged out of the way, jumping as the large metal piece slammed into the ground, separating the two groups from each other.

Just as quickly as the metal piece had started to fall, the Gray Man turned its attention back to Copper Devil, deciding to use its hand. It grabbed her chin, and with the effort of its abilities and its own strength, Copper Devil’s neck made a full 180 degree turn from facing forward.

The woman’s screams cut of into choked gasps, her mouth gaping open enough for little droplets of rain to fall into it, eyes wide and unseeing.

Gladiator felt his eyes cloud with tears as he fought to get up, to help, to do something other than lay there uselessly, but instead, he was forced to watch as the Gray Man didn’t stop there. From then, the twisting became easier, and it kept doing it, this time only with the effort of its magic. Her head turned on her neck like the key in a music box, the neck of her costume warping with it until it was a thin strip of twisted cloth.

Finally, Copper Devil’s voice was completely gone, her hands twitching minutely, but the rest of her body was rendered completely still, now wet with Mr. Champion’s pooling blood. The Gray Man
turned its head curiously at her body and slack face. Then it seemed to lose interest and grabbed her leg before throwing her a random way, her body flying before it landed further off.

“You...you...you monster...” Gladiator groaned, his teeth clenched so sharply that blood was starting to drip from his mouth.

The Gray Man turned to him then, still crouched on the ground. Then it smiled at him, a jagged thing that stretched its face, just as the little drops of rain started to become larger.

---

Izuku.

The boy startled in his seat, but Manual and Fraction thought it was simply due to something they said as they discussed their plans. So they didn’t pay attention to him in that regard.

Izuku, though, was startled by how strong the voice sounded above the muttered plans of the heroes beside him, and even the static rush of words in his ear from the earpiece. All other sound lowered to him, lessened so all noise around him muted to a mere, distant mumble.

Know this. No matter what, I’m still with you.

He wasn’t sure what to say in return. He wasn’t sure what prompted the statement either. Either way, some part of his panicked heart was calmed, sated, and settled to help him think.

I’m always here with you.

Izuku nodded, just the slightest thing so the heroes wouldn’t be distracted by him, and the sound faded back into his ears just in time to hear Manual speak.

“--nd I’ll stay up top with the battle. If Climantine lets it rain a little, I should have enough ammo to use. It doesn’t look like there’s going to be any fire heroes coming quite yet.” Manual had his hand pressed against his earpiece, speaking with the others on the other end.

[If Climantine lets up even a little, she’ll have to let the rest of the rain fall. Any fire heroes we call from then on will be at a disadvantage.]

“I’ll be out there with no way to use my quirk. I’ll be at a disadvantage!” he argued back.

[I, well, I understand that, Manual but--]

Before the man on the other end could say anything else, the sky above rumbled dangerously, like the mighty roar of Raiju. It was enough to shake the bed of the car, and stiffen their backs. Seconds later, the sound of loud rainfall hitting the car began, like a shower was turned on.

“...Well, I guess Climantine’s answered me. We’ll keep in touch.”

Manual shut off his communication and sighed, then turned to the two. Izuku noted the steeled, brave look on the man’s face, and felt himself a bit more emboldened.

“Remember the plan. I’ll guard you, so you stay behind me,” he said, looking at Izuku, before turning to Fraction, “and you head down to help Fourth Kind, Ingenium, and Falcon. Understood?”

Izuku nodded briskly as Fraction did more mutedly. “Roger!”

The truck they were riding in began to slow down, all inside feeling the deceleration. Izuku held onto
his seat belt tightly as the truck slowed and turned, until it finally stopped. His eyes met Manual’s and Fraction’s, and all three nodded at each other.

Then they unbuckled their belts and Manual pushed the door open.

The first thing Izuku smelled was the salt of the sea. The sound of its thrashing waves were coupled with the heavy thrumming of the rain on concrete. The clouds above rolled visibly in the sky, lightning striking in bright sparks amongst them as it cried its densely packed tears. Mere moments outside of the truck left him and the other two almost immediately soaked.

The front view of the archway and the structures behind it were shadowed with heavy, torrential rain. The sky was so dark at that point that he could even see himself glowing on the raindrops, his magic a beacon of light in the darkness of the deep gray blue of the storm. But ahead, there was something darker and humanoid-looking in the midst of the metal and buildings.

Izuku heard its static from right there.

The three hurried forward, Izuku staying behind Manual as promised, and they passed under the archway. The closer they got to the dark figure, the more Izuku realized there was more than one, though the standing one was the only one giving off the telltale noise. There were some more faded ones a bit further in the distance, but they were moving erratically. He couldn’t quite tell why.

Just as Fraction was about to run right as he was directed, he stopped short, gasping quietly in the noise of the rain. Manual stopped short as well, quickly putting a hand out to keep Izuku from going any further. Izuku stayed behind them, but peered out from behind Manual as he tried to see why they had stopped their plan.

Then he saw the trailing pool of red.

The Gray Man was standing above a big, heavy-looking body, another one lying not too far off, another one a bit further way. The one near the Gray Man was laying partially on its side, one of their legs broken. More importantly than the broken leg though was the streams of blood leaving its hand and the hole in its chest. The one further away appeared to be a woman’s body, but where her shoulders down were facing the sky, Izuku quickly recognized he was looking at the back of her head.

And the one the Gray Man stood above was bleeding the most, large swathes of red trailing from somewhere near its head. Somewhere near where the Gray Man had taken a bronze plate from the corpse’s bleeding side and stabbed it to the ground where its head should be. Izuku didn’t have to see the stump to know it was there.

The monster paused whatever it was doing. Then turned its head, looking at the three new arrivals.

“Minute Maid, hide! That way!” Manual demanded, turning around and pushing Izuku towards a bunch of metal boxes off to the side.

It didn’t take anything else to get him to hide, and Izuku scrambled off to the side as Manual made a large amount of water around him stop in midair, gathering into a large collection of water. He heard the Gray Man cry out and start to approach, but didn’t see it as he ducked behind the boxes Manual had told him to.

For a few moments, Izuku stayed frozen on his hands and knees behind the boxes, his body soaking wet with rain as he heard the loud splashes of Manual using his quirk. His eyes were wide, facing the
ground that his head guarded from the water above.

Heroes were dead, at least three. Heroes, trained to fight in these sorts of situations against unknown forces, were dead.

When Izuku’s brain finally stopped freezing on that fact, he realized he knew which heroes they were. The one whose neck was twisted was Copper Devil—even without her outfit, her skin’s impossible to not recognize. The one with the hole in his chest looked like Mr. Champion, and the beheaded one, without a doubt, Gladiator. All of them were upcoming heroes, Copper Devil leaving her common place as a sidekick, Gladiator gaining popularity in Yamasaki while Mr. Champion had a large overseas following. All of them were reaching their prime, and were now sprawled out on the ground, dead.

If they were dead...what on earth could he--

No.

Izuku stopped himself, reaching up to wipe the tears from his eyes with his wet gloves. He was not going down that route. Not right then.

He was...he was a magician, wasn’t he? Wasn’t he equipped to get rid of them? Where quirks couldn’t touch the Gray Men, his magic could, right?

Right. He...he wasn’t just a little quirkless kid anymore. He was a magician. He--He had power. He could actually do something...had to do something, even! So instead of hiding behind the boxes...he had to go for it. Had to help.

So, steeling himself, gathering his nerves and holding onto his focus, shifted and peered over one of the smaller boxes to look out at the battle.

The rain Climantine had let fall was giving Manual a lot of ammo, and, just as they’d speculated in the truck, having the water quirk was coming in handy. The creature was keeping its distance from Manual, sending small shards of metal to him that were immediately caught up in the big swathe of water he shifted through the air. When enough water built up, Manual sent it flying at the Gray Man, who was shoved back with the force of the liquid.

Fraction was near him, refusing to back down, but unsure of how to help. He was armed with a stun baton, but everyone wet, it was likely to cause more harm than good. Still, whenever an errant shard headed their way, Fraction swung the baton in the air, smacking them away to give Manual coverage.

Since they were now at the battle, Izuku could see what was happening behind the monster, to the figures that were moving before.

Luckily, it was Gunhead and Snipe, but the two were back to back, surrounded by an orbit of small metal pieces that thwarted their efforts to escape. Still, they participated as they could, shooting down any that came for them and, if they had an opening, shooting rubber and keratin at the Gray Man’s back.

If I can find a way to help Gunhead and Snipe escape, maybe they can tire the Gray Man out so I can get a good shot in, Izuku thought. And with that, on trembling legs, he shifted and crawled his way behind the boxes, further away from the action so he could circle around with as much coverage as all of the supplies would offer him.

As he crawled, he heard Fraction call out, his voice coming from a different place than Izuku knew
him to be standing. While his quirk wouldn’t work with such a cloudy sky and no other source of light, his ventriloquism didn’t need anything of the sort. It was apparently effective in what they tried, as moments later, a screech left the creature.

_Distracting it so they can get a solid hit in...taking advantage of its potential lack of sight for its sound sensitivity..._

When Izuku had crawled about halfway between the opening and where Snipe and Gunhead were fighting to not be impaled by small pieces of metal, he looked up from his hiding spot again and watched the battle.

His eyes widened.

Manual had gotten together a smooth torrent of water that he used to fly past the Gray Man, smacking into it and pushing it around when the creature couldn’t avoid it. It cried out each time it did hit, but Izuku could see the way its skin would plate up—Gladiator’s quirk, it took some of it—leaving the attack less effective. But as a distraction, it was working. The pressure on Gunhead and Snipe appeared to be lightening as the Gray Man called on more small metal shards to pierce Manual or Fraction.

Manual kept using the water to take in the shards, the torrent too fast for the Gray Man to pull them back to it, and Fraction smacked the other ones away. Gunhead and Snipe were starting to be able to send more shots at the creature from their trapped state.

The Gray Man, though, balled its fists and fussed loudly, loud enough to be heard over the rush of thunder and water, leaving Izuku shocked.

“It screeched loudly afterwards, and then it was moving again, rushing forward towards Manual and Fraction.

Manual reacted quickly, pulling more water in and pushing it forward at the Gray Man, but instead of being shoved around, it stuck its foot into the ground and tried to stay firm. In its effort though, it neglected the trap it had behind it, and, seeing a sliver of an opportunity, Gunhead rushed through a small opening between the shards. He hadn’t come out cleanly though, little trails of blood coming off his arms after the fact.

Izuku watched as the Battle Hero ran forward towards the monster’s back. Manual saw that, too, and let up on the water pressure, making the floating trail of water circle them instead. The Gray Man, realizing its pressure was gone, moved to go forward again, but was instead forced forward from Gunhead’s heavy kick on its back.

It turned towards him and made to screech, but got another blast of water in its face, Gunhead ducked down to avoid getting hit as well. Then, as Manual kept the pressure up, Gunhead began punching the monster with keratin poking from his knuckles, trying to get through the plating it had summoned on its belly.

When the water left, Manual getting it to circle back around, the Gray Man swiped at Gunhead, but the hero backed away, and Snipe, having slipped through the trap as well in its distraction, shot it in the face again.

It teetered on its own feet and let out a wheezy, static growl that was quickly drowned again under another blow of water.
“Yeah! That’s right, take it!” Izuku heard Fraction cheer as he watched Gunhead move in again and punch it some more.

But then, it bellowed lowly from even under the water, and it swiped at the heroes closest to it. Manual was far enough away to avoid it, as was Fraction and Snipe, but Gunhead wasn’t so lucky.

Despite his evasive dodging, one of the swipes came straight for him. He put his arms up to block, but was thrown back from the force of the swipe, a sharp clawing sound ringing in Izuku’s ears. Gunhead was thrown into a pile of stacked building beams, his arms bleeding where the swipe caught skin, his gauntlets now sporting groves etched into them. From the way Gunhead didn’t immediately get back up, Izuku knew he was probably down.

With the lack of punching, the Gray Man seemed to get focus again, and, once Manual had to quickly move the water back around to hit it, it ran forward faster than Manual would be able to move. Izuku gasped, hearing the hero curse as he tried to back away, but instead, Fraction jumped in the way, his baton ready.

The first swipe the Gray Man made was deflected by the baton, as were the second and third swipes. By that time, Manual had brought the water back over and tried hitting it again, but that time, the Gray Man ducked down onto all fours, the water missing it entirely.

From the ground, it crawled forward and swiped at Fraction’s legs. Fraction, though, had fast legs, and managed to barely avoid being scratched by its plate-covered fingers. But it didn’t last forever. It swiped with one hand, but with an unnatural balance, crouched with just its back legs on the ground, and so it grabbed Fraction’s leg with the other as he tried backing away.

Before Fraction could even cry out, he was sent sailing towards a suddenly formed barrier of small metal shards. Izuku watched as Fraction, unable to change his trajectory, yelled in fear as his body approached the wall, but suddenly, Snipe jumped out from the side of the wall, catching Fraction’s thrown body. Still, Snipe yelled out in pain, and the two fell to the ground, some of the barrier missing from where the Sure Shot hero’s body snagged and took some of the shards into his back in Fraction’s place.

With the others out of the way, Izuku shuddered as cold filled his veins, the Gray Man focusing its energy on attacking Manual.

Manual yelled as he tried to send his train of water at the monster, but it ducked under it and, with a swift punch, bent the hero over its fist. Even from where Izuku hid, he could hear Manual retch, the damage instantaneous. The train of water Manual had built up dropped to the ground in a spattering wash.

For a moment, no one moved, and Izuku certainly didn’t move, too shocked to do so.

It was only because it was so still that he even heard what it said next.

“It’s talking. It’s trying to reason with him,” Izuku thought numbly, “It’s trying to coerce him.”

But Manual didn’t say a thing. Instead, still bent over its fist as he was, he glared up at it with a mouth dripping with brown and red as he gritted his teeth against the pain of whatever was broken inside of him.
It shifted, pulling its fist back, letting Manual flop to the ground. Then it moved again, bending down and taking Manual up by his neck, and from the way hero clawed at the hand, it was choking him. It was staring down at the man who, in his fighting spirit, kicked at the monster holding him despite the clear pain it was causing him, foot making solid connections against its legs and torso. But it didn’t let go. It just held him and watched.

He kept struggling harder, but his face was starting to turn a startling shade of red, the creature’s hand still choking him at the neck. The struggling steadily became more sluggish, the man’s red face changing to purple. Eventually, all that was left of the man’s revolt was the minute clawing at the creature’s hand.

Then, it opened its mouth, a shark, jagged thing with no tongue or real teeth, and pulled Manual closer.

Izuku watched as it happened, saw how a slack borderline unconsciousness filtered into Manual’s expression. Vaguely heard Manual’s name being called as someone, probably Snipe, tried to rush to his aid. But he would be too late. Izuku knew he would—Snipe was hurt, probably still pinned under Fraction’s thrown body.

Someone had to do something.

And in the next moment, he felt himself move. Felt himself summon his bow like it was second nature. Felt himself put the arrow in position and pull the string taut. Watched as a flash of light flew forth from him, piercing the monster at its wrist as a small, almost electric shock burst from the contact.

---

Manual was right there as the arrow made contact with the Gray Man’s flesh.

When the tip of the arrow touched the inside of its wrist, sparked with a strange, foreign, yellow energy. But that energy spread through its skin, much like the gray veins he’d seen from Gray Man victims. The pollution didn’t stop there, though, for the arrow pierced its way into the creature’s wrist, and the simple yellow veiny figures turned into one like a lightning bruise, striking its way through. Once the Gray Man’s wrist was completely crossed through, from one side to the other, with the yellow energy, he heard a low crackling noise, and, like stone breaking off from a sculpture, the creature’s hand fell right off of it, the wound created, cut, and cauterized all in one.

And the static screech the Gray Man let out as he fell, the one that echoed loudly in the island’s metallic domain, bouncing off the walls and the steel and the concrete...he could tell that that one was a cry of actual pain.

When he fell, he felt pain too, one that shot through his torso and hit him like the freight train the Gray Man’s punch had been, hurting even more as he coughed and gasped for air. The hand that had been holding him by his suit fell with him, plopping against the ground lifelessly.

He couldn’t move after that, his body too in pain and trying to overcome the shock of near-death, but he could still look around, even though rain fell on his face and dripped into his eyes, he could still see. Even as his ears filled with the cotton song of his own agony, he could still see.

He could see how the Gray Man bowed over, its still-present left hand clutching at the stub of its right, its jagged mouth open and wailing loudly enough for him to still sort of hear its electric fizzle.
He could see the way it turned its head towards where he presumed Midoriya was hiding—or not anymore? Was he hiding anymore?

It didn’t matter either way, since with the next blink, the monster was gone from in front of him, leaving him alone with the creature’s detached hand.

He tried, then, to move. Though his body ached terribly—he had to have popped something, his liver or kidney or his intestines, but something was broken bad—he still turned as much as he could as he stayed laying on the ground. He angled his head up and—

Minute Maid’s glowing body hit the ground right where he’d managed to shift his gaze.

Midoriya, luckily, didn’t stay down long, scrambling to his feet as fast as he could right as the Gray Man returned. The Gray Man started swiping at the boy again, but Midoriya reached back and instead of having a bow and arrow, he had an umbrella, the canopy he then used as a shield. For a few hits, the Gray Man tried futility to hurt him, though the boy’s feet did slide backwards on the wet ground.

The Gray Man swiped again with its amputated wrist, pushing the umbrella’s canopy to the side before aiming with sharp, plate-studded fingers, at the boy. Midoriya backed away enough to avoid getting hit, pulling his umbrella in front of him with a little effort from the heavy winds and rain. Then the Gray Man and Midoriya shifted out of his focus again as the former shoved Midoriya’s umbrella.

Manual tried to move to follow the action, but he tried moving too quickly for his body, which screamed at him through his veins. He could hear himself groan in pain in his headspace, an echo in his ears. So, to sate his nerves, he stayed still for a little bit, trying to muster the strength to move again.

As he stayed still, he could sort of hear the sound of crashing and breaking and a distant, static screeching, but otherwise he heard nothing else but the rain and his own pain.

Shifting, he managed to curl up a little, turning his head, to witness more.

Midoriya had abandoned the umbrella attempt, switching his umbrella out for two, pink, glowing gloves. With one hand, he held back the stubbed arm, the other pushing the Gray Man’s hand back. Midoriya gathered strength, then with it, he pushed the Gray Man back. He moved forward, his arms going up to protect his face, then kicked the monster hard on its side.

He could hear it screech then, too, as Midoriya left behind veiny yellow lines right where he’d kicked.

He was able to do five more on the same spot as Manual watched its pollution increase, before the monster reached for the leg he was kicking with. He backed away in time and tried to circle the Gray Man, but it was persistent, swiping at the boy as he tried to move.

Each time he found an open spot, Midoriya would throw something, whether it was a kick of a punch, it didn’t matter. Each time he made a hit, more yellow would start crackling on its skin, but each miss left him open until he could back up safely and cover again, and unlike the mark that went through its wrist, the plating kept the strikes from going too deep. It kept on like this for a bit, the two in a stalemate that Midoriya worked to tilt in his favor.

Then, during one of the kicks, it grabbed the leg he was kicking with. Manual tried to move at the startled and frightened expression Midoriya gave off, but he could do nothing as it turned a quick
360 on its legs and threw the boy at a pile of boxes and poles. Midoriya hit it back-first, his mouth opening in what Manual imagined was a cry of pain, but he wasn’t alone in the rubble for too long.

The Gray Man rushed over and grabbed a hold of his downed body. It took a tight hold of his hair, dragging him away from the rubble as the boy’s mouth stayed open in what he could barely hear as screaming, his hands reaching up to get it to let go. Instead, it crouched down, pulling Midoriya’s body around like a ragdoll, then slammed the side of his face into the concrete.

It didn’t stop at once.

It did it twice.

*Three* times.

*Four.*

Still, Midoriya wasn’t still. Though his twitching and the splatter of blood on the ground told of pain, his hand still reached up and tried to dislodge the Gray Man’s hand from his hair. It did let go then, and Midoriya looked to be trying to crawl away, but then it grabbed a hold of his left leg. Rather than seeing any veins or anything though—not that he would under the boy’s socks—the boy’s leg sparked with the same yellow energy that had amputated the creature, and its left hand started to turn goldish at the palm.

It still picked him up by the ankle and threw him in the other direction, over Manual’s head. He heard rather than saw Midoriya hit whatever was on the other side, a loud clang accompanying a cry, and he could see the boy’s light right at the top of his eyes.

The Gray Man walked in front of him, his eyes trailing the creature’s feet as it walked towards the light.

Manual couldn’t stand it, his mind very, very slowly coming out of the fog as he took in more oxygen. The pain kept his hearing shot, though, and he couldn’t tilt his head enough to grit his teeth sharply, his helmet digging into the side of his head.

‘He’s a child, Manual hissed, *He’s a child, he’s a child!*’

He forced himself to turn enough to see what was happening, even though his body complained.

Midoriya was on the ground in front of a bunch of bent-in mental boxes, his head bleeding onto the ground, his chest moving rapidly in hitched breaths, his eyes red at the corners. His arms and legs trembled as he tried to sit up on his hands and knees, but the Gray Man pressed its sharp foot onto his back, pushing him back onto the ground.

It stood over Midoriya’s struggling body, parts of its own glowing with yellow figures like cracks on its skin. It considered Midoriya, its head tilting to the side, its cloud of hair flowing in the air behind it. Then looked off at something near them, then back to the child. Then it moved forward, grabbing onto the back of Midoriya’s dress before smacking him down onto the concrete again.

Manual grunted in pain at that, his body moving reflexively to help the boy, trying to finally get some movement back, but he froze when the Gray Man shifted over from the boy’s body to a pile of wide poles, broken some time during the long battle that day.

When it picked a very broken one, both ends jagged from some part of it bending and breaking off, and it stuck one side of it into the ground, Manual doubled his efforts, even though shooting pain was jolting through his torso.
No...no, no, don’t…

The Gray Man tested it, shifting it until it was stuck well into the concrete, almost like it had stuck the pole into dirt. Then it turned and walked back to Midoriya, who was lying still on the ground.

When it approached to pick him up, the boy turned over onto his back and gave the Gray Man a solid kick to the face.

It was a very hard one, one that displaced some of the rain with a gust of wind. The sound of his foot connecting with the Gray Man’s face echoed among them as a shock of yellow lichtenberg figures struck part way through its face. It backed away, startled, and reached up with its remaining left hand and held onto the right side where he’d kicked, screaming bloody murder.

Midoriya turned back onto his stomach and tried to crawl away, but the Gray Man got its focus back faster than he could escape, rushing over and slamming the bloodied side of his face into the ground again. Then it curved its hand around and picked Midoriya up by his neck, not unlike how it had picked him up.

No, no! No! Don’t do it! Dammit, body, move. Move! Please!

Midoriya kept struggling, even with the hold on his neck. Blood covered one side of his face, his left eye closed to keep it from getting in, and his arms held tightly onto the plated skin that held him, his magic slowly permeating it, but not fast enough to break the Gray Man’s body.

It brought him over to where it had set up the pole, the thing angled diagonally, water dripping off of its jagged tip.

Manual wheezed with the effort to move, but he could just barely manage to get himself onto his stomach. When he did though, he was blinded by pain, his teeth gritting as the broken, torn organs inside of him shifted.

Desperate, he reached up and tried to control some of the rain, something, anything to stop what was about to happen.

But his quirk wouldn’t answer him like he wanted it to. Instead, all he could muster with his pain-riddled body was a small, pointless floating stream. His focus was shot, his brain throbbed with the overreach of his energy, everything was hot and cold at the same time and the Gray Man was about to--

It leaned in on Izuku’s bloodied side, its jagged mouth open. It whispered something that made the boy’s open eye go wide, the one on his bloodied side just barely peeking open as well.

Then, the Gray Man, screeching static out loud, rose Izuku higher in the air.

And with a mighty swing, Manual was forced to watch as the monster brought young Midoriya Izuku down onto the broken metal pole below him.

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One moment, Izuku felt a prick against his back, but then the prick expanded into a blaring, sudden pain. It pushed and pushed and pushed until his insides cracked and broke and squished, forced around the cold, wet, unforgiving steel.

He was hit by a sudden, extremely sharp agony, a piercing sensation that had him reeling.
But he could barely scream as the sharp, bloodied end of the pole came out the other side of his chest.
The Kronia, Part 3: The Last Hurrah

Chapter Summary

Again: Graphic Depictions of Gore and Violence.

“We are in need of immediate medical attention! Send an ambulance down as soon as you can! We have a guard and an injured hero! Please, send something!”

Ingenium yelled into his earpiece as he ran up the stairs to the second level, Fourth Kind following behind with the officer in one set of arms, Falcon in the other. The mildly unconscious man bled steadily from a head wound, occasionally groaning and twitching in Fourth Kind’s arms. But Falcon was completely unresponsive, his face covered with gray veins, his arms and legs completely limp.

They had reacted too late, and Ingenium had only caught up in time to catch Falcon before he fell backwards after the Gray Man’s attack. Ingenium had aimed a kick at the Gray Man’s body just as he watched Falcon’s blue energy be absorbed and stabilized inside of the creature. His attack hadn’t been fast enough, and the Gray Man jumped up to the ceiling, hands and feet creating holes in the walls where it forced its body to stick.

Ingenium had been expecting it to attack and, preparing himself for it, cradled the unconscious man’s head in one arm while he readied the engines in his other to punch the Gray Man away. Unlike other Gray Men though, it stared at them for a moment with its newly solid face, then it fled, scurrying away now that it had what it wanted. Both he and Fourth Kind had an injured person with them, so they didn’t pursue it, and watched with fury as it escaped through the equipment door at the end of the darkened hall, tearing through the reinforced metal.

After that, he’d turned to look at the hero, to try to get his attention, but the man was completely and utterly knocked out.

His eyes, though, hadn’t had the chance to close, so Ingenium had seen the way his pupils dilated and constricted quickly with little to no control, his focus completely off.

He’d gasped in horror, realizing what the Gray Man had stolen, before noticing the way the corners of his eyeballs were starting to go red, the veins by his eyes straining. Ingenium closed his eyes carefully, then handed him off to Fourth Kind.

Now they were running, passing through rivers of blood and guts, running up stairs, their bodies smelling of sweat and gore that wasn’t their own, with no one answering their call.

“I repeat!” he yelled, “We need immediate medical help! A Gray Man attacked us and took one of us down, Falcon is down! We have an injured guard who might have a punctured lung! We need help, now!”

The only reply he got was static and hushed, hurried noises from connections just barely out of reach, the kind not hissed by the creature’s they had passed before.

“Shit, why aren’t they answering?” he said, hearing Fourth Kind tell the officer to stay still, probably having moved, if the choking sounds were of any indication. He pressed his communicator again.
“This is Ingenium! I repeat, we have two injured personnel! An officer and a hero are injured! Without any reply, we’ll go up to the surface and---”

[NO!]

Both he and Fourth Kind stopped in their tracks, startled by the force of Climantine’s voice.

Despite the rain and static they heard from her position, her voice had been very, very clear, like a strike of thunder amongst the white noise of their tech. For a moment after, she breathed heavily, like she’d forced her words out of her throat. Then, she spoke again, still clear among the sounds of the storm outside.

[No! You will not go to the surface! Do you hear me?! You will not do it!]

“Cl...Clima--”

[I said NO! Stay underground! Find a medical bay and treat them as best as you can until help arrives, but if you go onto the surface, you both and your injured people will die.] For a moment, Ingenium thought he heard the woman sob. [Do you hear me?! You will all die! Stick with your mission and stay. Underground.]”

“...Roger.”

He heard the slight clicking noise of the line closing, and let his hand down from his ear. Then he turned back to look at Fourth Kind on the steps behind him. The multi-armed man looked up at him with a stern yet startled look on his face.

The latter steeled himself, his face firming up. “Well, we heard her. Help’s going to take longer.”

Ingenium nodded. “Right. The medical bay’s on the base floor, down one of the halls leading to the lowest level of the main office. It’ll lead us right to the middle of the island.”

Fourth Kind nodded. “Lead the way then.”

Ingenium turned back and started moving without replying. Instead, his memory echoed the desperation with which Climantine demanded that they stay out of the line of fire. A part of him wondered why that was, but another wasn’t sure if he wanted to know.

Either way, if there was no help ready on the surface, then it really was for the greater good that they stay underground.

---

Climantine’s hand covered her mouth once she finished the call, going back into the same shock she had when she first saw the kid that once saved her life get punched around like a toy.

First, she wanted to know why Minute Maid was even there. They were commonly speculated to be a young girl, then after Yuu-tan and Dai-kun came back from the meeting, it was practically confirmed, except the gender wasn’t known. It didn’t matter to her--anyone 19 and younger were kids to her, even if she was just 24 herself.

Then, as the battle went on, she wanted to know why everyone was getting hurt. Why no one was able to protect themselves. Why everyone was falling to injuries or death. She’d been unwilling but fully prepared to see Manual die, to hate herself and her inaction, to stay in her position as the eyes in the sky even if it made her feel more like an abandoner than a hero.
Then the arrow happened. The glowing arrow that saved her before.

Then the fight happened, and a child’s blood was spilled.

Then the...pole.

That pole.

And now it was watching them struggle like a fish run through by a stick, and Climantine was stricken still in the sky, water keeping her up high and safe from harm.

Meanwhile, a child was dying below her.

_Move, she thought, Move down there and kill it. Use the water you have, use the water that you can and destroy it. Get rid of it. Show it the true power of a human and show it what happens when it attacks one of us._

But phantom pinpricks of pain shuddered along her back, and she couldn’t move.

Her legs trembled, her arms shook. Her eyes were wide and full of tears, only blinking when necessary. Her body was wet and cold among the rain she was accustomed to. And she could not move.

A sob bubbled out of her throat, but she choked it as soon as it happened. She couldn’t. She didn’t have the right to cry. Not when she’d yet to do a single useful thing to help. Not when she hadn’t been of much use the last time a Gray Man attacked and now again, she was useless. Not when her quirk wasn’t suited for it, when it would only serve to feed the damned creature more.

So she didn’t move. She didn’t cry either.

And she watched as her punishment, ingrained the memory of the dying child into her mind, and prayed to the manō to protect the other heroes guarding Tartarus only a bit further off so they wouldn’t befall the same fate if the creature pursued more humans.

In the midst of her prayer, she could hear some more action in her earpiece, the noise of many distant voices fluttering past her eardrums. It rose higher and higher the longer she prayed, the longer she watched—it felt like centuries when it was only a few moments.

Then from the crescendo of voices, one in particular came to her, clear among the noise of the storm, with a commanding yet soothing voice that could only come from one particular hero.

[Climantine? Are you there? Are you alright? ...What is the status of the heroes on the island?]

Her prayers paused with a gasped. After a second, she reached up and pressed down on the earpiece, opening her side of the line.

“...All Might?”

---

Toshinori left Tsukauchi’s car before they got near the bridge. He transformed and immediately felt the heavy strain of overworked muscles and the coppery mist of blood at the back of his throat, but the glowing, sparking arrow strapped to the right side of his belt led him to ignore it. Then, from his hiding place behind one of the nearby buildings, he leapt into the air, praying that no lightning attempted to strike him, aiming for the open space among the crowd of police waiting on more
heroes.

“It’s fine now! Why?”

There was a split second in the change between their expressions amongst the haze of the increasing rain. The second was of a stark rise in hope, but the first one, the one that many of them had turned to him with, was of a deep despair and a growing anxiety. Even after he landed, despite the many heightened voices beginning to talk to him, he could feel the anxious air latch onto him and cling, whispering desperately with some plea he didn’t yet understand.

Despite the mood, he stood tall, placing his fists on his hips, and smiled widely in the darkness of the pouring rain and rolling clouds.

“Because I am here!”

The present police cheered, much to his surprise, some of them even raising their batons into the air. He didn’t let it show though, searching around for the head of the group. The deputy chief approached him moments later, shielding an earbud from the rain with his hands.

“All Might! We didn’t know you were coming,” he yelled over the rain, his plastic poncho failing to shield his face.

“My apologies, Kawamura-san! I was in a hurry and forgot to send a reply to the message! I hope you forgive me for my rudeness,” he replied, taking the earbud offered to him as he was urgently led to the black truck near the head of the bridge, a policeman running over to the driver’s seat. “What’s the status on the island?”

The deputy chief’s shoulders stiffened as he jogged beside him, “The last time I was notified, there were some heroes dead, but others are still alive and fighting. Something else has happened since, I’m sure, but Climantine’s gone silent.” The man pointed up to the pouring sky. “She’s been on surveillance protocol since the beginning.”

All Might nodded, pressing the button on the side of his communicator.

“Climantine? Are you there? Are you alright?” then, after a short pause, “What’s the status of the heroes on the island?”

The other side, for a moment, was static and rain and rumbling clouds. Then there was the clicking of an opening line, and he heard the rain more clearly.

[...All Might?]

“Yes ma’am, speaking. Are you alright?”

When he didn’t receive a reply after a few moments, he frowned, then remembered one particular concern he had. He turned to the shorter man, clicking off his voice for the connection. “Oh, by the way Kawamura-san, I believe Minute Maid came alongside Manual and Fraction. Where is--”

[Above ground, Mr. Champion, Gladiator, and Copper Devil are dead.]

His voice died in his throat at the same time Kawamura’s did, her voice heard over the connection to all listening.

[Snipe and Gunhead are in critical condition,] she continued, like she was reciting from a paper. [So is Manual. Fraction is tending to Snipe…the Gray Man fed off of Gladiator’s quirk before it killed
him, and...

He turned his connection back on, but had nothing to say when she finally let a sob through.

[And...and Minute Maid is…]

He felt the smile drop off of his face without his control, thunder rumbling up above.

[They’re dying…it…it’s torturing them…taking it’s--] she sobbed again, heavy with a barely contained desperation, [--it’s taking its time with them...All Might, please--]

“I understand, Climantine. Thank you. Please continue to keep everyone posted.”

[...Roger.]

Toshinori cut off his side of the connection and for a moment stood still. It was as though time had slowed down upon hearing the news, and the rain pelted against cloth and concrete in slow motion splashes that glittered from the police flashlights and the lightning above.

There had been a few times in the past he’d had that feeling, like time was giving him the ability to collect himself and his emotions. That initial rush of adrenaline that slowed everything to a crawl for just a few moments as he made his decisions and moved to act on them. He’d had that feeling when he heard he only had a few more years to live with each use of his quirk shortening his time. When he saw All For One again after he’d crawled up from whatever sewage he’d dug himself into.

When he heard Shimura Nana was dead.

Each slow inhale made his lungs scream, blood welling in the back of his throat like a wave ready to rush from him, but the arrow against his side sparked yellow, a glowing beacon that cast a shadow against him and made the closest droplets gleam brightly.

He knew what he had to do as time moved again.

“Please excuse me, Kawamura-san.”

Then, he turned on his feet and swiftly made his way over to the beginning of the bridge, the police stumbling after him.

“All Might? What are you--”

“I shall head over immediately. Please send any other heroes who can help in the meantime.”

At the edge right where the bridge began and the barricade of cars and safety barriers ended, he slipped past them and got into a running prepped position, hands on the ground with one leg in front of the other. Kawamura, somewhere behind him, moved to the side.

“But All Might, the truck can--”

“I believe it will be best if I were to run there myself. I don’t want the driver to be in danger.” Toshinori turned to him then, a reassuring grin on his face. “Thank you for your help, Deputy Chief.”

In the next second, he was off, a gust of wind following his exit.

---
It hurt.

It hurt so *badly*.

His mouth was open in a scream he couldn’t let out as rainwater ran down his bloodied face. His gloved hands twitched and reached for the end of the pole sticking out through his chest out of shock. He wasn’t sure what else to do than marvel at it in terror until he started staring forward.

He’d never felt such pain. Such a striking, tearing, claying agony that twisted and ripped and curled inside of him. His eyes burned. His mouth felt wet and coppery, and his body tried to cough, but all it did was make him hurt more.

His feet were dangling above the ground from where he hung, eyes forward, nearly unseeing through the darkness settling in at the corners of his sight or the blur of tears and torment. What he could see, though, was the Gray Man’s curiosity, its mouth open in a downward crescent to reveal the jagged representation of teeth.

"This is his pain?"

As Izuku gasped and gagged on the pole, his arms finally dropped to his side, the agonizing weight of his body on its impaler dragging him closer to unconsciousness. In front of him, its remaining hand began to reach up to him.

"It is not his pain."

Its fingers started to trace his face, and he wanted to force them away. Wanted to grab its wrist and snap it then burn it off. Wanted to do something, anything, but be stricken still from his position. But he could barely breathe, much less move--what was left of his lungs was quickly dying out, and his heart was all but gone completely, turned to gore on the dripping metal through his chest.

The Gray Man dragged the tips of its fingers through the blood on his face, its eyeless gaze taking in everything it could about him, about what pain was. Then its mouth screwed up, turning into an ugly scowl as it went from tracing his cheek to grabbing his chin, the other arm shaking like it would be shaking a fist.

"It is not his pain."

Suddenly, Izuku felt something cold, not unlike the steel through his spine, but also completely different. This cold leached from him, invaded his system and drove his vision darker as Izuku began to choke on blood and nothingness. The flesh of his face began feeling colder, but it could barely drive him to do much more than twitch and wiggle on the pole.

"It is not his pain."

It leaned in further, inspecting him as he felt his veins run colder. It was scowling still, but something about it seemed...genuinely upset, even as he felt his own yellow magic filter into its body in a way it hadn’t before. He could still feel it, like the magic was still a part of his body, but it was just now elsewhere, like his limbs were being amputated and ingested right in front of him, but he could still move it if he could just get the numbness out of it.

"Oh...now he kind of understood it.

Now he could sort of understand what it meant when it called him a traitor before impaling him.
He could understand that a little, but it took him a second to register when it wasn’t in front of him anymore, a loud crash sounding off to the side as suddenly, something—someone very different was in front of him.

---

Toshinori’s mind refused to go blank when he saw the boy, the Gray Man—that damned monster—standing in front of him, torturing him just as Climantine had said it was.

The boy’s blood was mixing with the rain as it dropped off of his body, staining the front of his dress red, his feet dangling above the ground. And yet, somehow, he was still alive. He could tell by the way he twitched and the thing kept talking to him—he couldn’t hear a word it was saying, didn’t give a shit what it was saying. But even more concerning was the way it had its hand on his cheek, and gray veins were starting to trail in on the boy’s skin, like ink was being injected into him.

Faster than the rest of his body, the boy’s face was going pale, his eyes quickly losing light, and Toshinori knew he was running out of time, so he wasted none.

Without stopping, Toshinori rammed shoulder-first into the distracted creature, sending it flying with a startled screech into the plexiglas of the office building, where it shattered on impact. The hit made Toshinori lose enough momentum that he didn’t follow after it on pure kinetic energy alone, stopping just a bit further than where it had been standing in front of the bleeding boy.

It wasn’t the first time Toshinori had seen a child near death or dying. There were many faces that would haunt his dreams for the rest of his life. But of the many faces he saw, he knew this one would be a fresh one that stayed with him for a long time.

The boy’s left eye was a bit more closed than the other with the blood running down that side of his face, but both eyes were on him, the yellow glow to them faded dull, the star-shaped irides hazy and loosing form. His face was pale with the gray veins, his color dimmed to that near a corpse. At his sides, his hands and feet twitched, his mouth open and bloodied as a wheeze filtered from in between his lips.

Toshinori quickly shifted over to him, moving his left arm under the boy’s legs to support him so he wasn’t hanging on his own weight, the pole held between his left arm and his chest. His right moved behind his impaled back, taking a hold of the metal. He shifted so the boy’s head could rest on his shoulder, his hand starting to clench down.

“A--ah--A-All--”

“Say nothing, my boy. It’s alright.”

Quickly, Toshinori bore down on the metal with his fist so it thinned and broke off. He heard the boy gurgle against his shoulder in pain, but otherwise didn’t make a sound as he supported the boy’s body with one hand, holding the remaining part of the pole with the other. He moved away from it then, finding a stack of metal boxes to set him down by as he heard the crackle of broken glass being stepped on back near the building.

Toshinori set him down carefully, pushing the boxes until there was a space that could support the bar while the boy sat up against them. He put the back end of the bar there as he arranged the boy as comfortably against them as he possibly could, listening to him wheeze and choke as he did so.

“If you can, I need you to hold on for just a bit longer. Can you do that for me?” he asked pressing the boxes back close so the bar could sit in between two of them. He backed away from the boy the,
taking in how he looked.

The boy, Midoriya, was gazing at nothing for a moment, but then his eyes shifted until they were looking at each other. The boy didn’t nod or anything, but Toshinori could tell what the boy meant wordlessly with his slow, careful blink, though it was accented by another bloody cough, red spilling over his lips and onto the white front of his dress and the apron further down.

Toshinori smiled softly, concealing the cloying swirl of regret behind privately clenched teeth. He ran a hand over the boy’s head, pushing some of his soaked hair away from his forehead, where he saw a gash Midoriya bled from.

“It will be alright. Just wait here for now, young Midoriya.”

He heard a growl further behind him, and he stood to his feet, his body temporarily guarding the young boy’s glowing body from the heavy rain. Then he turned around, facing the monster as it pulled itself from the wreckage.

Manual was near the middle of the area, on the ground and in clear pain, but still breathing. Snipe and Fraction were on the same side Midoriya had been arranged, though further off, Fraction moving and putting pressure on Snipe’s back wounds--far enough away to be safe. Gunhead was unconscious where he was embedded in a pile of building beams, at least, Toshinori hoped he was unconscious.

Quickly, before the creature could attack again, he rushed over to Manual’s side, picking up the injured man, before rushing him over near Midoriya’s side--not directly beside him, but close enough that if you saw one, you’d see the other. The Normal hero was struggling when he let him down onto the ground on his side, his arms wrapped over his waist, his face red with stress and pain, but he was alive.

He did the same for Gunhead, quickly moving him to the other side of Manual’s prone body, carefully arranging his bleeding, possibly fractured arms in his lap. When he turned to find Fraction and Snipe, he found that the two had already moved away from their previous position, Fraction supporting Snipe’s body as they inched away behind the piles of metal and boxes to the outskirts of the area--probably heading over, but in a roundabout way. They could handle themselves then.

Well, with all of the injured people as out of the way as possible...

He didn’t give the creature the chance to pull itself out completely before he ran over to it, careful with his footing to not send a gust of wind back at the injured crowd. Before it could move out of the way, he punched it in the face with very little fanfare. It was a bit more ready that time, not being blown back, but it did skid further into the office building, displacing some of the chairs and coffee tables in the main lobby.

It opened its mouth to screech at him, but he threw another one at it, then another, then, as quickly as he could, kept up a barrage of impact, not giving it a chance to counter. The pressure from how he hit it flushed through the closed area, glass breaking around them, chairs and tables flying backwards from their fight as the wind even creaked against what was left of the plexiglas at the front of the building.

At one point, the creature tried to angle its sharp, pointed shoulders at his fists, but when it did, he shifted his punch from ones straight forward to an uppercut. Before it could lose ground and fly up into the air, Toshinori grabbed its mane of hair, and with a twist of his torso, flung it out of the building. More glass crashed, having thrown it through another part of the wall, and he heard the loud crackling of concrete as it’s shoulders embedded into the ground.
“Normally, I wouldn’t be this crass,” he said, his voice poignant even over the sound of rain as he walked out of the building, towards the creature trying to pull itself up, “but considering the circumstances, considering that you’re confirmed to be inhuman, I cannot afford to not put everything into each punch. Surely you can understand that.”

The Gray Man pulled its shoulders out and hissed a stream of static, its back still to him before it started turning his way.

Before it could even fully turn around, Toshinori’s fist slammed against its face, it’s neck snapping the way of the punch, before another fist slammed into its chest. Another to the face, another to the chest. Two more to the chest, avoid the spikes on its shoulders as it tried to hit him, knock its wrist away and punch its face again.

Toshinori let himself fall into a rhythm of combat, and waited for its fatigue, waited for the perfect chance.

---

This one looked tasty, too.

Its energy was strong. Tanaka wanted to eat this tasty one.

_The gross one had a name where it didn’t. It took its name. Names were a human thing, after all._

But the strong one, this one, named All--it’s what Tanaka’s kin had called it, and thus All was All’s name--this one was too strong.

All was so strong, each blow draining at the energies Tanaka took from the plated tasty--_Gladiator, its name was_.

All hogged all of the creatures, whether tasty or gross or inbetween or _kin, like the glowy yellow one, kin, traitor, doesn’t deserve the name it has_, up against the wall. Tanaka didn’t want to try to approach them. Couldn’t even if it wanted.

All was too strong.

All was beating it.

Tanaka felt its energy waning, because All hit it too much and it had to use a lot to keep moving.

And All had Traitor’s magic at its side, unused, sparking, ready to eat, ready to kill.

Kill?

Death.

Tanaka could die.

Even with all of All’s hitting, All couldn’t kill Tanaka, but Traitor could. That’s why it took Traitor out. Why it wanted to eat Traitor.

But Traitor was still there, right at All’s side.

Death…

Death was a human thing.
But Tanaka didn’t want that.

Pain was fine. All punching Tanaka was near pain, and that was fine.

But Death was not.

Death was...end, it was end, finish, done even if not complete, the fast-paced stream of noise in its mind spoke and said it ends things.

It would not be able to be anymore.

Tanaka couldn’t come to be if it died.

Tanaka barely was as it was, Tanaka was just starting to be, and if it died now…

It had to get away. It had to end All.

But All was quick. All wouldn’t let it get away. No matter how much Tanaka swerved and dodged, All would hit Tanaka too much and it wouldn’t be able to move.

And All was strong. All had two hands, and avoided Tanaka when it tried to get rid of All’s hands.

And All was hitting Tanaka too much for it to call the metal.

Tanaka was dying. Tanaka would die.

Tanaka...

It...didn’t want to die.

No.

---

Izuku’s limbs felt cold.

He could feel the rain against his body if he focused, but otherwise, it just felt like he was being lightly poked through a blanket on all sides.

The pain had cooled like ice while he watched All Might run, jump, and punch and slam the Gray Man into submission. It wouldn’t give up--it didn’t know how, probably--but All Might was more tenacious than it could ever wish to be. Even while it tried to match All Might’s pace, tried to injure the hero, the most it had gotten was a few small cuts from rearranging the plating on its skin, but a little of his own blood spilt was nothing to the Symbol of Peace.

The Gray Man didn’t stand a chance.

So Izuku watched on, fighting with everything he had to stay conscious. He wasn’t sure if the arrow would stay live if he fell asleep, so he had to. And even if it would, he just…

He just wanted to see All Might win again.
He watched as All Might’s punches packed more energy, so much that the creature’s body morphed around it like thickened playdough, the plating it stole from Gladiator starting to fail. He watched as one of those punches set the creature to do the closest thing to spewing that he’d ever seen, a strange, wet collection of dark gray magic glittering with pinks and reds and yellows, flying from its mouth, pattering onto the ground in a wet puddle.

After that, the Gray Man’s body dimmed, the pink, red, and yellow glow fading till there was nearly nothing, and it seemed to lose its mind, screeching so loudly that Izuku could no longer hear Manual’s writhing, injured form calling his name. It started attacking back more than before with wild haymakers and loud screeches, using nothing of its horns or shoulders anymore, trying to land some hit, any hit, but it failed time and time again. All Might blocked it, parried it, and returned the favor tenfold, hard enough that the rain’s fall pattern was disturbed by the wind, that Izuku could feel the force of it blowing against his hair and face, pushing him against the boxes behind him.

The Gray Man didn’t form plates anymore. It didn’t call on any metal anymore. For the sake of brute strength, it abandoned all except its single fist and its pointed legs.

But it wasn’t enough.

The Symbol of Peace kept on, putting all of his energy into each hit, until he built his energy in his right one and punched it on the top of its head, right in between its horns, and the creature’s feet sank into the ground like it was puddy.

It was here that All Might paused, and that’s when Izuku saw it.

The Gray Man was twitching, its head shaking wildly, its hair and body seeming like it was glitching out from the amount of magic it used.

It was fatigued.

And so, with what little energy Izuku had left, he pushed just a bit more, just a little, and felt for the arrow he’d given the hero.

He saw the yellow light of his own magic in the arrow on the hero’s side brighten, turning the raindrops near it a yellow color as they passed. It sparked wildly with the excess Izuku had managed to push into it, and All Might on the other side of the soaked hero’s body, and saw something like lightning glitter and trail along his suit. He watched through hazy eyes as All Might reached down, taking the arrow up in his hand, holding the middle of the weapon. With his left, he took a hold of the Gray Man’s right shoulder spike, steadying its ever-twitching body. With his right, he rose the arrow in the air.

Izuku couldn’t hear the rain anymore. Couldn’t tell if Manual was calling his name anymore either. It never occurred to him that he was so out of it that he couldn’t hear anymore.

Instead of all of that, he just watched his favorite hero as he brought down the arrow, stabbing the Gray Man in the face. When he did, a great spark of magic, pent up within the weapon, struck straight through the monster, lichtenberg figures connecting all through the parts of the monster. Izuku saw how its mouth was wide open, probably screaming, but he couldn’t hear it.

Still, he knew the exact moment when it finally cut out, its entire body going terribly still.

It was...over, then.

Finally.
Knowing that, he couldn’t hold on any longer.

Ahh, really…

Izuku’s vision slowly faded to black with the image of a victorious All Might, holding his arrow in the creature’s face as it finally began to crack into pieces where the yellow of his magic had polluted its body, parts of it breaking off like a crumbling statue.

At the same time, he felt himself start to fall, as if he was slipping through his own fingers, straight through the ground and into the ocean. The numbness spread all through him until he felt nothing. Saw nothing. Tasted nothing.

All Might…is…

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Then there was nothing.
After-party Clean Up

Chapter Notes

Thank you all again for all of your attention and fan art (as viewable on my tumblr) and general goodness.

I can’t say much as I’m leaving for work soon, but I hope you guys have or have had a fantastic Spring Break.

The Gray Man collapsed into pieces before Toshinori, and when the dust of its body settled, it revealed seven dully glowing, pulsing crystals. They bobbed in mid-air, like the rewards from defeating a video game boss, not at all affected by the rain pouring down around it. The blond man stared at the crystals before looking down at the arrow he held, the bright yellow weapon still sparking lightly.

If this wasn’t confirmation that young Midoriya’s magic was the only known thing to kill the creatures, he didn’t know what was.

With the boy re-entering his thoughts, he turned away from the destroyed creature in front of him to look over where he’d left the injured heroes.

Gunhead was still very much out of it, completely unconscious and unresponsive to the rain falling on him. Manual was still curled up on his side, his arms wrapped over his stomach as much as he could manage. His face was blotchy and red from the obvious pain he was in, but his eyes looked red, his teeth clenched.

And beside him…

Midoriya had lost his transformation, the glow gone from his body.

The boy’s face was slack, eyes half open, mouth just open enough for blood to trickle slowly down from it in a waterlogged stream. Instead of staining a pink dress and white apron, it stained a loose, wet t-shirt, the words on it pierced by the pole through his chest. The skirt of his dress had become khaki shorts, his shoes losing the pink glow and shine. His hair had gone dark, nearly black. His arms were limp on the ground at his sides, his whole body pale with blood loss, his face still bearing the gray veins from some of his magic being taken.

Toshinori sucked in a breath. Paused. Then began walking forward towards them. Once he was close, he bent down on a knee and really took the boy’s body in. Young Midoriya’s eyes had lost all light, dulled out and dim as the sky above.

Toshinori swallowed, then softly closed his eyelids.

“I am...so sorry, Midoriya, my boy. I was not fast enough...” in the distance, he heard the sirens of the arriving ambulances.

“I am...sorry.”
The instant Climantine had given them the ‘all clear’, the paramedics and policemen started racing down the bridge to the isle, sirens blaring and lights flashing in the darkness of the storm. Tsukauchi went with them in his own car, followed by another truck with inspectors ready to pick up any leftover magical evidence.

It was one thing to hear of the battle through Climantine’s dutiful report. It was another to see it.

In the middle of the walkway between the curve where the road turned cars back around to the bridge and the partially wrecked main-office, Gladiator’s corpse laid still, his head rolled off to the side. Mr. Champion laid a little before him, a large hole in his chest, one of his legs clearly broken. Off to the right side, Copper Devil laid, her body facing up with her head turned towards the ground.

They saw where All Might stood then, further away from them to the right, staking guard over the injured people there as he waved for their attention. Fraction and Snipe had joined him, the latter on his stomach to avoid aggravating his wounds, barely clinging to consciousness, the former tending to him, visibly scratched up looking tight-lipped, but still alive and moving. Medics rushed over with their gurneys, and All Might helped them raise Manual and Gunhead up onto theirs, Fraction helping with Snipe.

But even some medics froze at the sight of the young boy there, very clearly dead.

While other groups rushed over to the second entrance down to the lower floors, Tsukauchi ran over to his friend, calling out his hero name. But All Might didn’t respond, his gaze staying trained on the boy’s body. When Tsukauchi saw him, he too slowed down, then stopped.

Tsukauchi stared at Midoriya with his friend for a moment before he slowly removed his hat, putting it to his chest. He reached out with his other hand to his friend’s shoulder, feeling the heat of his barely contained steam through his costume.

With the man’s quickly depleting time in mind, Tsukauchi shifted, and took out his small, handheld camera. He let his friend go only for a moment to take a picture of the scene, of the surroundings, and of the boy. Then he stood back up, putting his hat back on, shifting himself back into business.

“Come on. Let’s get you two out the rain.”

All Might’s tight shoulders relaxed just a little, and he bent down, moving to cradle Midoriya’s body yet again, noting inwardly how still and cool he was this time around. Tsukauchi led the quiet, straining man to another ambulance, this one having nurses with tight lips and knowing gazes, eyes somber at the sight of the dead child. They helped lay the boy on his side on the foldable stretcher in the back of the truck tied right to the bench seats, arranging the pole so it wouldn’t shift or hurt anyone else, but not taking it out yet.

Tsukauchi helped All Might sit on the other side with the common white rollable stretcher, where the nurses began caring for him immediately, preparing medicine to stabilize him when the backlash of the extended quirk usage hit him. Steam was already starting to leak as it was, but he was holding, just until those doors closed. Tsukauchi looked his friend in the eye, making sure he was looking back.

“All Might, we’ll take it from here. You focus on recovering.”

“Tsukauchi.”

The detective paused, waiting for his friend to finish speaking through his clenched teeth.

“The arrow,” he continued, bringing attention to the weapon he’d taken out of his belt, which
glowed and sparked in his shaking hand. “I was only able to kill the Gray Man with this arrow. Take it. Just in case.”

Tsukauchi nodded, taking out a plastic evidence bag and taking it from his friend with a barely contained wince at the odd, otherworldly feeling it gave him when he touched it. He nodded upon having it in his grasp, and turned away quickly, stepping away from the truck as the nurses closed the doors partially. They didn’t close it all the way, allowing the steam from his deactivation to flow out the back of the ambulance, then Tsukauchi heard their hurried voices and All Might’s hacking, painful coughing cut off as they closed the doors and the sirens started blaring, the truck driving off with his friend and Midoriya in it.

The detective sighed, looking down at the glowing arrow in the bag. Then he rolled it up and carefully placed it in one of his coat’s inner pockets.

“Well. Back to work,” he muttered, walking over to the middle ground where the main damage was, where the inspectors were gathered.

Before he got too far, he felt something nudge his side, and he startled a bit, quickly turning to see who it was. A second later, he registered that he heard the sound of the rain hitting something thin, like nylon.

It turned out to be true, as to his side, Detective Hashiro stood, gaze somber, an umbrella raised and open over her head. She held onto it with her left hand, holding out another towards him with her right.

“You always forget yours, Detective,” she said, letting it go easily as the man calmed himself and took it.

“Thanks.” He opened the canopy and the rush of rain stopped falling on his head and shoulders. “What’s your progress?”

“Just got here. I’m going to get pictures of Gladiator and Mr. Champion. Copper Devil’s first, though... You?”

That didn’t look like all she wanted to say. There were many questions in her eyes, flitting around before being pushed down for the sake of professionalism. He was sure she’d probably ask them later. He couldn’t help but wonder what he was looking like if she seemed so concerned.

“All Might gave me the arrow he used to kill the Gray Man. I’ll give it to the inspectors in a moment. But in the meantime, I’ll get pictures of that scene,” he said, pointing over to where they were, a bunch of white coats hovering around a single area. “Keep an eye out for anything strange.”

“Will do,” she replied, starting to walk away.

“Oh, and Detective?” Tsukauchi called out, waiting until the woman turned back to him. With her attention on him, he pointed over to the pole stuck into the ground, the head of it twisted. “Get a picture of the end of that pole, please.”

She looked at it, then back at him, her eyes searching his. She apparently found what she was looking for, because she nodded, a slow, almost cautious move, then turned away, heading over to Copper Devil’s body. He said nothing else, turning back to his target and walking over.

There were five people in white windbreakers there, their heads covered with the hoods as they took pictures and pointed and muttered about the strange, goopy, multi-colored liquid and the floating crystals the Gray Man had apparently left behind. Two of them turned to him as he approached,
revealing a woman with dark green hair, bright green skin, and yellow eyes, the lower part of her face covered with a black cloth, likely the neck of her turtleneck. The other who looked at him took off their hood to reveal silvery white hair and a somber smile, Inspector Yayoi then fishing an umbrella from her pocket.

“Detective Tsuakuchi,” she greeted with a small bow. “I wish we could see each other again on better terms. How are you?”

“Considering the circumstances, I could be better,” he replied.

She nodded, understanding. “If you need any pictures for your personal documents, please do so quickly. Hana Team is going to take the substances in for testing as soon as you’re done.”

He nodded and got closer, taking out his camera. The people watched him curiously, especially the one with yellow eyes, but had stopped their mumbling, giving him space. Still, he could feel them watching him, like he was just as interesting as the specimens they were taking in, and almost felt nervous as he started snapping pictures, careful to not touch anything.

“You work with Inspector Yayoi?” he asked, taking a picture of the floating crystals. When the yellow-eyed woman didn’t answer, he glanced at her, and her eyes widened.

“She is our superior, yes,” a mild, soft voice replied.

It rang true, and he nodded, somewhat reassured.

“And your name?”

“At the the subtle narrowing of his eyes, Yayoi interjected, one hand up placatingly. “Hana Team is one of many under my tutelage. They work under codenames considering how confidential magical information has been and still is.”

“Huh.” As it usually was with Yayoi, he had to strain a bit to tell if that was truth or a lie, like there was a blanket covering his senses when it came to her, but something underlying it seemed to ring correctly, so he trusted her words.

He directed his camera’s attention to the goopy-looking liquid on the ground, the dark, inky grey substance flashing slowly with sparks of pink, red, and yellow, reminding him distantly of dark opalite. He took a picture.

Before he could ask another question, suddenly he heard Hashiro’s voice ring out, startled and firm. Tsuakuchi quickly turned her way, as did Sakura, trying to see what the commotion was about.

Through the sheet of rain they saw Hashiro calling over a group of nurses and a gurney, kneeled down near Copper Devil’s body. They couldn’t quite hear what she was saying, but Hashiro made gestures near her neck. One nurse bent down and took one of Copper’s wrists into his hand, checking for a pulse. There was a pause, longer than what would usually be needed to see if someone’s heart was still beating, but at the end of it, they could see the shock on his face even through the rain.

“Oh,” Yayoi said, raising a hand to her mouth in shock. “She’s alive.”

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“Ahhh...that looks terrifying,” a nurse mumbled at the front desk, looking out from the clinic’s station to the television in the filled up square, soft tan waiting room, coughing men and children stretched out in their beige pleather chairs as mothers and women stayed huddled up and curving away from the open-mouthed sneezing. As she watched, Inko walked back in with her hands full of folders from the six appointments she’d helped check in and dismiss.

She sighed tiredly upon entering, and looked towards the spot where she’d left the folders from before for the other nurse to check in. They still sat there, piling up steadily.

“Nanajou-san, would you please--” Inko began, beginning to hand the woman three of the files in her hands before she waved her off, not even looking in her direction.

“In a minute, Midoriya-san,” she mumbled, still staring at the screen.

Inko felt herself starting to sweat a little, and began looking around at the other women in the room, but they were either working with other documents or taking a call. She sighed, and turned back to Nanajou, the woman curling her brown hair around her finger.

“Nanajou-san, I really need these filed--”

“It’s just going to take a second,” the woman replied, patting the open space beside her on the desk, “Just leave it there, I’ll do it later.”

She wouldn’t though. Inko knew this well enough, because time and time again, the younger nurse would leave it piling up until there were too many to check in by herself, then Inko would get roped into helping her file them, only to find that, an hour or two later, Nanajou-san had already left the office without her.

Frustration built in Inko’s throat like a bubble of acid, because she was so, so tired. She’d already had two late nights that week, and was not looking forward...no, was not going to accept having a third one. So, she breathed in carefully, cooling the heat of irritation spreading through her veins, and made sure her face was carefully neutral. She walked over slowly as the nurse kept her eyes on the television, stopping once she was standing right above the pile of folders.

For a brief moment, Inko considered taking a page out of Mitsuki’s book and slamming them down, but no. That just wasn’t her nature. So instead, she added the files to the pile that was already there, and placed a hand on the younger woman’s shoulder.

Nanajou-san turned to her, looking perturbed, but froze upon meeting her eyes. Inko wasn’t smiling, channeling her disappointment into the light in her own eyes.

“Nanajou-san, if you would.”

The woman sat there with a startled, wide eyed look on her face, before she scowled and picked up a folder. “Fine, fine. Don’t get your panties in a bunch. You act like I can’t do my job or something.”

“Thank you.” Inko said, smiling genuinely, a little wobbly with her tiredness. Relief washed over her and she turned away, making her way over to an empty chair and computer. Behind her, she could hear Nanajou mumble something about “fat, old nurses” and “killjoys”, but she didn’t care. If it meant she would get home earlier, she would deal with Nanajou’s brand of distasteful tendencies if she did what she was supposed to do.

She breathed out a little puff of air in relief as she plopped down into the chair, her arms and legs a little shaky from how much she’d been moving around. But at least she had a little time to relax, maybe five minutes or so before the next check-in.
As she let her tired muscles settle, she looked around the small nurse’s room. Some of the nurses were still taking calls and working on papers rather earnestly, though one or two were occasionally clicking away from their Facebook profiles to type in a word or two for their work. Her lips pursed a little, but she said nothing about it, turning a little more in her chair as she looked at the rest. Her gaze landed on Nanajou again, who had stopped, an unfiled folder in her hand as she stared out into the waiting room at the television.

Inko frowned, but decided against saying anything again for the time being. If push came to shove, she’d try to find a way to leave, papers filed or not! Well...perhaps not, that would be a bit mean. She’d just have to motivate the nurse more, perhaps even pester her a bit if need be. But really, something on the television had to really have her attention caught.

Since she was on break, Inko decided she’d pay a bit of attention, too. She turned her gaze away from looking at the back of Nanajou’s head to the television screen, and immediately, what she saw gave her pause.

The reporter was a woman with dark hair in a dark raincoat with an umbrella raised over her head, trying to protect herself from the still heavy rain. Above her, dark clouds shifted, though they weren’t rolling like it was reported to have been near the buildings. All the while she spoke, sirens sounded behind her as three ambulances drove in.

Her ears then tuned out the calls and typing noises to hear what she said, helped by the captions trailing belatedly at the bottom of the screen.

“So far, there’s been several ambulances travelling from the in-construction Gray Man facility to Rirossu Ward Medical Center, where heroes and guards alike are being transported after a reported catastrophic attack by a Gray Man who managed to get free within the facility. So far, we are unable to confirm the amount of deaths, but we do know there are numerous casualties, and many injured personnel.”

Oh...oh my…

She put her hand over her mouth, shocked by the events on screen. As she detached her gaze from the television, she noticed how entranced the occupants in the waiting room were by what the woman was saying as well, mumbling amongst each other as they took in what she said. A father wrapped his arm around his daughter as she cuddled closer to him, scared by what the woman meant.

Looking at them, she thought of Izuku.

Was...was he alright? It was storming out there, wasn't it? The storm wasn’t just in Rirossu, it was spreading all over the nearby area. And he’d been going out in the mornings to the old beach park?

Pushing the thought of the attack out of her mind, she dug into her pocket where her phone was on silent, wanting to warn Izuku to be safe. But immediately upon flipping it open, she noted she had two missed calls and a voicemail. She clicked on the Recent Calls tab and checked the number.

It was one she didn’t know. It was probably some sort of spam, then.

Ignoring it, she began to type in her son’s phone number, then turned away from the waiting room window as she waited for him to answer.

“Hi, y-you’ve reached Midoriya Izuku. I can’t answer my phone right now, b-but please leave a message!”
Inko blinked, and backed the phone away from her ear. Why wouldn’t he answer? She’d told him to keep his phone on, especially while he was out. Maybe he was taking a bath or something? She called again, only to meet his voicemail message again. Well, it just meant she’d have to give her son a talking to when she got home.

Moving the phone away from her ear, she began trying to get to her messages app, but her eyes caught on the calls and voicemail she missed, the little red symbol pulsing next to the message, the phone’s number bright red.

She glanced up at the room again, finding that no new patient needed to come in just yet. So...usually she wouldn’t listen to voicemails or do calls until after work, as was polite, but maybe if it was just slow enough this time...just this time.

So, curious, she moved over to her missed voicemail tab and clicked it, the message appearing above the others in a list with a red dot right under the time and date of the missed voicemail. The number it was left from was the same as the unknown number in the call log. It was only 36 seconds long.

That wasn’t long enough to be problematic for work. A listen surely wouldn’t cause her any trouble.

With that in mind, she pressed the play button and rose her phone to her ear to listen.

“Hello, Midoriya-san. This is Detective Tsuakuchi Naomasa with the Musutafu Prefectural Police Department. I am calling to inform you that your son, Midoriya Izuku, has been taken in to the prefectural office as of the time of this call. Please call me back at 04-7371, or come to the office at 4 Chome-1-5 Nakamura, Sousei, Musutafu 100-8292. Again, I am Detective Tsukauchi, at 04-7371.”

All of her brain processes froze for a moment, stuck on the words she’d supposedly just heard, though there was an underlying stream of thought that chanted over and over again that she’d just had an auditory hallucination. She...had to have heard that wrong.

So she played it again. But the same words played for her, to a T. Tsukauchi-san. Police department. Her son, in the office. The number.

She backed her face away from the phone in her hand, her chair rolling just a bit from the force of her movements, and checked the number that left the message, finding it was the same as Tsukauchi-san had said. She pressed the “Call Back” button without a second thought, not minding the growing attention on her in the office.

It rang.

Rang.

Rang.

Rang.

And just when she thought it wouldn’t pick up, she heard the click and slight fumbling as an indication of an answer, then a voice, tired but firm.

“Hello, this is Tsukauchi.”

Under his voice, she could hear people yelling and loud beeping noises right before the noise cut off behind the sound of what she assumed was a shutting door. Still, even through that, she heard the distant echo of rolling, squeaky wheels, tinkling metal, and heavy footsteps.
She swallowed the saliva in her throat. “H-Hello?”

“Might I ask who is speaking?”

“Oh--uhm, ah, this is--ah--this is Midoriya Inko. I-I got a call earlier today from you? I...I was busy. I was working, you see, and I didn’t get it until now. Is...is my son okay? What happened? Why...why is he with you?”

For a moment, he was quiet, and her breathing increased. Her empty hand grasped the front of her shirt tightly, ignoring everything around her except for the noise over the phone. The voice on the other side cleared a little, then, more muted than before, he replied.

“Midoriya-san, this is no longer something I can explain over the phone. If you are free at this time, would you mind coming over to Rirossu Ward Medical Center? It will be much easier to explain the circumstances.”

“Rirossu Ward Medical…” she trailed off, her eyes darting back up to the screen in front of her, watching as the police started making the news crews disperse. She felt her heart trying to escape through her ribcage. Somehow, she’d stood up, staring at the television screen. “Wh...W-Why there? Why do I need to go there? My...my son’s at the Dagobah Beach Park, not...not over there. He shouldn’t be, so... Wasn’t he at the police office? Where is my son? I...I want to speak to him. Let me speak to him...please.”

“Midoriya-san, I cannot explain this over the phone. If you would like to meet at the police office, then--”

“Is that where my son is?”

“No, he’s not th--”

“Then where is my son?”

“At the medical center, Midoriya-san. He’s here. I am here as well.”

“Oh…”

Izuku was at the medical center. She couldn’t for the life of her imagine why, but he was there. And the detective couldn’t tell her what was wrong. Couldn’t let her speak to her son.

...No.

“G...Give me an hour. I can--I will be there within an hour.”

“Understood. I’ll meet you at the Emergency Room Check-In. Please call when you’re almost here.”

No.

“I w-will. I will.”

Then she heard another click, and the call ended. It took her a few seconds to let the phone down from her ear, and other noises started filtering in.

No.

Distantly, the television had moved on to another story, a mere mumble in the background. Some of the other nurses were standing near her, their gazes worried. Even Nanajou had turned in her seat,
eyes wide as she stared at her.

“I...I need to go.”

“What?” the young nurse asked, standing.

“I need to go. Right now.”

“But—”

Before anyone else could tell her anything, Inko turned and rushed over to the door, opening it, not caring if it cracked against the wall where the doorstop had been missing for days. The doctors and nurses working in the back halls paused, startled from the noise, then watched as she scurried over to the locker room, throwing that door open as well.

When she made it to her locker, her hands were trembling too much to roll the lock correctly, and tears were starting to build at the corners of her eyes out of frustration. She channeled that energy into pulling at the lock with her quirk, breaking the mechanism inside, and opening the door with an ease that would need repairs. She piled her things into her arms, not even pausing to put her purse over her shoulder, and then she turned on her heels to get to the back exit.

Pushing her way through the small crowd trying to talk to her at the locker room entrance, she turned down the hall right next to the entrance and headed straight for the unmarked door that led to the outside hall and the rest of the building. She needed to be down the elevator and out the place as soon as she could manage, and yet, one voice rang through the fog clouding her ears.

“Midoriya-san!”

She paused with her hand on the door knob, and refused to turn around.

Nanajou called out behind her somewhere again, her voice frantic and, dare she note, a tad angry. “Midoriya-san, you can’t just leave! We’re busy! They’ll fire you!”

Inko considered it for a moment. Just for a moment. Thought about how much she’d worked and how grateful she was to be able to provide for her son as a single mother. Thought about the joy he felt when she made his favorite food and was able to give him an allowance from the money she got.

Thought about how much she missed in his life, how she hadn’t been able to do a thing about how timid her son grew, how afraid and hopeless his eyes had grown no matter how much he tried to hide it behind a smile. How she missed whatever had happened April 10th that led to her son coming home late and crying in her arms, unable to get up the next day for the half-day at school. How that hope slowly regrew in his gaze, accompanied by a pinpoint focus and a pure exhaustion she wasn’t familiar with.

Thought about how she had no idea when her phone rang to let her know her son was with the police. About how he’d escalated from the police office to the hospital in her absence.

Even if they did threaten to fire her for some strange, convoluted reason, she wasn’t about to stop.

So, she ran out the door without looking back.
As Midoriya-san had promised over the phone, she did call him when she was almost at the center. And so, as he promised, Tsukauchi quickly settled issues with other policemen and checked up on the status of the heroes before moving to wait at the public ER Check-In. He got a few glances from the passing people, all of whom were from families of the police, sidekicks, or heroes. Many were sick or hurt, one such man passing by him with a clearly broken arm, but others were waiting, huddled together for comfort in case of bad news--the news some of them thought he was going to give them, their wide-eyed concern at his entrance not fading in the slightest even minutes later. Nevertheless, he stayed still where he stood near the counter, one arm to his side, the other holding up his slightly damp trench coat.

He didn’t have to wait long after the call, only about ten minutes, and when Midoriya Inko came rushing into the ER, she didn’t do so silently. She rushed in through the sliding doors, panting like she’d ran ten miles, trying desperately to close her clearly inefficient umbrella, her legs from the knee down soaked with water. Her eyes passed over his body three times in her panicked state, even when he waved to get her attention, but when she did notice him, she honed in and sped briskly to his side, carefully weaving through the injured, sick, and waiting with a practiced ease.

He could see where her son had gotten his eyes and height from.

“Are you--” she huffed, “--are you, Detective Tsukauchi?”

“Yes, ma’am. And you are Midoriya Inko, Midoriya Izuku’s mother?”
She nodded hurriedly, not taking her eyes off of his, and her answer rang true under his skin.

He nodded in return, assured of her identity. “Alright, now, we can--”

He suddenly found the arm holding the trench coat in her desperate, damp grasp. She pulled him downward until they were almost eye-to-eye, her gaze clouded with a barely withheld, nearly answered despair. Two guards watching from a distance startled, but he rose his other hand, and they froze in their spots. He kept his expression carefully neutral as the mother before him could no longer hold back her tears, transparent, salty trails running down her cheeks.

“Where is he?” she hissed low and wavery, like a compressed steam desperate to escape, without anger, only fear, “Where is my son?”

Tsukauchi put his hand on hers, and her fingers loosened only a little.

“I’ll tell you in a moment, Midoriya-san, but let’s move to a more private room to discuss this.”

He watched a horrified understanding cloud her gaze, as the light so similar to her son’s started to fade. Her mouth dropped open, her jaw trembling as she tried to come up with something to say. But she couldn’t. And she gave up, her mouth shutting with a visible shudder.

With a nod of her head, he continued to hold the top of her hand as he led her away. With his hand on hers, he could feel the way it shook against his coat.

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He led her off to a small office-like room lower in the hospital, closer to the morgue. By the time they went the single floor down to the morgue in the elevator, Midoriya-san bowed her head, clear drops pattering onto the floor below. She was still in her nurse garb, clearly having left work just as she said, so he knew she knew what was happening. He knew it didn’t make it hurt any less.

A policeman was waiting for them at the door down the hall, his hands crossed behind his back as he nodded, the long, elvish ears at the sides of his head lowered. He opened the door for both of them, leading them into a carefully neutral room without windows or mirrors, just the window on the door present. There was a long wooden table in the middle of the room with a clipboard, folder, and papers on top, one chair on one side, one on the other. Above it, a single, large light that brightened the room enough by itself, but left a sharp line of darkness in each corner where the cone-shaped shade cut it off.

Tsukauchi led her over to the one alone before settling in the seat on the other side. He cleared his throat carefully, watching her as she stared at her hands in her lap, and let his previous training as a grief counselor take over.

“Midoriya-san, thank you for coming in,” he began. “My name it Tsukauchi Naomasa, lead detective of the Musutafu Prefectural Police Department. We will be making sure that we have the right person, and that the person I am referring to is your son. I will be with you during the identification process. I wish I could have explained everything over the phone for your sake, but here, right now, you can ask me any and all questions you have regarding him if he is who we believe he is. The identification process will be done via photo. I will hand you a clipboard with a picture we took of the person we believe is your son.

“In the picture, there will be a blue background from the sheet he is laying on. You will only be able to see the front of his body from the top of his head to his collarbones. A part of his face will have gray veins from an injury acquired during the Gray Man attack. His face will also have some
scratches and bruising on his cheeks, shoulders, and head from the attack. The bruising covers a large part of his body, but the scratches are small. You will have all the time you need to look and confirm or deny if the person in the photo is actually him. From there, if you so desire, I will explain what led to his passing. While I personally can only be here for twelve hours, our other detective, Hashiro Hayako, will come in if I need to leave. Do you understand?"

It took her a moment, but she rose her eyes to about his chin, and nodded once again.

With that, he picked up the clipboard already there which held down nothing but a single photo turned over on its face. He carefully placed it in front of Midoriya-san, and watched as her head dropped again and she curled in further, a restrained sob pressed down into a body-shaking sniffle.

“Remember, you can take all the time you need.”

She didn’t respond to him that time, but he figured that she heard him. So without rushing or pushing her to look, he sat at the other side of the table and waited.

He’d had to do this a few times before. Sometimes it took the person a few hours. Sometimes they tried to be ready but weren’t and had to call another family member to come and support them as they looked. Once, a man had refused to look at the picture of his dead wife for almost a whole day.

He’d seen the family information on Midoriya Izuku. After four years old, his mother’s name was the only thing to show up on his files for a guardian, and after a point, even Bakugou Mitsuki faded from the alternative emergency contact section. His mother was the only one Izuku had, and vice versa.

And now he was gone.

So, knowing that, Tsukauchi was prepared to sit there for the full twelve hours without a single reaction from the woman in the other chair. He was surprised when it only took her an additional ten minute wait after presenting the opportunity.

Her hands trembled as she scooted the clipboard closer to her body, then lifted the clamp and slipped the small square picture free. She didn’t lift it immediately, breathing heavily to keep herself from sobbing, to measure her breathing. Even so, she slowly began to turn it over, and she had to wipe her face of her frightened tears to see clearly.

For a moment, time seemed to stand still for her. Her gaze was trained on the picture, and all of her trembling had stopped. She sucked in a breath and didn’t let it out.

Then she choked. And her tears started anew, first as little buds at the corners of her eyes before they bloomed into long, thick trails that ran down her cheeks. Her whole body shuddered with the weight of her sobbing, and with a trained ear, Tsukauchi began to recognize words filtering through her weak, low voice.

“My baby--” she sobbed, “Izuku...Izuku, my baby boy...my--...my Izuku…”

Slowly, Tsukauchi dug into his pocket to pull out a pack of tissues, removing three for her to use. For a moment, she didn’t even acknowledge it, her gaze stuck on her son’s slack face, the picture shaking in her hand. She startled a little when she realized the tissues were there, but didn’t say anything as she took them.

She put the tissues up to her nose and mouth, and paused again, staring at the picture. Then, she placed the picture against her chest, bent forward, and released all of the tension that had built in her with a low, reedy whine as the precursor to sobbing, her eyes shut tight.
Tsukauchi almost couldn’t bear it, seeing her sit alone on the other side. He wanted more than anything to give her someone she could lean into and cry on, wanted to help alleviate at least a little of her pain, even if he had the distinct feeling that once she knew how he’d been involved in his death, she would hate him for it.

Still, he rose from his seat, lips pulled tight, swallowing down the cloying pill of regret that stuck to the walls of his throat, and made his way over to her side to put a hand on her shoulder. He couldn’t tell if it helped or not, but she leaned her body just slightly his way.

It took her a long time to cry. She sobbed into the tissues he gave her for a while, curled in like she’d been stabbed in the chest rather than her back, like the world had outright and openly betrayed her. He’d heard it from a grandfather looking at his son once before—it was a hard thing to know you outlived your child. Having no children, he couldn’t know that pain, but he could imagine.

Eventually, though it took longer than most, her twin rivers dried up and the full-body shuddering reduced to a minor tremble. She stared at the picture of her son’s dead body blankly, her cheeks ruddy and eyes tinged red, but the stabbing pain had calmed for the time being, reducing to a simmer. Tsukauchi waited.

“How—” she choked out after a while, once her voice box managed to work again. “How did...how did this happen? He was at Dagobah Beach Park, not…not Rirossu. Why...how...he was...he was with the police. The message said he was…”

And there it was.

Tsukauchi swallowed heavily, but he knew what was coming. He knew what he had to say because it was the truth.

“It was…” He paused. Breathed. Tried again with a firmer voice and a straighter back. “Ma’am, to sum it up shortly, it was neglig--”

Suddenly, there was a quick knock on the door, a hurried one with eight knocks one right after the other. It startled Midoriya-san enough that she jumped and stared wide-eyed at the door, and Tsukauchi turned sharply to see who it was.

Through the small window in the door, he could see the guard talking to someone on the other side, their ears pointed upwards as they tried to direct them away, but the other person was insistent, moving even to jangle the knob on the door. The guard managed to push them further away, and he could vaguely hear voices through the heavy door. After a moment, the guard seemed to lead them off, their head moving from the view of the window, and Tsukauchi let his shoulders drop, his guard dropping with it.

“I’m sorry, Midoriya-san, I’m not sure what--”

Then, the door swung open, a harried Yayoi entering the room, her medical jacket billowing behind her, the guard moving in behind her before he paused mid-grab.

The woman stared straight at him with her eyes wide open, kaleidoscope colors glittering in her irides, the heavy feeling that came with her gaze filling the room. He stared straight back, having quickly moved from Midoriya-san’s side to in front of her, hands prepared either to flip the assailant over his shoulder, or to reach down and grab the gun strapped to his side.

When he realized who it was, he calmed immediately, but a seething frustration built in his chest with a startling speed.
“Detective, I need to speak with you right now. As in, this immediate instant.”

He straightened up, a scowl narrowing his eyes, “Inspector, you better have one hell of a good reason for interrupting a body identification meeting.”

“Body ID…” she closed her eyes then and looked in the room, finding a wide-eyed, blank-looking Midoriya Inko behind Tsukauchi’s protective stance. “Oh, is this Izuku’s mom?”

“What?” the woman asked, her voice still reedy and confused, “Yes, I...what is happening?”

Yayoi’s smiled brightly then, straightening up and clapping her hands together, “Oh, wait, this is perfect, actually. Nothing could be more perfect than this.”

“What are you talking about?” Tsukauchi asked, the glare still strong on his face.

Not affected by his anger in the slightest, Yayoi bounced a little on the balls of her feet.

“Detective Tsukauchi, permission to move you and Midoriya-san to the Imaging Room for a revelation on our current subject’s condition?”

Tsukauchi’s glare lightened to a frown in his confusion. “Subject…”

Then it dawned on him what she meant.

“What’s happening? What revelation? And wouldn’t whatever you have to say be classified?”

“Usually it would, but considering the circumstances,” Yayoi nodded her head at the progressively more confused woman behind him, “I believe it’s within her rights. So, Detective, will you be handing me jurisdiction over the complete handling of this information?”

Tsukauchi paused for a moment, but then heard the chair behind him shift. When he looked back, Midoriya Inko had stood to her feet, clutching the picture of her son in her hand. Her gaze was still bleak, but there were questions there, too, many of them flitting around right behind her cornea. There were too many for him to answer on his own, and he wasn’t even sure he knew the answers to all of them, especially since he didn’t know what the inspector had to say.

“Subject...Izuku? Is this about my son?”

He looked over to Yayoi, who smiled back at him eagerly. Something in his soul told him he might regret it, but he’d feel more regret if he didn’t let her do whatever she was going to.

“Allright, Inspector. I give you legal jurisdiction.”

Her smile turned into a grin, and the feeling got worse.

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Yayoi was ecstatic as she hurried the two out of the room and back into the elevator, words leaving her mouth in a brick road of consciousness.

“It’s absolutely astounding, really, so I don’t blame you for being misinformed, Detective--Aww, don’t look at me like that, I’ll tell you both what it is once we’re there, alright? I don’t want to spoil the surprise. And when I say surprise, I mean surprise! Like, really, what’s happening right now cannot in any way, shape, or form be completely explained by science. The last time I’ve been this excited about a magical revelation was back in 20--ah, well, nevermind.”
Tsukauchi was very, very tempted to ask her to tone it down, but ever since the woman started spouting whatever came to mind about the “exciting amazing discovery that I’m not telling you about yet,” Midoriya-san seemed to be calming down, a somber look of nostalgia coloring her expression blue. He remembered then that Izuku was the kind of boy who did the same thing Yayoi was doing, so he decided not to say anything about her information dump after all.

When they got to the right floor and Yayoi guided them away to the Imaging Room, he was surprised to see a small crowd of doctors and three medical equipment technicians hanging around, trying to get back inside of the room, but two people in white, hooded windbreakers kept them at bay, the lower half of their faces covered by the black necks of their turtlenecks. One of them was much shorter than the other, but for both of them, the tops of the hoods of their windbreakers sported two triangular, dog-like ears.

The two stared at the crowd with a surprising amount of disinterest, but immediately perked up when they saw their group approach. Yayoi waved at them, and the two nodded, then moved, pushing people aside with ease to open a path for them to enter the room, one of them sprouting more arms from their back to hold people back, the other humming a low tune that, for some reason, seemed to fend their side of the crowd off.

The inspector thanked them as moved from the back pushing them forward to the front to open the door for them. Inko entered first, slowed by her apprehension, but Tsukauchi’s presence behind her helped her move forward. Inspector Yayoi twirled in, shutting the door and the noise off behind her.

The small room was dark with some small pictures on the left wall, only light coming in being from the room ahead. Through its clear door, they saw the dim, warm yellow of the light above the computers that recorded the fMRI pictures and video, where Detective Hashiro stood near two sitting figures in medical coats with a distinct mouse-looking symbol on their shoulders, both pale and completely blue-eyed women wearing their black hair tied in buns at the backs of their heads. The right corner lead off to the changing and entrance room to the fMRI machine, but that wasn’t where the inspector wanted them to go. She turned to them before she opened the next door in front of them.

“Now that we’re here away from prying, gossipy ears, I have so much--and I mean a lot--to show you.”

She opened the door, and Hashiro turned her head away from the view of the machine, the shock already on her face turning into a different kind.

“Detective Tsukauchi…” she muttered, then her gaze trailed a little downward, “And you are…”

“When I found Detective Tsukuchi, I found Izuku’s mother as well! A nice little arrangement of fate, wouldn’t you say? This is Midoriya...ah, Inko, you said?” Yayoi asked.

The still shocked woman blinked, her hand still tight on the picture. “Ah. Yes...that’s...that’s my name... Uhm...where is...where is my son? You said this was about him.”

Yayoi’s smile turned apologetic, her eyebrows tilting upwards. “Yes, it’s about Izuku--I’ll stop dragging you around in just a moment, alright?” She cleared her throat and stood up a little straighter then, shifting into a more professional tone. “As far as where you son is, he’s in the other room. You can see him through the glass, but since we’re running the machine, you can’t go in.”

Inko shuddered into action then, slowly walking from being near Tsukuchi to the big viewing window, looking into the room with the machine.
The room inside was dark with a cool blue light coming from the fMRI, the light shining down on the body inside of it. She couldn’t see his whole body, just his sheet-covered legs. Then she turned from the view to one of the computers the doctor’s looked at, hoping to see more.

In one of the open programs, she saw the live video of the person inside of the machine, Izuku’s eyes and mouth closed as though he were asleep, little pale scars and faded bruises on his face, his skin still carrying the evidence of his leached magic in gray veins that trailed along his cheek. She reached her hand out to touch it, the doctor moving aside a little in their chair to let her.

“He’s...he’s really in there,” she murmured, fingers pressed lightly to the screen.

“Yes ma’am, he is. So all of what I’m about to tell you is in regards to his body as studied. Would you like to take a seat?” Yayoi asked, pulling over another chair for her to sit in.

When Inko took it without a reply, her eyes trained intimately on the live video of her son, Yayoi turned to the two detectives with the same offer. When they denied it, she smiled and made her way over to a bigger screen on the wall to the side of the viewing area, a full-body, live feed of Midoriya’s scan was displayed in shades of black, white, and gray. The most harrowing thing about it was the large, empty darkness in his chest where his heart should’ve been, his spine and ribcage visibly broken with little shards of bone and torn tissue surrounding the hole.

“Now, what you see here is a normal scan. This is what the other doctors saw when they determined that Izuku was dead. This is a live feed, so everything you see here is happening in real time. As you can see, there’s no visible activity,” Yayoi began, taking out a small, sleek, extendable pointer she had, to touch the screen.

As she did, Inko’s attention latched onto her words, and she finally looked away from her son’s face. The hole on the screen made her shiver, scared and confused.

“What is...why is there a hole there? What’s wrong with his chest?”

Yayoi turned to her, visibly resisting the urge to cringe. “Well, uh...there’s no really light way to put it, Midoriya-san, but that hole is how your son presumably died. He was...completely impaled on a five by six inch pole through his chest. And from the position of it, of course, his spine, ribcage, and most importantly, his heart, took...ah, the brunt of the damage.”

“His heart…” Inko muttered, “…I don’t...I don’t see it.”

“That’s...ah, it was completely destroyed, Midoriya-san.”

At the sob that choked out of her throat, the doctor closest to her put a hand on her shoulder, and Yayoi, for the first time since Tsukauchi had started working with her, looked visibly panicked, her hands waving in the air as she stumbled a step closer to the sorrow-ridden woman.

“B-But remember! I said I had amazing news! If he were just dead, I wouldn’t have brought you here! It’s alright, Midoriya-san, please don’t, ah, don’t cry.”

“Completely destroyed? But then--” Hashiro interjected, her eyebrows scrunched up. She turned back to the smaller computer, then to the MRI room, “That...I thought I saw…”

“If his heart is gone, then why is he here?” Tsukauchi asked then, his arms crossed.

Yayoi noted his impatient tone with raised eyebrows, but understood he was trying to get her back on track. She cleared her throat and continued. “I was working with the other members of the Nezumi Team on the crystals found on the site when I remembered something important and brought
these two with me to investigate. Now, Detective Tsukauchi--and I’ll explain this to you later, Midoriya-san--you recall during your interview earlier that Izuku said he didn’t actually need to breathe, right?”

Hashiro blinked, startled at the news, and turned to Tsukauchi, as did a very confused Inko. He nodded at her before replying, his eyes questioning.

“Yes, I remember that.”

“Well, the thought came to mind while I was there that Izuku had sustained severe injuries and couldn’t possibly be alive, but then I remembered that particular fact. He said that his whole body is regulated by magic, not by his brain. So, in essence, he doesn’t actually need oxygen, thus he doesn’t need his lungs, thus he doesn’t need to breathe. He just said he likes to,” she said, her small wand touching the points she referenced on the screen.

Then she turned back to them, a hand on her chin.

“So then, I wondered if that would extend to his heart as well.”

The three people she was presenting to froze.

“It made sense, too,” Yayoi continued, her hand still on her chin as she paced a little in front of the scan, “His whole body is run on magic, not just his heart or one other part of his body, his entire body. So then, if he could function without using his lungs, it made sense that he could without his heart as well. When I realized that, I rushed over with these two as fast as I could, and sure enough, I found your doctors pondering over a particular development with his body.”

With that, she took out a remote she had in her right pocket and clicked a button on it, changing the scan behind her to a bigger image of his real, in-time visage, the boy still as death under the light.

“His face looks better, right? Midoriya-san has a picture taken a few minutes after he was brought in and processed, but we’re now three hours after his supposed time of death, and yet his body seems to, very minutely, be improving.”

When she said this, Inko remembered the picture in her hand and looked at it, shock-filled eyes widening at the truth in Yayoi’s statement. The vein marks were lighter and not quite as extensive as they had been in the picture, not extending out over his cheek as much as before. Some of the bruises and scars had faded, too, not completely, but some bruises had changed, their dark purple color shifting already into yellow, some of the less severe scars a mere, very pale line on his sun-kissed skin.

She handed the picture over to Tsukauchi when he asked to have it back, and he and Hashiro noted the differences as well, muttering lightly amongst themselves as a dawning awe slackened Tsukauchi’s shoulders.

Yayoi continued after a moment. “The thing about the gray veins is that, usually, there’s no real recovery for the condition. The veins stay just as prominent there for weeks after in normal victims, as evidenced from Todoroki Kazuo, but Izuku is a magical gi--magician. The reason the veins showed up in the first place was the depletion of magic, but as a magician, Izuku can replenish his magical reserves.”

Yayoi paused for a moment, her gaze catching Inko’s, the latter woman’s hands clutching her knees, her eyes blinking rapidly as confused tears built and threatened to bubble over. But the woman stayed silent, still listening even as Yayoi switched the view on the screen back to the monochrome
fMRI that showed the hole in the boy’s chest.

“Of course, magic isn’t really quite as detectable with current technology, so this is what it looks like with the usual configuration. It’s not on any frequency that can detect magic. Luckily, with some pretty extensive tests, a few years ago, Nezumi Team and I were able to create a scan configuration that would detect it to a minor degree and--”

The silver-haired woman pressed another button, and suddenly, the screen flickered and lit up in a burst of color that made the other three squint. Inko gasped out loud, raising her hands to her mouth as her tears started spilling over again. Hashiro and Tsukauchi stood still with their mouths slightly open.

Before them, the fMRI scan had lit up like a city, his entire body teeming with activity that no one could see with their naked eye. Every part of the image had taken on some sort of glow, and there was even visible movement of the magic, the energy pouring into his body from a strangely black encirclement around his right wrist, the only dark spot on his entire body.

Tsukauchi knew what was around that wrist, and shuddered.

The magic leaving the dark spot formed vein-like roads through his flesh, all parts of it bright, but some places in particular were like metropoles shining in the night, like cities full of people, of life. Those places centered around marks on his face, formed right in the area where the gray veins on his face were, formed at bruises on his body. It formed at the tears in his lungs, too.

The brightest place of all, though, was the circumference around the hole in his chest, that place a live wire of magic.

“This is one of the most extensive magical networks I’ve seen to this very day. All throughout his body, his energy is constantly working to keep the cells still present healthy, but the brighter spots? That’s where he was injured heavily. Those aren’t places for maintenance, those are places for recovery. And the extent of that process? Well, there was one other unnatural development the usual doctors found.”

Yayoi’s bright, energetic grin faltered before she could change the screen, and she turned to Inko with a careful smile.

“Uhm, Midoriya-san, the next picture will be...graphic. It’ll be of a video of the hole in his chest I took a few minutes prior to the scanning process. I look very closely at the flesh, so it is a pretty gorey video. Will you be...alright with that? If not, I can--”

“Let me see it,” Inko replied, her voice airy with wonderment and numbness, but firm enough for Yayoi to know she meant business. “I’m a nurse, so...I’ve seen a lot of things before. I want to see this. Please.”

“Ma’am, I understand that, but this is your son. I can only expect you to be--”

Inko looked her in the eye. “Please. I need to know what’s happening to my son.”

Yayoi’s eyes opened at that, her kaleidoscope gaze searching hers, a heavy energy returning to the room. But it only took a moment for her to close them again, her smile bright once more as she nodded. _Then she clicked the button._

The image turned to the video she was referring to, the first shot of his chest from an aerial view, showing the open, circular hole without all of the insides. The camera dipped closer to the open wound, searching it as it looked over the faded pinks and purples of seemingly dead flesh, a small
amount of strange, white, bubbly overlay over the torn tissues, even over the bones. It backed away slowly, then cut as the video looped on itself.

Both detectives stood in shock at the image as Inko stood from her seat.

“You see that little pale stuff developing on his muscles and bones there? Guess what those are,” Yayoi said.

Inko kept her eyes on the video, flitting dimly through the knowledge she had from her classes, and eventually replied.

“New...N-New cells?”

“Precisely. That is a new layer of still-bloodless cells, developed over the course of three hours. His body, without oxygen, without a heartbeat, is creating new cells to replace the old ones.”

Tsukauchi’s mouth opened further. “But...but that’s--”

“Impossible?” Yayoi giggled. “One more thing. And Tanezumi-san, please pull up the magical scan of his cranial area.”

She clicked one of the previous buttons three times, and it brought up Izuku’s face again, while one of the twin doctors, supposedly Tanezumi-san, shifted to the side to show the scan of his brain, magic flowing through the tissues. Yayoi gazed closely at the screen, her hands balled into fists near her chest as she searched.

“If we can just catch him at the right time...have the video on record, Tanezumi-san.”

Hashiro glanced at Tsukauchi before she moved in closer, trying to watch the same place Yayoi was. Inko moved in closer as well just a few moments later, her eyes watery, her steps careful. Tsukauchi stood a little behind her, staring at the screen as well.

They waited a few moments, long enough that Hashiro glanced at Yayoi just to be sure she was still waiting. She almost missed it, but looked back just in time.

For a moment, in what looked almost like an aborted movement, Izuku’s eyelids shifted with his eyes.

At the same time Yayoi let out a joyful cry of “There he is!”, Inko backed up into Tsukauchi in shock, but he was standing still enough to catch herself and keep his own weight up, his own brain short-circuiting at what he saw. Hashiro froze where she stood as well.

“Oh my God!” Inko cried, moving away from Tsukauchi’s steadying grasp, her hands unable to decide whether to touch the screen or her own face. “Oh goodness...oh my God…”

Yayoi turned to the two doctors, a grin wide on her face. “Play that back! Side by side, his face and his magic scan!”

The two nodded, shifting to save the recorded video feeds, and pressed a button on their screen that overrode the remote’s control, showing a video of Izuku’s real body and the scan side by side, revealing what happened.

At the same time that Izuku’s eyelids shifted, the dark spot sent off a spark of energy that flashed up his arm to his brain, making it shine like a glowing globe within his head, eyes shifting visibly even in the scan when it happened.
“In the usual person, this activity would be more, well, active, but his entire brain, just every once in a while, twitches. Lights up like a show and goes dark again. Each time, his eyelids twitch and shift with his eyes. See? It’s almost like it’s testing to waters to see how reactive he is. This activity…it’s an emulation of what you see in sleep. See?” She took out her pointer and remote again, pressing a button on it that slowed the reaction down. Then, with the pointer, she traced the brain reaction. “It shocks up his arm to the upper part of his brainstem, right where the VLPO, hypothalamus, and thalamus are, right in that section we call the Sleep Switch. Then, as you see, there’s a secondary spark almost indeterminable from the first, that leaves from those sections to the rest of his brain, controlling the rest of his system.”

Hashiro couldn’t tear her gaze away from the glowing images before her, watching the show of light as it ran through his skin. “So he’s...sleeping.”

“In a sense. More importantly,” her gaze turns and settles on Tsukauchi, “to go along with Izuku’s confession at the station, he’s being kept asleep. And while it’s like sleep, I can’t say it’s the exact same. His body temperature is completely determined by his environment, and as it is, he has no heart and his lungs aren’t bringing him any oxygen, but he’s still, somehow, functioning, just not in the way we’d expect. He’s less asleep and more in a sort of stasis. I’ve come to appreciate the term Recovery Hibernation.”

She grinned at the group, taking in Hashiro’s slack-jawed awe, the shake in Tsukauchi’s hands, and Inko’s openly confused yet happy sobbing.

“Nevertheless, Midoriya Izuku is still alive.”
Hey guys! Thanks for coming to read yet another chapter of your favorite suffering magical boy!

Ah, but I'm coming up to a bit of a dilemma. Σ(´д `)

You see, because so much of this story is based on original content, I've had to go the long, explanatory route with things, and I do hope it's not boring you guys too much, but also, I myself am perhaps getting a bit impatient. There's things I want to get to, but things I still need to explain or at least show that they happened.

So what I'm thinking about doing is adding a side story called ICBAMGYAMGS: Fall and Winter, which will detail more specifically some of the events that happened during the Fall and Winter before we finally get into canon-alteration territory rather than original content. There will be snippits of Fall and Winter that I must include in the main story for it to make sense later, but other things could potentially be OVA content, if that makes sense.

Errrr, I mean, he does meet some important people in Fall and Winter, and he has some important experiences...eeeeehhhhh...

Anyway, it's either making the side story or adding chapters called "Intermission:" with some more specific title after it. They'd be shorter than the usual chapters, so I might be able to pop out, like, two at a time if not put two into one and put it as a chapter.

It's something I'm considering...I'll let you guys know what the verdict on this is later, it just needs more thought on my part. ( • ᷄ ᷅ •)

Anyway, thank you all for your continued support thus far!

Thank you guys so much for all the fan art you've given me--available on my tumblr @ studiostatic--and for all of the genuine interest you all have expressed in this story. Your love has been getting me through some pretty tough times recently, and I seriously appreciate you guys SO MUCH!!! Ω่วย①(๑•ᴗ•๑)

Alrighty, let's continue~

Thursday morning’s episode of Hero! Daily! Shot!! didn’t start off with the usual fanfare that it would normally. Instead of the lettering being big and colorful, it was smaller and off to the side, the usual pink and white turned monochrome. The middle of the screen, Totoko’s desk was cleared of her loud, boisterous hero merch, the top cleaned of everything but two small, clear jars with sticks of incense, a few white candles, the ends of the desk covered with white chrysanthemums.

Totoko’s short bob was slicked professionally to the side and pinned to her head. She wore a black kimono, following common Japanese custom save for the necklace of white beads around her neck and the dark blue Ainu headband with white square patterns wrapped around her head. Totoko’s
expression was somber, a far cry from her usual outbursting persona. Usually, the camera would take different shots, but this one was straight on, Totoko looking into the screen after a moment with her eyes closed.

“Hoi, hoi, my wonderful and beautiful viewers. While today was initially for the interview with Mt. Lady on the growth of her hero agency, we will be postponing the showing of that footage till later this week, as my daily subscribers have already seen in the roster update. Today’s show is being shot to you live from our studio to give us all a time to grieve, to give a time to respect and remember the lives of those who parted with us just yesterday.”

“While a full death count is not yet confirmed, we do know that at least 55 people lost their lives in the battle to contain the Gray Man in the holding jail created for them, including the lives of two dedicated, strong-willed heroes, Gladiator and Mr. Champion. Today on Hero Daily Shot is a day of prayer. We here at the studio pray for the swift recovery of the surviving heroes, and for the safe passage of those who died into the afterlife.”

“Interspersed between moments of music, we will update you all on the status of the surviving heroes as information comes in, and will also retell information on the lives of those confirmed to be lost, whether a registered hero or a guard at the facility, because in the end, it’s not the license that makes you a hero, but your actions in a time of need. They gave their lives so we may live ours.”

For a moment, Totoko was quiet, her gaze dropping from the camera to the table. She breathed in, sat up straighter, and looked back into the camera.

“Let us begin. We’ll return to you after a three minute intermission. Please take the time to pray for the families of those who have lost their loved ones, and for the safety of our country.”

Then the slow, almost meditative background music eased in a little louder, and Totoko bowed her head, saying prayers in a language not all Japanese people could understand as her voice and image faded into a shot of the chrysanthemums and candles and nothing else.

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“Good morning, Hosu. This is Channel 9 News at 10 a.m. I am Hanazawa Yawara--”

“And I, Takahashi Suzume.”

“Today marks the first day after the devastating attack by a Gray Man in the still under construction facility used to house them. The Gray Man, now garnering the name ‘Kronos’, was reportedly processed faultily into the facility, leading to the deadly break out.”

“The facility, located near Rirossu Ward, was 11 kilometers out into the sea. In one of its underwater levels, we have reports that a Gray Man apprehended in Hosu had not been thoroughly checked over, boosted its abilities while in the facility, and proceeded to consume other Gray Men while killing the guards. As of now, it is confirmed that over 63 people lost their lives in the attack, including two pro heroes, Gladiator and Mr. Champion. There are fewer people injured, but those who are were reportedly received by Rirossu Ward Medical in critical condition.”

“As a response to this tragedy, all over Japan, heroes are now altering their policies on how to encounter Gray Men, and new checks are being put in place to make sure that such a tragedy cannot occur again. Today, governors, mayors, and assemblies from several prefectures and municipalities are in contact with each other to possibly arrange for similar preliminary regulations regarding interaction with Gray Men until official law is proposed. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Suzuki is in the immediate act of proposing a bill to the Diet for consideration and action across Japan. He will still
be giving an official statement before the public this afternoon at 5 p.m.”

“We here at Channel 9 give our most sincere condolences to those who lost family in the attack, and will continue reporting on this issue as the day goes on.”

“Our 5pm roster will be showing the official statement by the Prime Minister.”

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Hanagakure Shounen (@482nin) -- 9 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 are you alright?! are you alive?!?! weren’t you there????

Mr. Prince (@ryoukuji) -- 9 minutes ago
@482nin I haven’t heard anything about Devil since yesterday either

Hanagakure Shounen (@482nin) -- 9 minutes ago
@ryoukuji yeah i know!! i’ve been messaging her since yesterday, but got nothing

itsa me pengis (@sugarvanille) -- 9 minutes ago
Why isn’t she responding? i’m worried…

SixStix (@66skwl) -- 8 minutes ago
@482nin Maybe She’s Dead

Hanagakure Shounen (@482nin) -- 8 minutes ago
@66skwl you think i don’t know that’s possible? shove it!!!

Hanagakure Shounen (@482nin) -- 8 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 please please please respond, everyone is worried

KAM (@socialitenifoji) -- 7 minutes ago
@482nin Now stop panicking, she’s recovering

Copper Devil✔ (@yoshiko483)
#SheLives instagram.com/p/9Dgj10gaS9_5KGksoagiw

Hanagakure Shounen (@482nin) -- 6 minutes ago
oh my god, she’s alive! thank god!

Mr. Prince (@ryoukuji) -- 6 minutes ago
She didn’t take the picture. Is she asleep? She looks asleep…

SixStix (@66skwl) -- 6 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 [heart emoji]x10 Luv U 4Ever

~+Verant Choice+~ (@tsukutsukuma) -- 6 minutes ago
Holy shit, her neck’s broken??

mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 6 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 hows it feel that all your friends are dead?

mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 6 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 hows it feel that all your friends are dead?
mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 6 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 hows it feel that all your friends are dead?

mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 5 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 hows it feel that all your friends are dead?

mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 5 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 hows it feel that all your friends are dead?

mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 5 minutes ago
@yoshiko483 hows it feel that all your friends are dead?

mortimer (@LastThingYouSee) -- 4 minutes ago
lmao, she blocked me

Mr. Prince (@ryoukuji) -- 4 minutes ago
@LastThingYouSee Not her, whoever’s doing her Twitter rn

SixStix (@66skwl) -- 3 minutes ago
@LastThingYouSee I Don’t Blame Her, Asshole #RIPGladiator #RIPMrChamp

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“Thanks for tuning in to Jungle the Podcast, y’all! It’s ya host, Minamori Satoshi, aka MoriMind! I’m here with YouTuber Tazmine Gal and Twitter Activist Hiboshi, both in audio calls, to discuss the extremely recent Gray Man attack in Rirossu. Hey y’all! What’s happenin’?”

“Well, death apparently,” Hiboshi replied, his voice like steel. “A lot of unnecessary death.”

“I’m pretty alright, Mori, just a bit shaken. It was really sudden yesterday. One minute, they took a Gray Man in, the next, roads to Rirossu were shut down and 70 families lost family members.”

“Right...yeah, it’s pretty rough out there,” MoriMind said. “I heard there’s a few flash-mob protests happening all around Japan, especially in wards close to Rirossu.”

“Rightfully so! This whole situation reeks of negligence on the part of people we’ve expected and trusted to do their jobs. Why did no one know the Gray Man had a power boost waiting? Why isn’t there a system to find what Gray Man might have taken someone’s quirk? Why--”

“I’ve heard some speculations around earlier today, and honestly, I wish I could ask Tomo-chan about it cause she’d know more than I would, but I think the Gray Man had taken Blackjack’s quirk. It would explain why a facility made of concrete and metal would not be the best in holding it. When I think about it, Tomo-chan and I were wondering what happened with Blackjack a month or two ago on HeartPower.”

“Yeah!” MoriMind cut in, “I remember that show, it was back in late May, early June...ah, yeah! May 31st! The last day of May.”

Something about Tazmine’s voice dripped sourly. “I can’t believe it’s been a month and a half now and we’re just now finding out what happened to Blackjack, not even directly.”

“Exactly, Tazmine, the heroes are being too covert. They aren’t telling us enough and they expect us to just roll over and take whatever they feed us when something goes wrong,” Hiboshi seethed, “In my opinion, I think the heroes got too haughty. Someone slipped up, and now many lives are gone...”
for it. I think we should find who that was and have them prosecuted for negligence.”

Tazmine’s tone went sharp. “Don’t you think that’d be too distracting at such a time as this? This isn’t the time for a manhunt, it’s the time for recovery!”

“Part of the recovery is to hold those who promised to protect us accountable for their actions! You shouldn’t let your admiration for heroes outshine your logic, Tazmi—”

“Hey no, no attacking each other!” MoriMind interrupted sternly, his voice a grounding force.

The two went quiet for a moment, then Hiboshi spoke up.

“My apologies. I can get a bit too hasty when I’m riled up. I hope you can forgive me, Tazmine Gal.”

“...Fine, it’s alright. I can understand. This is a really trying time, after all.”

“Right. Now, I have had one other question on my mind recently,” MoriMind said. “Where is Minute Maid in all of this? I haven’t heard any news nor have there been any sightings of her since earlier yesterday.”

Tazmine’s voice rose, perking up considerably. “Right, about that! Minute Maid was taken into custody yesterday after the first Gray Man attack in Downtown Musutafu! All Might himself apprehended her and brought her in.”

“As expected of the Symbol of Peace—”

“Still, with the lack of news about her since, I wonder where she is, too. I mean, it looked as though she was the only one who could get rid of Gray Men, but we don’t even know if she was there at the Rirossu site.”

“That’s the thing,” MoriMind said, clearing his throat, “We don’t know exactly who was there yet. We do have a few names, like Gladiator, Copper Devil, Mr. Champion, and more recently, Ingenium and Fourth Kind, but that’s not everyone. I’ve heard rumors that Climantine was there, and so was All Might.”

“Which is fine, I mean, I’d be infinitely more reassured if All Might really had gotten there, but my question is where was Minute Maid when the attack started? Is she still in police custody, or did she escape during the attack?” Tazmine Gal argued. “I really don’t trust a vigilante on a good day, so now I’m wondering if, perhaps, the girl had left them to die.”

“Hold up a minute—I agree that vigilantes cannot be trusted, but considering Minute Maid’s actions earlier that day, that accusation seems out of her character,” Hiboshi cut in. “She saved the lives of several people, some directly and others indirectly, and All Might had decided she was worth rescuing when she couldn’t escape the building on her own—given, it’s All Might, so of course. But I think that there’s perhaps more honor to her than even I initially thought.”

“Whatever, I still think she’s a hack. Is it really coincidence that her capture coincided with the worst Gray Man attack to date? I think not.”

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“Minute Maid caused the attack,” a 40-year-old salaryman said, being interviewed on the street. He checked his watch again before looking up at the camera. “Everyone has been so focused on the vigilante, they haven’t been focusing on the Gray Men. It’s her fault this happened.”
“I bet she got rid of it. No one else can get rid of Gray Men,” a young highschooler said, twirling his hair around his finger.

“All of this chaos...none of it started happening until that girl came along. It’s too much stress on the heroes,” a mother of three said, one of her children clinging to her skirt with a mud-dirtied hand.

“The heroes betrayed us! They didn’t prevent this! There needs to be reform!” a 50-year-old man raved, wearing a yellow sign over his shoulders with big red text that said ‘Hero Agencies, Where Are You Now?’ on the front and ‘Minus 80 Lives’ on the back.

“My dad’s not answering his phone...I called him a lot...I’ve called him over and over again, he’s not answering his phone...” a young boy said, quickly ushered away by an older boy with livid, blotchy eyes and ruddy, salt-stained cheeks.

“Minute Maid’s done nothing but help us! Why do people hate her so much?” a middle school girl hissed, clutching the straps of her backpack, standing outside of an arcade during school hours. “They’re just stuck up, that’s all! Mad someone wearing a dress is saving everyone!”

“Who came up with that building? The construction wasn’t good enough,” a man said, raising up a pack of boxes onto a truck, his 5 o’clock shadow looking dark against his skin.

“All Might had to be there, right? He had to have ended it. It has to be All Might.”

“Everyone’s panicking! Do you think you’re helping, throwing microphones in everyone’s faces?”

“Hey Mom! I’m on TV!”

“I found out Copper Devil was okay...that was just a really huge relief, you know? I mean, ‘okay’ is pushing it, but it’s better than dead, right?”

“I couldn’t get to work on time yesterday because of the road closures. Now work’s closed today. All of this mess is messing with my income. I’m too scared to protest, though. That’s...that’s just noise.”

“Why can’t All Might take care of it?”

“How young is Minute Maid? I don’t know, but I think it’s good she was caught yesterday. I hope she wasn’t involved in that attack.”

“Mr. Champion was my favorite hero. He always had this...this ability to kinda push you forward, to push you through the hardest times. I know he wasn’t as popular as All Might, but he just never got the attention he deserved.”

“Where is Minute Maid? Where was she? Why did Gladiator have to die?!”

“Can we really rely on heroes? I’m skeptical now. We need to find out whatever quirk Minute Maid has and utilize it somehow.”

“I hope that girl is okay...”

“I don’t know where Minute Maid is, but if she’s going to school or whatever, I hope all she thinks about is all the lives lost because of her.”

“M-Minute Maid saved my life yesterday, me and Oomori-san and--! She...she deserves to be helped!”
“There’s less Gray Men in Musutafu because of Minute Maid. I hope she comes back soon. I don’t want to die.”

“I’m scared to go outside now, because of all these attacks. When will it end? Where’s Minute Maid?”

---

Yagi Toshinori was fast on the path of recovery.

Most of his injuries were self-inflicted via exasperating his previous wounds. After the nurses had stabilized him, they let him sleep to recover, putting him on a drip so he could get some much needed nutrients, one nurse in particular scolding him lightly and respectfully over his diet when he was coherent enough to heed her words. But now, with Tsukauchi sitting in front of him with slight bags under his eyes and a steaming paper cup with a cardboard cover filled to the brim with coffee kept on a table away from his bed, he began to wonder if maybe he should sleep a little more so he could hear clearly. Because Tsukauchi, dear of a friend as he was, had to be lying.

“He’s...alive,” Toshinori muttered, eyes wide with shock.

“Yes.”

Toshinori was silent for a moment.

“...Now, you and I both saw the pole in the boy’s chest.”

“Yes.”

“It was--” he choked, then steeled himself, “It was high and big enough to puncture his heart. Destroy it even.”

“Right. But you said he tried to talk with you when you got there.”

“...I did, but...I...” His head dropped into his hand. “This doesn’t make sense.” Then he jolted up, the blue glow of his gaze a little watery. “This isn’t to say I’m not absolutely overjoyed, though. Somehow, the boy survived...he survived that...how is he?”

Tsukauchi smiled tiredly, then bent his head down and rubbed at the bridge of his nose with his right pointer finger and thumb. “He’s in hibernation, from what Inspector Yayoi’s noted. His body’s in a shut down state to reform his lost organs...bones, too, apparently. He’s not conscious, just out on a really long, really deep sleep.”

“You almost sound jealous.”

“Not ‘almost’.”

Toshinori managed a single laugh before he felt a little blood bubble in the back of his throat. Hurriedly, he covered his mouth and coughed, unable to stop once he started. Even with his eyes shut tight, he could hear the uptick in the machines attached to him, some beeping at his distress, but he could also feel the soft touch of a disposable napkin a moment later, Tsukauchi’s fast reflexes not failing him despite his drowsiness. Grateful, his hand closed around the napkin and wiped at his mouth, coming away a mere pink color.

Better than coughing up a splatter, anyway.
“I’d really love to stay longer,” Tsukauchi said, Toshinori’s eyes just starting to squint back open, “But I have a few more things to take care of now. The press is starting to ask questions, and Hashiro and I are pressed to provide some answers.”

“You two? In a press conference? With that look on your face? I can’t imagine Detective Hashiro looks much better.”

“No,” Tsukauchi smiled wryly, “Just our information. The doctors downstairs are trying to count and identify the bodies...as much as they can anyway, and everyone’s rather curious about how we’re handling the rest. We need as much done before five if we can manage it, but…”

Toshinori looked up, his brows lowering in concern, “But what?”

Tsukauchi sighed. “Midoriya-san’s starting to come out of shock. And I...I’m not sure how well she’s going to react to everything. She did well before, but it’s one thing to hear that your son’s dead. It’s another to hear he’s only nearly dead because the police facilitated it.”

At that, the pro hero grimaced, then his expression slackened, a somber droop pursing his lips. “...Considering the part I had in it, if you need my assistance--”

“With you in the bed as you are? No way, my friend.” Tsukauchi patted his shoulder. “You need to focus on recovering first and foremost. Then you can deal with the press and angry mothers.”

Toshinori wanted to argue, but something about his friend’s eyes told him it would be for naught. So instead, giving what little support he could, Toshinori smiled and patted his friend’s hand back.

“I understand. Thank you for your hard work.”

“Same to you.”

---

Shimizu stared at her phone at the bench with her bag, listening distantly to the grunting and impact on the punching bags and floors around her, rubbing a towel against her hair. She had the conversation between her and Midoriya open, the last text hers from yesterday afternoon, a simple [hey, where are you] with no emoji. It had been read hours later, but she’d gotten no reply.

He hadn’t shown up to training as usual, and now she was wondering if everything was okay, especially when it clearly said he’d read the message. Midoriya was a considerate boy, after all. He told her hours in advance if he wasn’t going to be able to attend--and those times had been few and far inbetween for as long as she’d known him--and she was almost guaranteed to have a response within an hour after the message was read. Almost three months of him, and he’d never ignored a text for any longer than that.

She was...worried. More worried than she probably should’ve been, all things considered. It wasn’t like he was her kid or anything, so not getting a text back from him shouldn’t bother him. It was just out of the ordinary for his usual habits was all.

She let a scowl pull at the corners of her mouth, sharp teeth slightly unsheathed by the shift of her lips.

Who was she kidding. One of the few friends she had in real life, away from the internet, was a damn middle schooler.

It couldn’t be appropriate to call him, though. Not in the least. No, she was 22 years old. An older,
non-relative woman to the young 15 year old. No, not appropriate.

...But it wasn’t like she wanted to ask him out on a date or anything. Absolutely not, that was super gross and she cringed with regret of even having thought up such a scenario. She was just concerned over his wellbeing. The boy was being abused, after all--she’d seen enough old burns to know that, knew enough about that Kacchan in his class to know that. Worrying about him was just second nature at that point.

Teeth pressed together, she backed out of the Messenger app and moved over to her contacts. Scale-covered fingers typed in Midoriya’s name, his contact showing up with a circular picture of his wobbly smile, the option to call just a bit below his name and number.

She glared harder at her phone, her thumb hovering over the call button for his phone number. It wasn’t like she could get arrested for it, right? Calling him to see why he didn’t come to his appointed training session...that should be fine, right, even with the way she looked? She was kind of his teacher, so a single call of concern wouldn’t be grounds for a police take-down would it? Issues with the police had always been an iffy thing with her, what with her quirk and all.

“Mmmmmrrrrrrrrhh…”

When she let out the low mumbling growl, the man training near her, shirt thin over his bulging muscles, paused and looked her way fearfully. He then, with all his muscle weight and thick form, scurried to grab his things and move further away.

Shimizu watched him do it, eyes normal before narrowing at his movement. She breathed in and out heavily in a full-chest sigh, a sick weight settling on her shoulders.

...Midoriya was one of the few people who didn’t immediately think she was villainous, too, who didn’t judge her just by what her quirk made her look like.

If he cared that much about her, it was only sensible that she did the same for him in return. Wanting him to be alright wasn’t a crime. So, she pressed the call button with her mind made up and moved the phone closer to her left ear hole, cocking her hip to the side as she waited.

The phone rung a few times. Once. Twice. Thrice…

Then she heard the click of the phone being picked up.

A gratefulness flooded her veins faster than she could comprehend it. Eager beyond her usual self, she quickly started speaking.

“Midoriya? It’s Shimizu-- Are you alright?”

For a second, no one responded, and she wondered if she had imagined the click, but then she heard a voice.

“As in Shimizu Mako, correct?”

Her mouth paused before she could form the next word.

That...was definitely not Midoriya. Maybe it was a Midoriya, but not the one she’d gotten to know. The voice on the other side was definitely feminine, but stiff and tired, the woman dragging the first letter just a little before her voice cleared up. Could that be his mom?

“Ah, yeah. Speaking. Who is this, if I might ask?”
“Just to be sure, you train Midoriya Izuku in Muay Thai, correct?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Yes. Is this his mom? Did something happen to him?”

The voice on the other side cleared her throat. “No, I’m not his mother, but yes, something did happen regarding Midoriya Izuku. This is Detective Hashiro Hayako with the Musutafu Prefectural Police Department. I was actually preparing to contact you at a later time, but considering the convenience of your call, I will ask you now. I was hoping I would be able to speak with you tomorrow at the prefectural office.”

Shimizu froze, teeth clicking together as her jaws slotted like puzzle pieces.

“Is it an interrogation? Am I being charged with something? If so, I’ll need to speak with a lawyer first.”

“No, not an interrogation. You are not being charged with anything. It’s simply to ask you a few questions regarding Midoriya Izuku.”

“Is Midoriya being charged with something?”

“Not at the moment, no.”

That was not promising. Not at all.

“What do you mean ‘not at the moment’? I would think he’s either being charged or he’s not.”

“Shimizu-san, I assure you, we mean no harm to you or your student.”

“Then, if I may ask, why do you need me to come in to answer any questions at all? Why, in particular, are your questions about Midoriya?”

There was a moment of silence, and Shimizu grit her teeth slightly in barely contained impatience, her shoulders stiffening.

“Unfortunately, Shimizu-san, the answer to that question is classified for the time being. But what I can tell you is that it is regarding Midoriya Izuku and some actions he may or may not have been committing unbeknownst to you whilst under your care.”

“Actions like what?”

“Actions related to vigilantism, Shimizu-san.”

And just like that, the stiffening loosened just a slight bit, and a thin dribble or resignative regret began to drop down her spine.

“I wouldn’t know if he was a vigilante. He’s told me nothing about that.”

“I understand, Shimizu-san. The questions we have though are less to identify him as a vigilante and more to understand his motives for vigilantism. Even if you were to be a motivating factor, you would not be charged, as the actions were of Midoriya Izuku’s decision alone.”

So he was already confirmed.

She’d dimly expected it, but was hoping that he wasn’t actually a vigilante. It made sense to her, really--a boy beaten down by life for his quirklessness, small stature, and meek demeanor attempting to find a way to contribute to society, to prove himself as good enough--as the boy often inferred he
wasn’t, finding a path to feeding this desire through vigilantics. From the first time she’d asked him who his favorite heroes were, getting his amazingly in-depth answer and description for each hero he favored, she’d had a seedling that grew ever so slightly each day they trained that the boy would get involved in things he shouldn’t. Even after she’d told him why she wasn’t a fan of heroes, even then he couldn’t agree with her—couldn’t find anything wrong with a 15-year-old defending the peace that adults should’ve been able to take care of.

And now it was coming to a head, wasn’t it? If there was one thing their sessions together didn’t teach, it was tactics to evade the police.

“...I can be there at 9am tomorrow. No earlier, sorry.”

“Alright, thank you very much, Shimizu-san. You’ll receive directions as to which room you need to be in when you arrive. The front desk will be expecting you.”

“Fine.”

She hung up the phone and let her arm drop. Then she leaned her head back and sighed, regret pooling at the bottom of her spine, filling her torso slowly like a glass of goo.

---

As Tsukauchi had expected, Midoriya Inko did, in fact, eventually come out of her shocked stupor, and the reality of the situation was starting to become very, very clear to her.

He hadn’t been there to watch it, but according to those who had been in her presence as she slowly came to terms that her son wasn’t, in fact, dead, and the wonder over magic faded from her eyes, it was replaced with questions. Many, many questions. And a darkness that came from a deep seated, unsheathed fury, waiting to be revealed to the world to smite it to embers. If only Tsukauchi could say that her ire wasn’t justified.

Minutes after confirming that Ingenium and Fourth Kind were well enough to leave the hospital and continue their work and he got an account of the events from Fraction and a mostly-conscious Snipe—who he’d probably have to reinterview—he sent a police officer to get Midoriya-san from the Imaging Room to bring her to a consult room to bow his head in supplication and admit to the woman how her son’s condition came to be. He’d only needed to wait about six minutes before the policeman knocked on the door he was behind to announce her presence.

Now she was there, sitting in front of him with a table between them, her small hands clutching her bag, her eyes lidded and fierce much beyond what Tsukauchi had thought the woman capable of when she’d rushed in yesterday, begging to see her son. It wasn’t so much that her glare was dangerous in the way he though she would launch herself over the table and attempt to strangle him. Instead, there was a dark glint to her eyes that told him she’d tell him to drown himself and he’d probably be inclined to listen. There was a patience to it that only a few parents and teachers could manage, and a coldness like Arctic ice thawed at the frays from the red lining her previously tear-wet eyes and a tiredness he could only imagine.

He cleared his throat when it became clear she wouldn’t attempt to speak first.

“Midoriya-san, I’m sure you have many questions, unless you would like for me to begin an explanation for the situation.”

For a second, her gaze flitted around his face, then it relaxed again right on his eyes.

“...No, I want to ask.”
“Please do.”

“...Firstly, how did my son...die again?”

She knew he wasn’t dead, but Tsukauchi knew that didn’t matter, not really. On all accounts, Midoriya Izuku should be dead, but he just happened to hold within his body some disruption to the natural order that allowed him to live without his heart. So dead, not dead...did it really matter?

“He was impaled on a metal pole.”

The woman swallowed heavily. “How...how did he get impaled?”

Tsukauchi kept his expression carefully neutral for his next answer.

“He was reportedly forced onto it by the Gray Man during the attack.”

Suddenly, some more emotion colored Midoriya Inko’s expression, a shocked, almost desperate look coming onto her face.

“During the attack...my son was there? With those heroes--with Gladiator and Mr. Champion? And...f-forced onto it? It...it made him--”

“Yes ma’am. Though he hadn’t arrived at the same time, they were, at some point, present on the same island. Apparently, they were--”

“I don’t care about the rest, but just to be sure, my son. My only son. My newly 15-year-old son was present during a major attack on Japan. Newly 15. He just turned that old on July 15th, you know? My baby hasn’t even been 15 for an entire month yet. But...he was there.”

“Yes.”

Her eyelids shook. “And how...how did he get there?

Tsukauchi resisted the urge to swallow thickly, throat numbed by a cotton fullness that nearly rendered him unable to speak. But the woman deserved answers. She deserved to be brought into the loop as the boy’s mother. So he shoved the feeling down—it made his tongue feel like lead in his mouth, but at least he could use it.

“He was approved to travel with another group of heroes heading to the site to neutralize and eradicate the threat.”

“‘Approved’. So...he didn’t go by himself.” A sickened understanding began to color her features, and the fury deep in her eyes bubbled to the surface, alongside a chilling cold horror.

“Someone...someone made him go.”

“He requested permission to go, and I allowed it.”

Her eyes snapped up to his face, and he felt the icy heat of her gaze burn savagely into his own.

“You?”

“Yes, Midoriya-san.”

“You let him—...Why? Why? I...I don’t understand. Maybe I’m missing something! But why...why did you let him go? I just--I can’t imagine what on earth ever made you ever think that was okay!”
The thin control she had over herself to keep herself still snapped, and she nearly stood from her seat then, fingers digging into the material of her bag. Somehow, she managed with just leaning forward sharply, her voice risen to a shrill, sharpened needle, tears pouring from her eyes in big, trembling drops.

“Why did you send a young boy with those heroes? Why my son? He hasn’t even been trained or anything! He’s not like those hero children, do you understand? He’s my son! And he—he was hurt so badly he’s practically in a coma, all because you—the heroes—everyone! No one thought it was wrong to send him? No one thought to stop him? My baby--my Izuku--he-he’s not strong enough for that—he doesn't know better, and yet no one kept him safe?”

Her yelling reduced to a mere whisper then as her head bowed and she placed her face in her hands, no longer able to bear the amalgamous even the detective could see twisting in her gut, one accented with the salt of her tears.

“No one?”

Tsukauchi took her etching words and heeded them as the truth they were. She was right—there was no way around it.

But...there was no way around what he had allowed. Even at that moment, he couldn’t think of what else he could have done in and of himself. With the knowledge he had at the time, he thought he made the best decision possible, and even though he now questioned it, he didn’t have enough evidence to say he was wrong by choice.

He was wrong, yes, but from what he knew...well, it sickened him to think it, but many, many more could be dead than the current count.

“There is no excuse, Midoriya-san. I have nothing I could say that would make my approval for him to act in the same situation as a pro hero make sense or be reasonable. I would like to make it clear that what I say next is not…” He breathed out slowly. “It is...to be honest, I am trying to justify some part of my decision, but I know it still wasn’t right. I don’t want this to be an excuse, but I know that in part, it is. Just...would you please be willing to hear me out?”

“Why should I?” She stifled the urge to sob, her shoulders already drooping with the loss of her energy, her fury shifting smoothly into a deep-seated despair. She rubbed the sleeves of her cardigan against her swollen eyes.

Tsukauchi paused. Breathed. Considered his options, his eyes darting off to the side. Then his gaze returned to her, more grounded than before.

“There’s no good reason for you to, other than to understand why I allowed it. It doesn’t have to be something you agree with. Just as long as you have the chance to understand. You deserve to know.”

Midoriya Inko’s face was still hidden among her sleeves and hands as she tried and failed to stop crying. Still, she’d managed to get her breathing somewhat under control, wrangling it into heavy breaths that expanded through her whole chest before she let it out in a slow, invisible stream of air through her nose. Her hands still shook like she was in a small earthquake only she could feel, but still, it was better than the full-body sobbing from earlier, even the screaming moments before. Piece by piece, the woman was collecting herself.

Had collected herself enough to lower he hands a little, bloodshot eyes searching for his own before locking on.
She breathed in, and on her exhale, she spoke.

“There is...nothing...you can say that will...make me forgive this. Nothing...but for your sake...tell me.”

---

The room was dark with a lamp over the metal table, the contents of a big yellow backpack emptied and strewn out on it with little number labels near them. Detective Hashiro, Officers Tamakawa and Kenji, and two silent members of Yayoi’s Hana Team perused through the objects with a careful patience, taking photos and searching to find something, anything that would clue them in to what the boy knew. Admittedly, a small voice within Hashiro was telling her to feel foolish doing it. After all, everything on the table was from a 15-year-old boy’s school backpack, so the biggest things she saw from it were notepads, a pencil case, a few books for class, and a summer reading project pamphlet, one she was currently flitting through.

“Huh...kid’s a natural,” Tamakawa muttered. When Hashiro turned his way, he showed her the book he was looking at, and she leaned forward.

“Hero Analysis for the Future, No. 13?”

“Yep, and look at this,” he turned the page towards her, his plastic gloved fingers carefully out of the way of the burned book’s text, water-damaged pages still fully detailing Mt. Lady’s body on one page, the other filled with a quickly scribbled analysis of her abilities with more neatly written notes apparently put in afterwards.

The sketch of her body was, well...amazing, quite frankly. It was obviously quickly done, with light lines and smudged erase marks, but the detail he put into his sketch had purpose, and the notes he had around it attested to his keen eye. And the more extensive notes on the other side were well done, too—even if some of them had lines through it where he corrected a thought, or there were signs of other parts he’d erased out. There were speculations there as well, about efficient quirk usage and places where Mt. Lady would have the most advantage.

“Book 13, so he’s been doing this for a while,” Hashiro hummed, glancing over it once more before going back to the packet that she was getting ready to push aside. “Keep looking over it. He might have slipped up and added some of his own information there, too.”

She heard Tamakawa reply affirmatively as she deemed the packet empty of any real content aside from schoolwork. Placing it down, her eyes trailed over the rest of the stuff there, trying to remember what she’d already looked at. Math book, training gloves—no magical, Tamakawa had been very sure about that—earphones, loose papers…

Then she noticed one other books he had, a thinner one titled *The Science of Muscle Building*, had a gap in between the pages, like it had been bookmarked by something too big to fit in it correctly. She slid back behind Tamakawa’s body over to his other side to peruse it, picking the book up with her gloved hands.

Holding one side of the hardcover book in one hand, deft fingers flipped the pages from one side to the other. She skimmed over the pages, noting the small, pen-marked notes left in the book, particularly in the arm muscle section, but it wasn’t until she got to the leg section that she found what had caused the gap in the pages.

Another sleek notebook was there, this one much better looking than the hero analysis one had been. It was a mint green color, the same brand as the other notebook, but the title was different.
Humming curiously, she chose a page at random, and immediately paused.

On the page was a Gray Man she had never seen before, its short, thick, stubby legs barely supporting the bulbous mound that appeared to be its stomach. It had a long torso leading up to thin, mosquito-like arms that bent oddly for its body and a thick-necked, static-ridden face. All around it were notes on its abilities, its behaviors, and there was a specific section to note whether it had been cunning or dull-minded—this one noted as particularly dull. It was called Number 23.

“This is it...this is it!” she gasped, flipping to another page, Number 24 just as unknown as the former one had been. She dug into her skirt pocket for her phone. “He did document everything!”

The two Hana Team members were at her side in an instant, peering over her shoulders to inspect the pages as well. She’d twitched, shocked from the sudden move, but put the book down under the light on that page so they could see it, pulling her phone out to hold it in her hand.

“...This appears to be his documentation, as you said,” a masculine voice with a low tilt muttered, never turning his head away from the open book. “We’ll allow you to take as many pictures as you need for the initial processing, but we will take it and process the information the rest of the way.” He finally turned to her then, his eyes mere dots of light from under his hood. “That being said, our collaboration will allow you all to have access to what we find. Don’t worry, we will not conceal information.”

“That’s reassuring,” she quipped, not quite listening as she hurriedly focused and blinked her eyes on the different pages, quick-sending them through her phone to Tsukauchi. After a moment, she started sending the others she had to both him and Yayoi, remembering she existed.

“Ooof, Number 32 looks...disgusting,” Tamakawa hissed, his ears flattening back on his head, Officer Kenji humming affirmatively to his side.

But every page wasn’t on Gray Men he destroyed. Some of them were on his own stats—increases in strength from training, heightened durability to certain attack types, a note on his quicker healing, even how the transformation itself improved his body. He had it all, studying himself just as intimately as he studied the monsters he killed.

Humming under her breath, she decided to send one last picture and hand the book over to Yayoi’s Hana Team, turning quickly to the first page to see what it was. She carefully flipped back through all of the pages before it until there was one mere sheet between the rest of the book and the cover. With the shift of her fingers, it joined the others in its sealed pile and displayed the words written on it.

Unlike the other pages, this one had considerably fewer words, just a few sentences centered in the middle of the page in careful, neat handwriting.

Hashiro focused her eyes on the page under the bright light and prepared to send it.

But then she read what was written, and she stopped.

For a moment, she didn’t comprehend what was there in the then 14-year-old Midoriya Izuku’s neat scrawl, but she slowly came to understand what it was, and her lips pursed shut, her hand clenching slightly on her phone. Officers Tamakawa and Kenji had fallen silent, backing up a little, and the Hana Team members leaned forward.

“Ah, this must be what initiated the pact,” a feminine voice said, and Hashiro breathed in heavily.
Then she blinked, sending the photo.

---

Yayoi was drinking from a mug of tea when Tsukauchi walked into the room they’d set up in the hospital for quick study rather than having the group constantly have to move. There were several computers there in the dim room, all against one wall with a desk holding them, their cords plugged into a charge-protector plugged into the wall. She leaned back and turned in her rolling chair, smiling patiently at the very tired-looking man behind her, his shoulders sagged in a way they hadn’t been before the talk. He groaned lowly as he settled into a more comfortable, padded chair, rubbing at his nasal bridge in the attempt to stave off a headache.

“She put you through the wringer, huh?” Yayoi asked, sipping again at her mug, the light of the computers bouncing off her silvery hair.

“That’s putting it lightly,” he sighed. “She’s on the wall about her threat to sue the police department as a whole for negligence and gross misconduct. I’m not sure if I made the possibility better or worse.”

“Perhaps I could talk with her at some point?” Yayoi offered, her voice a light, airy breeze amongst the storm building between his brows. It seemed to ease it just a little, the man sending her a grateful look.

“If you would, please.”

“I mean, it’s only fair considering the part our organization’s had in the whole situation. Admittedly, I’m hoping we can get her to see it’s much more than negligence,” she said, crossing one leg over the other, “Rather, all things considered, it’s not as though there were many other viable choices.”

“Still,” Tsukauchi gave in and put his head in his hands, “did that choice have to be to send an inexperienced kid to a battlefield?”

Yayoi watched him silently for a moment, the hum of the computers the only noise among them. Then she set the mug down on a nearby foldable table.

“That shouldn’t have had to be your choice in the first place, Detective Tsukauchi. As a detective, it’s your job to investigate and report, not give directional orders. And yet, with no one else able to give the OK, it fell to you. You did what you could in the position you were forced into.”

“Did I really?”

“Consider this then, if you don’t mind.” She waited until the man looked up at her through his fingers, his tired, guilty black eyes on her closed ones. “Consider a scenario where you didn’t send little Midoriya there, where everyone went in without a single magical weapon in access. Consider a scenario where the Gray Man got the opportunity to take more and more from every hero it encountered until it completely passed Minute Maid’s threshold of abilities, until not even All Might could subdue it. Consider a scenario where it was able to run rampant until all of Japan was either dying from being killed or dying because of the chaos of their uncontrolled quirks.”

Tsukauchi didn’t say anything, but he’d risen his head, gaze shocked and wide on her face, her’s neutral in return. For a brief moment then, she opened her eyes, and her kaleidoscope gaze pierced into his, her glittering irides glowing against the fabric of her shirt.

“That puts it into perspective, doesn’t it.”
She closed her eyes with a small smile. He breathed heavily, but nodded.

Before he could say anything else, his phone rumbled in his pocket. He blinked, dimly startled, then pulled his phone out to look at the message, noting it was from Hashiro.

“Ah. Looks like they found something…is this a diagram of a Gray Man?”

“Ooooh~! Let me see!” Yayoi cheered, scooting her rolling chair over the sleek floor with little tip-toed steps to look at his phone. When she made it over, he angled the screen her way so she could get a look, the woman oohing at the picture. “That’s really nicely detailed. Little Midoriya would do great as a Hana Team member!”

Tsukauchi was about to comment, but then another picture came, this one of a different Gray Man.

“I never saw this one before. I guess it’s true that Minute Maid was busy in Musutafu.”

“And he documented the ones he defeated, so by that logic, he should have every Gray Man he’s encountered in there to date,” Yayoi finished.

A few pictures went by like that until her phone vibrated on the desk with the computers. She turned to look at it, a pout on her face.

“Ah, let me go check that.”

She scooted away from him with her tip-toes, grumbling under her breath, and Tsukauchi turned back to his phone, looking through the photos carefully. Yayoi wasn’t wrong, after all--his notes were pretty extensive.

“It’s a stroke of luck, you know!” Yayoi called from where she neared her desk, “That he’s so keen on note-taking. Otherwise we’d probably be even further in the dark than we already are.”

“Yeah, no kidding,” he muttered, pulling out a small notepad he kept with him, deciding to take down some immediate trends he saw in the boy’s records.

“Aaaaah,” Yayoi huffed after a moment, “these are just the same from Detective Hashiro-chan. I guess she remembered I existed, haha! Ah, but these are good, these are really good. She has a really good quirk, huh? Better quality than a normal picture.” The woman clicked on one of the computers a bit until a blank page showed up in Word and she began taking down little notes. “The Gray Men are rather wonky beings, huh? Pretty grotesque, some of these.”

Tsukauchi hummed in reply, writing down his own notes to keep along with questions he wanted to ask the survivors of the incident to see if they corresponded with Midoriya’s theories.

While they did their own notes, there was a bit of a pause in the pictures, and they went into a quiet state of inspection, Yayoi clacking away at the computer while Tsukauchi’s pen made quick work of his notepad.

Then, belatedly, another picture was sent, and both paused their work to look at it.

They both went silent as they read over it.

“...Oh...that’s unfortunate,” Yayoi whispered, slowly turning her chair to face Tsukauchi, eyebrows tilted up in a sympathetic pain. “It seems little Midoriya’s pact is more complicated than I--”

She words shuddered to a halt at the look on Tsukauchi’s face.
The man’s eyes were wide as he read over the words, but there was something else to it. A pain, a knowing distress that she couldn’t for the life of her understand the source. He looked like he would jolt to his feet at any moment, yet he remained sitting, taking in the words once more before he leaned back and closed his eyes in a heavy regret.

“Oh no.”

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On April 10th, 2224, I was suffocated to death by a sludge villain on my way home from school in the underpass. That same day, I was revived by the Handyman, qualifying me as being undead.

From here on, I will detail as many notes as possible on the extent of my new abilities and the enemies I have to fight in hopes I can come to understand my current self.

Handyman says my power is called magic.
Intermission: Realizations

Chapter Summary

Quotes used for parts of the press conference, particularly the speaking parts of the Cabinet Public Affairs Secretary, taken from here.

Ah, yeah, there's a press conference.

Chapter Notes

Hey guyyyyys, it's a little late, sadly.

It's shorter than usual, too, but I still have three essays and two finals to finish before final's week is over this coming Friday, and one of those essays are 60+ pages long so...you'll have to bear with me this time. .BigInteger

Anywhooooo, I'd just like to say I FREAKIN LOVE YE ART, AIGHT? This includes some from ayaptre, noping-out-of-art, rakkiankh (gore warning), and even a fancharacter!! More from the past can be witnessed here.

Thank you all SO FREAKIN MUCH, MAN!!! σ(≧ε≦)σ

Well now, I think it's about time, ya started, ey? There's some music links down below if you want to listen to it.

...I'm a little disappointed in how much of an info-dump this one is, but it's the best I could do for now.
The next one will be better. (≥_≤)

Thank you guys for your support thus far!! Ө(≥▽≤)Ө Please enjoy!!

At exactly 5 p.m., the dark blue curtains and dark brown wood of the podium lit up in flashes of white as Prime Minister Suzuki walked out onto the stage, his guards stationed on the sides. The crowd lit up in an array of mumbles, not loud enough to be questions, but enough to create a white noise that persisted until the Prime Minister rose his hand in a request for silence. As they quieted down, he straightened his tie a little, breathed in, and looked forward into the crowd.

An older woman in a well-pressed pantsuit called to their attention first, holding a microphone as she walked onto the stage.

“We will now begin the press conference by Prime Minister Suzuki Asahi. Prime Minister Suzuki will first deliver an opening statement, after which we will open the floor to questions from the press.” The woman turned to the man on the stage and, with a slight bow of her head out of respect, continued her statement. “Mr. Prime Minister, your opening statement, please.”

The man bowed back slightly to her, then faced forward to the press.
“Ladies, gentlemen...citizens of Rirossu Ward, it is with a heavy heart that I stand before you today. This attack on our land was vicious and without warning. Our first responders and our heroes risked and lost their lives to protect this ward, and as of now, have done so successfully. To those who have lost a beloved family member, a friend, a companion, I know very well that no words can truly sate the pain you are experiencing, that no words can heal the damage our enemy caused. I hope you know you are not alone in your time of need--this attack has hurt everyone in our country. Tonight, we will all hold our loved ones closer, pray for the protection of our police force. We will extend to you as much comfort as you need, and together, as a community, we will all stand with you to try to rebuild what was lost, even if we cannot replace who was lost.”

As Prime Minister Suzuki began to list off the names of the citizens who were confirmed dead and their achievements, the press began counting. In the end, without yet listing heroes, there were 62 names, 17 women, 42 men, and 3 non-binary people.

“Then, in the league of heroes, those who have sworn to use their quirks for the good of our country, we lost Sobaera Minoga, Mr. Champion, who had been a Pro-Hero for three years after two as a sidekick, and Yamamoto Rikiya, Gladiator, who had been a Pro-Hero for two years after three as a sidekick. They were both graduates of Isamu Academy High School, classmates, friends of their communities and role models for our country. May they rest in peace, knowing their sacrifice was not for naught.”

“Still, this war is not over. To this day, we still have over 60 Gray Men held in our facilities, and the number of their appearances continue to increase. Now that we understand more so than before the dangers of these unknown creatures, we must now change the way we face the issue at hand. As such, we will arm ourselves with information, with will, with determination. I assure you all, as a community, as a country, as your government, we will do everything within our power to fight this mysterious force and, with time and study, return peace where it belongs.”

“That is why, for the purposes of protecting our country, the Cabinet and I have begun correspondence with the International Special Forces Unit, a specialized group of people who are very much used to encountering, studying, and, if necessary, eradicating unnatural phenomena. Initially, the Musutafu Police Force called on their assistance due to the initial appearances in their area, but now, with the spread of this threat, the Cabinet and I will allow for nationwide associations with the group.” He paused and stepped a little to the side at his podium. “From here, I invite to the podium Inspector Yayoi Gin of the Japanese sector of the International Special Forces Unit.”

With that, the press turned their cameras to the entrance of the meeting all, and watched in awe with murmuring as a woman entered.

Her fluffy, bright silver-gray hair laid over her relaxed shoulders, her low-heeled shoes clicking lightly on the floor. Her body exuded confidence like a diamond glittered with radiance, her suit and skirt pressed wrinkleless, her steps equal and level. All the while, her bright eyelashes laid against her cheeks.

She walked up the short set of stairs, coming up to the minister’s podium, bowing in respect as she put out a hand, a gesture the seemingly older man returned. They both turned to the group, but Prime Minister Suzuki backed up a step to allow the woman to take the stand, where she placed her booklet of notes down beside the man’s notes on the podium.

“As he has said, my name is Yayoi Gin, Lead Inspector of the Japanese sector of the International Special Forces Unit. Our organization has been active since 1965, watching over and taking care of the lesser known unnatural phenomena of our world. I myself have been active for several years, and am well-equipped to help the nation of Japan in its time of need. Please feel free to ask me any
questions, and I will answer them to the best of my abilities.”

She gave a short introductory bow before backing away from the podium as the Prime Minister took his place at the front again.

“Thank you, Inspector Yayoi. With this, I end my opening statement here.”

The Cabinet Public Affairs Secretary walked on the stage again, microphone in hand. “We will now open the floor to questions from the press. Please first state your name and affiliation before asking your question. I will begin with a representative of a company coordinating the press club.” She then waved her hand towards a man who stood then, a microphone given to him from a member of the press crew. “Yes, go ahead.”

The man cleared his throat away from the mic then spoke, his eyebrows drawn tight. “Hello, I’m Tatoi with the NHK. Specifically for Inspector Yayoi, I must ask—what are the qualifications of your organization to help the government handle this situation? You say your organization has existed since 1965, but I do not know of any public records that have the organization’s written as proof of its involvement. Considering you claim for your organization to have started in 1965, 31 years before the first quirk appeared in China, I would think the name of your organization would have been included in the discoveries of what made quirks function, yet I have never heard of such a group.”

There was a murmuring in the crowd, but Yayoi didn’t falter at his question, responding clearly with her high, airy voice.

“The lack of our name in the official documents was due to a unanimous decision by our administration at the time to remain private in order to continue our research quietly. With the permission of several world governments, we were allowed to provide information to these governments about any inquiries they had towards unnatural phenomena occurring within their borders. While we did have a hand in the discovery as to what quirks were and how they ticked, our research was not important enough to garner public attention, nor did it break the laws of any world government or the humanitarian laws of the United Nations.”

Another man stood at the Secretary’s prompting.

“I am Watanabe with the Nishinippon Shimbun. As it seems you have researched the issue with the Gray Men, I would like to ask a few more specific questions about them. If you can answer this for me, I would like to know what they are, where they came from, why Japanese citizens have such a reaction to them, and what their overall goal is. I would also like to ask how long you presume the public will need to wait before we have a weapon that can either fully detain or destroy the Gray Men if necessary.”

Yayoi glanced at the Prime Minister before receiving a nod of approval from him. She turned back to the crowd, and opened her folder.

“To answer your first question, Watanabe-san, I would have to explain the full implications of their abilities and existence, and while I am not officially cleared to give you that information at this time, I can abridge it as closely as possible. You see, the Gray Men are creatures made very similarly to the energy and DNA that has created quirks in over 80% of the world population.”

That got more than a few murmurs from the crowd, the voices erupting into questions as the Secretary tried to quiet them down. Yayoi continued whether they were silent or not.

“While studies indicate that Gray Men are derived from the same energy that created the quirk mutations in humans, they are not the same. Gray Men, therefore, are not the result of quirks, but of a
different mutation in that same energy. To answer your second question, this is why Japanese citizens have such a negative reaction when in contact with Gray Men, though to be fair, this reaction would occur with humans from every country, not just ours. You see, the main goal of the Gray Men is to acquire some of the energy that makes human quirks into their own bodies as a way of feeding itself. Though the energies are not the exact same, because they come from the same vein, the Gray Men are able to consume it through physical contact, taking it into their own bodies, thus giving the appearance that a quirk in part or in-full has been stolen.”

“As far as its overall goal, that would require us to know where and why the Gray Men have appeared, which we do not yet have answers to, but my teams are working with the government, the police, and the heroes to find those answers. As far as a weapon, we do not yet have a full tactical response against a Gray Man’s attack, and as such, will continue the apprehension of Gray Men and further our studies in how they work to take the creatures down. As they are confirmed to not be human, they are not covered by the human rights clauses in the 1946 Constitution of Japan, and all those not used for study will be swiftly eradicated once a weapon of destruction is acquired.”

The crowd took in as much information as they could, the reporter from Nishinippon Shimbun bowing in thanks before taking his seat. The Secretary began to speak again.

“Next, I would like to take a question from someone other than the companies coordinating the press club. Please raise your hand if you would like to ask a question. When you are called on, please first state your name and affiliation before asking your question.”

Immediately, several hands went up as they wordlessly begged for the opportunity to ask a question. The Secretary waved her hand toward a middle-aged man in the third row, reading off his nametag. “Ishikawa-san, if you would, please go ahead.”

The man stood with a light bow, his graying hair slicked on the sides and top towards the back of his head. “I am Ishikawa with Endoru Shimbun. Thank you for taking my question. Prime Minister Suzuki, as far as the search for a weapon of destruction in regards to the Gray Men, we have already seen some potential and potent effectivity against the Gray Men. This is through Minute Maid, a vigilante who appeared in early to mid April in Musutafu, who has, so far, been the only person confirmed to be able to kill the Gray Men. She was reportedly recently taken into custody by All Might after a Gray Man incident earlier the same day of the larger attack in Rirossu Ward. If I may ask, I would like to know what is planned in regards to the relationship between the Cabinet and Minute Maid.”

The Prime Minister nodded at the man as he took to the podium.

“Minute Maid is indeed in custody, and the Cabinet is currently attempting to find the best way to associate with Minute Maid, as, as you stated, her quirk is indeed the most effective against the Gray Men. As far as charges on vigilantism, we will be unable to drop them due to the proper state of Japanese law. We are currently negotiating charges considering the unnatural circumstances with which she has become at odds with the law. As far as her ability to destroy Gray Men, we hope to work out some correspondence between the Cabinet, the Special Forces Unit, and herself to work mutually and find a solution to the Gray Man infestation.”

The press muttered and noted what they could as the Prime Minister backed away, but before the Endoru Shimbun representative could sit, Inspector Yayoi had moved forward and taken the mic unprompted, her close-eyed gaze directed straight at him.

“I would like to make it very intimately clear, Ishikawa-san, that Minute Maid themself is not a weapon of destruction. Any and all information about their abilities that we acquire will be at their own expense and will, as is required by the human rights laws in both the Constitution of Japan and
the human rights clauses of the United Nations.”

Some of the room went a bit silent at her assertion, especially the man who had asked the question, who simply nodded at her before taking his seat. Inspector Yayoi backed away from the mic, a small smile pulling at the corner of her otherwise stoic lips. After a moment, the hands began raising again, and the Secretary chose another.

“I am Matsushita with Musutafu News Network, thank you for taking my question. You said just now, Prime Minister, that Minute Maid’s abilities were a quirk, and you, Inspector Yayoi, stated that quirks and the energies that make up Gray Men are not the same. Is it true then that certain kinds of quirks can work against the Gray Man while others cannot? If so, what are some quirks that have been proven effective against the Gray Man? If not, why? What makes the energy that makes Gray Men and quirks so different? And you, Inspector Yayoi stated that the International Special Forces Unit had not made any significant discoveries to garner publicity, yet I would think that discovering what makes quirks would be a significant enough discovery for that. Could you answer why the ISFU did not come out to the public with that information?”

The Prime Minister paused for a moment, but only a single one, before going back up to the podium.

“To answer your question, Matsushita-san, it is true that the energies that make quirks and Gray Men are not the same, but it is also true that some quirks can do more damage to Gray Men than others, even if they cannot get rid of them entirely. Quirks that affect the body of the holder rather than someone else’s body have been proven more effective against Gray Men, but they are also at the most danger of having their quirks stolen. Those whose quirks affect others are significantly less effective, but they are at a lesser danger than others. Still, I would like to stress that citizens should allow heroes to handle the Gray Men at this current time--to not get involved or resort to vigilante action. Please use your quirks only to protect yourself in the event of an attack on your own being.”

Then, as he backed away, Yayoi came forward.

“To answer your other question, our organization did not come forth to the public with the information we had acquired due to our involvement with public study groups. As we wished to maintain our personal privacy until the event of a disaster in which we would publicly expound on our results, we handed our information over to the more public study organizations for them to finish testing their hypotheses. We did not start the studies, and our facilities at the time were used only to proceed with humanitarian tests. Also, due to our upholdance of the United Nations’ human rights clauses, our labs were, as some would say, limited, whereas others were not. As such, we proceeded with our own separate studies, but the results of those were similar to those who were already in public. Having no new information, we did not see any reason to reveal our organization outside of severe emergency, as we see at the moment.”

The reporter nodded and took a seat. The Secretary indicated to the others that, due to time, the next question would likely be the last, and directed her hand towards one more person.

“I am Suzume with Ingra Inquiry. Thank you for taking my question. Considering the destructive nature Minute Maid’s quirk has towards Gray Men, I wonder then if Minute Maid was involved in the attack on Rirossu Ward, considering the destruction of the Gray Man. If so, I was hoping I could get some update on her physical condition, considering the death count and the severe wounds that many of the survivors of the attack sustained.”

This time, Inspector Yayoi walked up to the podium, closing her folder before she even spoke.

“Yes, Minute Maid was involved in the attack on Rirossu Ward. Their powers were used to destroy the Gray Man, and we were able to acquire some very important artifacts from the Gray Men to
study the way they function and come one step closer to destroying them. As far as Minute Maid’s condition, they were severely injured in the attack. That is all.”

Suzume’s mouth dropped open a little at the final bit of her statement, but Yayoi didn’t intend on expanding on it, backing away from the podium with her folder under her arm. Before any other of the many, suddenly jolting questions could be asked by the press, hands straining into the air as others just plain blurted them out, the Secretary interjected, stating that their time for the conference was over, thanking them for their time.

The Prime Minister exited first, his guards close to him in the event someone got out of line, and Inspector Yayoi followed smoothly, ignoring the desperate calls for attention behind her.

After much consideration on Tsukauchi’s part, he decided that he would wait a bit longer before informing Midoriya-san about her son’s previous death and subsequent undead nature. Considering everything that had already happened, he figured it would be too much on the woman’s soul--that, and as Yayoi said, it would probably be better for the bad news to come from someone else’s mouth for once; it would do no good for her to become any more antagonistic towards him.

As far as Yagi was concerned though, well…

If he wasn’t going to find out something happened from Tsukauchi telling him, he was going to find out when he realized the policeman had to alter his heroics reports to fit the new information. Besides, Yagi was a smart, inquisitive man, much smarter than some people gave him credit for. He was going to find out eventually.

That didn’t help Tsukauchi feel any better as he watched the blond hero’s eyes go wide with shock.

The afternoon sun peeked out through the still heavy load of clouds, leaving strangely strong shadows in the corners of the hospital room. Yagi’s hands were still on top of the covers over his legs, sitting up with minor assistance now that he was feeling better. His heart monitor beeped low and steady at his side.

Yagi looked as though he were waiting for Tsukauchi to continue speaking, but the detective saw the slow inkling or resignation begin to trickle in. It took him a bit to finally start talking again.

“So then...when I found young Midoriya unconscious in the tunnel.”

Tsukauchi stared at him, eyebrows tilted just a slight bit upward.

“He was already glowing when I found him.”

The detective’s hands clasped each other a little tighter in the open V of his legs as he sat in the chair facing his bedridden friend.

“So then,” Yagi said after a moment, finally looking away from him, one of the two long strands of his bangs shielding his eyes from view like a curtain. “I was too late.”

“Yagi, you couldn’t have known Nigori was going to try to find someone--”

“But I was the one who made him panic, wasn’t I?” Yagi didn’t attempt to turn his way, still looking forward, eyes still shielded. “He was stealing money from a local convenience store. He was a thief, yes, but not even while there did he try to kill anyone. It wasn’t until...I showed up that he began to escalate. He was a thief before I was there. After I appeared, he became a villain.”
Tsukauchi’s face schooled itself neutrally, eyebrows a soft line. “As much as that may be, it was his choice to go that far, not yours. He decided to try disguising himself that way, not you. You never gave him that suggestion.”

“Except, his thought was to hide from the Symbol of Peace, was it not?”

Yagi turned back to him then, and Tsukauchi finally received the full force light of bright, neon blue eyes fully entrenched in a tired, guilty resignation.

“I cannot help but know in my heart that I pushed him into that corner.”

“...You didn’t kill Midoriya, Yagi.”

The older hero sighed, leaning back on the pillows.

“I might as well have.”
Intermission: Brunch Discussion

Chapter Summary

There are slight perspective changes that occur, hence the name use changes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The hospital cafeteria was mostly empty at that time of day, right in that area before noon that felt too late to be considered morning yet was morning nevertheless. There were a few people mulling around, drowsy with the low thunder and pattering rain. They perused the bagged chips as they considered braving their prejudices and trying out some of the food the hospital had heated up.

There were a variety of seating choices, from dark blue plastic chairs at easy-to-clean navy plastic table tops held up by a metal pole with a quad base, to a booth with foam stuffing in a navy plastic seat top sealed to the tan bench surrounding a table with just enough of a gap to feel like you didn’t have enough space; an enclosed feel unrivaled by almost any other booth anywhere. Logical reasoning would lead those who compared and contrasted the seating options to choose the chairs.

Unfortunately, the two sitting in the booth did so to accommodate a large, cloth-covered tail.

Midoriya Inko sat on one side of the booth, unable to keep her gaze on her guest for very long, and on the other, Shimizu Mako’s hulking, tall shark-quirked figure had been squeezed like a sardine into the seating, her tail taking up the rest of her side. The shorter woman had a small plate of macaroni salad, while the taller had salmon with mushroom sauce. Neither touched their plate, utensils ready to be used, but the women themselves were rendered unable to use them out of discomfort.

Eventually though, Inko cleared her throat, prompting the young woman on the other side to look up from her plate. The older woman fought down the shudder that ran up her spine from the unintentionally sharp look in the other’s eyes.

“You said your name is Shimizu Mako, right? I, uhm...well. Thank you for meeting with me like this on such a short notice,” Inko started, bowing her head slightly. “When Detective Hashiro gave me your number, I was surprised, but I’m glad we can talk.”

Mako bowed her head lightly in return, dipping low enough for her bangs to just barely conceal her eyes. “It’s...my pleasure. I didn’t get to meet you before.”

“Yeah....”

They trailed off into a cloying silence. Others in the cafeteria ate with smacking lips and rumbling stomachs, and the rain outside pattered against the windows in a constant flow of white noise.

Inko opened her mouth once, then closed it. Then opened it again, her gaze chilled to ice. “Did you know? About...about my son’s activities?”

Mako shook her head. “No, not at all. I didn’t even know he was a vigilante until the police interview.”
Inko looked at the young woman across from her and found she couldn’t sense a lie. The ice thawed immediately. “Oh...oh, I thought...well, then. I, uhm, feel a lot better about you, then. A-Admittedly.”

The shark-quirked woman hummed, her slitted gaze flitting over the older woman’s features.

“You see, I thought that, well, maybe you had known and had encouraged him to do it. Maybe even prompted him.”

Mako scoffed, her eyes lidding with a dull, ironic humor. “Considering my thoughts on the hero-villain system, I assure you I’d be the least likely person to do that.”

Inko’s shoulders relaxed visibly, some of the tenseness flushing out of her, and she placed her hands together in a pleased clap.

“Ahh, you too, hm? I mean, I don’t know everything you think about it, but honestly, it sounds like you’d rather they not be around, right?”

“That’s the gist of it.”

“Me, too. It feels as though they cause more trouble than actually solving any problems, right? That isn’t to say that heroes aren’t wonderful for getting rid of villains, but if neither existed...I feel like life would be more peaceful.”

The sharp-toothed woman across from her nodded in agreement, her toxic-colored gaze relaxing as well.

Inko felt a lot of things about the person across from her, but at the very least, she knew she hadn’t prompted her son into danger. That alone made up a little bit for the fact she’d been teaching her son martial arts behind her back. Well, actually...

“Did my son tell you I gave him permission to learn...uhm...what was it?”

Mako’s shoulders tensed. “Muay Thai. And no. I...honestly hadn’t thought about it.” She picked up her chopsticks and tapped them against the plastic plate, her mouth twisting a little. “I met him at the gym, so I didn’t really think about it.”

“Oh...well,” Inko gazed down at her plate of macaroni salad as she processed the answer. “I suppose I can’t really fault you for that. I guess I can’t fault you for teaching him the moves, either.”

When the woman across from Inko remained silent, she continued, sighing as she leaned back. The plastic covering on the booth squeaked, and the awkward nature of their meeting crept back to them, seeping through the gaps in the seat and through the scent of their hospital food.

“More than your fault, I guess you could say I blame the...you put it well, the hero-villain system. They get all these kids riled up about their form of justice and they completely ignore the repercussions of their actions. What about the kids who can’t meet society’s expectations for them like that? What about the children who can’t become heroes?”

When Inko sought affirmation from her visitor, she was met with consideration instead. Mako’s head had tilted a little to the side, and her eyes were narrowed as she thought. When it became clear she wouldn’t say a word, Inko felt her previously bubbling assurance flatten out. After a bit, she couldn’t handle it anymore; she cleared her throat and glanced off to the side.

“It’s just...my son. He’s not like other kids.”
“Mmh.” Mako nodded a little as well, chopsticks pulling at the fish flesh before her.

“You understand, then? I mean, you’ve taught him...this Muay Thai, so I suppose you understand somewhat.”

Mako hummed again and didn’t look directly at the woman, her gaze lidded with thought as she blinked at her fish before deciding to stop playing with it like a child. She picked up a loose piece of it and started to chew on it.

“I just can’t seem to imagine him in a class like that, even if everyone tells me he was. He just needs more care, you know? My son...did he tell you about his condition?”

“Condition?”

“He’s...well...” Inko sniffled and watched Mako’s gaze flitted up from her fish.

“He’s quirkless,” the woman finished with a whisper.

Inko had told many people about her son’s condition, only when the situation called for it. Most of the time she’d get hushed condolences and wishes for his health. Sometimes she’d get pitied, the people shaking their heads and clicking their tongues as they gave her suggestions on how to deal with it. Once or twice, she’d been questioned about his IQ and physical health by curious people—namely the teachers and faculty at the schools her son had to attend as they tried to figure out if they needed to give him extra accommodations considering his disability.

Instead of any of those things, Mako reciprocated with patience, glowing green staring at Inko as though she was waiting for something else. When Inko didn’t say anything additional, her eyes lidded and something in her expression set firmly into dissatisfaction. “...Uh huh.”

Inko raised a hand to her lips, covering her own mouth. “He hasn’t told you yet, has he? Or has he already?”

“He’s told me.”

Inko blinked, a little shocked by the notion. Izuku didn’t make it a habit of telling others about his condition, but...well, considering she was a martial arts instructor, he probably had to tell her even if he hadn’t wanted to. Still, considering how others often reacted, Mako’s didn’t make much sense.

“Oh...he has? That’s good. I’m glad you knew. I...I’m a little surprised you taught him regardless. Not that I don’t think you should’ve but...ah, well, most people, when they hear he’s quirkless, they...they decide against teaching him anything. Doesn’t matter what it is, they just decide not to teach him.” Inko’s gaze dropped to her hands, fiddling with her own fingers. “It’s just...I worry about him so much. I-I know he’s not telling me everything that goes on at school. He used to enjoy classes so much until he...until we found out. Then he started coming home with this look in his eye. He’s been so despondent, and I didn’t know how to fix it. Didn’t know what to do. So I just...I just want to keep him safe. He’s so...he’s a soft child, you know? He feels so much all the time, I would’ve thought he was an empath. He probably is somehow, just not as a quirk. But he got my tear ducts, that much is certain. I just wish...I wish he could’ve gotten more from me than that; than my hair, my eyes, my height. I...I wish I could’ve given him a quirk.”

Mako paused, her chopsticks short of her teeth, the piece between them dripping a little with mushroom sauce.

“All he wanted from the time he realized heroes existed was a quirk. I...I watched him wish day after day for one. He even tried to move the couch like I can move small objects.” Inko’s voice hitched.
with a small, barely contained sob, her body bending forward as she curled in on herself, hiding her mouth with her hand as her eyes teared up. “He...he even tried breathing fire like his dad, even after Hisashi... But we went to the doctor when he was four, when it looked like he might be a late bloomer and, well...you know. To this day I regret that, not being able to give him something to use. He’s so small, my son...and I love him so much, so, so much...yet I couldn’t...I couldn’t give him what he needed and now he’s...”

Inko couldn’t see it through her tear-filled eyes, but Mako had already put her chopsticks down. Mako hands were in her lap under the table, and she stared across to the crying woman.

“He’s not dead, but...but he’s barely alive as it is! I haven’t done enough. Not...not nearly enough. He got all these ideas about vigilantism and I didn’t even...I didn’t even realize what he was doing! I didn’t get the chance to stop him! If I had known he was out there trying to be a hero, I would’ve stopped him right then and there! I would’ve! I wouldn’t have let him do something so unsafe, not when he can’t defend himself like other people! If I hadn’t been so focused on work, I would’ve been able to...maybe I could’ve gotten him into another hobby. Maybe I could’ve spent more time with him at home, or—or had him do more at the house so I could at least know he was there rather than out on the streets all alone! I thought he was just chasing heroes, not trying to become one...and now... S-Shimizu-san, maybe you’ll hate me for this, but my son...”

Inko peered up then, straight at the shark woman’s hair-shrouded face.

“My son can’t be a hero. I...I can’t let him. Maybe it’s terrible but...I’d always hoped he’d give up on it...trying to be one. But then I noticed him starting to build muscle and I was going to look into why because, after all these years, it’s the first time in a long time that I’ve seen him try to do that. The first time since elementary that he’s wanted to get fit like that, and I thought maybe he would try to get into U.A. or something...m-maybe it was meeting you that made him want to be a hero. I don’t know. I really don’t. But...but once he’s recovered, however long that takes, I...I--”

“Midoriya-san.”

Inko paused, choking on her words, before she covered her mouth. She kept her head low as she began to try wiping her tears away.

“With all due respect. Are we talking about the same boy?”

The noise in the rest of the cafeteria had stopped to them. Like every other person there had become mere shadows to their solid forms. No one else truly existed except for the two women at the booth.

Midoriya Inko blinked, her mouth dropping open a little. “Wh...what?”

Unseen to the older woman who had yet to look up from her own lap, Mako stared down at the woman with lidded eyes and firmly set lips, fighting off the scowl that threatened to mar her face.

“Are we both talking about Midoriya Izuku?”

“I...well, I imagine we are.”

“Really...hmm.”

Mako went quiet again, her tail starting to twitch and pat against the seat. She could feel Midoriya-
san eyeing the tail before the older woman sat up a little more, confusion starting to bleed into the cracks of her sorrow.

"...I want to say a few things. But. I also don’t want to offend you first thing upon meeting you. The thing is, what I have to say and what may offend you are...in the same category. So.” Mako’s eyes narrowed, her tail twitching again. “I’ll only say it, if you want me to.”

This was a warning she gave often. She knew she could go a little too far with her assertions, especially after she’d been deemed a villain more than once over her opinions on certain political and heroic institutions. Offense was something she was good at. Subtlety, sadly, was not. So, at the very least, she could give a warning to those who wanted to heed it. It had saved her more than a few arguments, some people deciding they didn’t want to hear what she had to say if it would offend them.

Midoriya-san apparently wasn’t one of those people, the woman blinking as she considered Mako’s offer. Then she sat up a little straighter, her eyebrows scrunching even as she tried ridding herself of her own tears. “If...if you would, please.”

Mako breathed in, her bangs still over her eyes. She rubbed a hand through the hair at the back of her head, then settled, her tail still thumping a little at her side, one of the hits against the material a little too hard, loud enough to make a thwap resound near them before she forced herself to stay still.

“...The first time I met him, I knew he was getting bullied.”

She kept going through Midoriya-san’s gasp.

“Even before he said anything about it, I could tell just from the way he’d carry himself. He’s always so timid and careful. Tries to make himself unassuming around others. Tries not to be different from anyone else. Always seems to have a new bruise on him from somewhere. Maybe the kid’s just a trouble magnet or something, because even the official trainer at the gym started bullying him, too.”

“What? You mean...you’re not--”

“No, I don’t own the gym. I just have a membership there. But the reason I started training him was because...well.”

Mako rose her head up, allowing her gaze to piece through the dark veil of her deep blue hair, luminescent green glowing at the other woman.

“He was watching me, and despite being in that hack of a training class, he’d managed to improve just from watching others and trying to use their moves with his own body. While people who’d been training with the leader of the gym hadn’t even learned how to balance themselves during a kick, he’d thrown a near perfect one--but he’d overcompensated his weight because he hadn’t been able to factor in how much force to kick with. I’m working with a tail while he’s not. He knew that much, but without knowing its weight, he wasn’t sure how to change his kick to fit himself. Still, he threw the best kick out of every one of those dimwits. He still got scolded.” The bridge of Mako’s nose curled with distaste, pulling up a little on her lips to reveal the tips of sharp teeth. “Even when he’s doing his absolute best, no one seems to recognize him. Not even you.”

Midoriya-san shook, her hands clenching on her body. “Wh-wha--”

“This whole time you’ve talked about him, I didn’t hear you say a single thing about how smart he is. How brave he is. How considerate he is. All of those things are so obvious to his personality, but all I’ve heard from you this entire time were his weaknesses and how you wish you could lock him
away and your regrets over not giving him a quirk, and it made me think. When was the last time
you told him he was strong? The last time you told him he could do what he put his mind to? The
last time you gave him encouragement rather than just watch him saunter into your house looking
like a kicked puppy and feel pity for yourself?”

Mako could tell she was adding fuel to the woman’s fire. Midoriya-san held herself like she would
burst into glass shards and slice straight through her scales, but Mako couldn’t stop. All of the dim
irritation she’d felt had bubbled up her throat like bile and cranked her mouth open to let every ugly
thing spill out between her jagged teeth.

This woman, Midoriya Izuku’s mother, who looked so much like Mako’s beloved student and good
friend, was one of the people hurting him, too.

“I know you probably mean well, but honestly, you sound like you’re pitying yourself more than
your son—not that he needs it. Midoriya is so much stronger than anyone gives him credit for. For the
past three months, I’ve watched him grow and improve on himself faster than even some long-time
experts in martial arts do. He trains his hardest every time and gives his best every single day I see
him. He’s analytical beyond others, wise for his age, and more than anything, his heart has room for
everyone in it...everyone but himself. Because for all the kindness he’s shown me and any random
sap who he happens to bump into on the street, he doesn’t give an ounce of it to himself. He’s even
given excuses left and right for people outright abusing him. And he shouldn’t have to. He shouldn’t
feel the need to. But of course he would.” She can’t help the snarl that echoes in her stretching gills,
hers voice going low and throaty. “It’s all about quirks, after all, and no one’s had to mind to tell him
it’s not.”

“...What are you saying? Are you saying I neglected my son?”

Mako’s words finally stopped pouring out from her, and the rage she’d slipped into slid off of her
slowly, like a sheet falling away. She stared at Midoriya-san. The chubby woman glowered at her
from the other side of the table, her hands clenched so hard, she could see the skin under her fingers
turning white.

And right then, Mako knew she’d said too much. She didn’t know everything, so she most likely
wasn’t being completely fair to the woman across from her. Then again, she’d asked if the older
woman wanted to hear what she said, and she’d said that she would. Now the woman was asking
another question. The woman deserved her honesty most of all.

“I didn’t say that. But. Neglect isn’t always physical, or intentional.”

The way that Midoriya-san’s breath hitched, Mako felt immediately it wasn’t from sorrow. She let
her teeth slot back together in silence, and waited for the other to speak.

“You...you can’t say that to me.”

Inko had felt this kind of fury before. She wasn’t one to outwardly express her anger often, but it
didn’t mean she didn’t get angry. The few times she did before were when the man who’d made a
promise to her and her son walked out, the first time she’d witnessed someone reject her son because
of something he couldn’t control—something her fault, something she hadn’t given him—and more
recently, when Detective Tsukauchi had the gall to tell her that he let her son run out on a mission
with pro heroes and receive what should’ve been a death-dealing blow from it.
And now this woman before her had the audacity to tell her she was neglecting her son when she
didn’t know everything.

She was not one to react with anger, but it didn’t mean she wouldn’t when the time called for it. So,
with a chilled crawl of monstrous disgust crawling up her throat, she replied.

“After Izuku’s father...after that man walked out on us and left me alone to care for him, left us to
care for ourselves...how can you even say that I’ve neglected him? I don’t care how much you think
you know, but every single day of my life since my son was born...every moment of my life has
been dedicated to my son. To our lives, to our family. I’ve wanted nothing but the best for Izuku--
I’m only looking for the best for him! But sometimes, sometimes there’s some things he just can’t
have! He can’t be as strong as heroes, he can’t have a quirk, he can’t have the same freedom
everyone else does! You don’t know the kind of danger he’s in just because of who he is, how
scared I am that one day…”

Inko’s teeth clenched, then slowly, after a moment of shaking, she released the tension, and her
shoulders began to droop. The shark woman across from her remained silent and listening, her tail
unmoving since she’d started talking. That woman…

She couldn’t know what she and her son had been through.

“For you to even have the gall to say something like that…”

Before she could complete her sentence, she felt a hand pat down onto her shoulder, startling her.
She didn’t jump, instead turning to see who the person was.

A man who seemed like he didn’t have a quirk aside from the strange shade of purple his hair had
taken on stood there, his glasses lower on his face to stare firm-eyed over at Shimizu-san. He glanced
at her and smiled warmly.

“Are you alright?”

Inko blinked, surprised by his sudden appearance. “Oh, uhm…” She wiped her face again and sat up
a little more, knowing her cheeks would be ruddy and a little tear-tracked no matter what she did.
“I’m alright…” Her voice tilted a little upward at the end, unsure of the reason he appeared.

Then he told her without saying so, turning back to face Shimizu-san with a firmly-set glare on his
face. His hand tightened lightly on her shoulder, and she realized what he was doing. Across from
her, just in the corner of her eye, she could see Shimizu’s shoulders stiffen, her head turning towards
the man at the same time she felt him shudder.

“Do you need me to call for law enforcement?” he asked, his voice trembling just a tad at the end.

Oh.

Inko rose her hand, ready to tell the man that it was alright, that there was nothing to fear--why was
he afraid in the first place? She’d been the one to invite her there to talk, even if it wasn’t pleasant, so
it was fine.

But before she could, she felt the man back up a little, and she turned towards Shimizu-san.

The young woman had her mouth open, several sharp rows of teeth clicking against each other and
glinting in the harsh light of the cafeteria. She’d managed to balance the entire piece of salmon
between her chopsticks, placing it in her mouth. Inko watched as she chewed, the fish’s flesh
shredded to pieces in moments, and stayed staring as the young woman’s pink tongue licked at her
teeth, catching lost bits caught between the razors with a practiced, bloodless ease.

Shimizu-san placed her chopsticks down and scooted out of the booth, standing to her full height, towering tall over the two of them and everyone else nearby. She rose her covered tail over her shoulder with ease.

“No need for that. I’m leaving.”

Inko blinked up at her as Shimizu-san picked up her tray and plate, ready to take them over to the drop-off to be cleaned. The man stayed at her side, but she could feel the nervous energy coming off of him as he tried to stay vigilant. Before Shimizu turned away completely, she paused, reaching a hand back to take a hold of her jacket hood.

“Say what you will, Midoriya-san, but please take this away from our conversation.” She glanced back at her, her toxic green gaze piercing into Inko’s eyes. “Maybe he wouldn’t have tried so hard to prove himself to the point he got as hurt as the detective implied he is if he knew he’s worth something.”

Shimizu Mako rose her hood then and stalked away, others in the cafeteria giving her a wide berth as she left.

The man to her side squeezed her shoulder lightly, though Inko barely paid attention to him at that point.

“I’m glad that’s over. They really should up security in this place if they’re going to allow people like her in.”

Inko felt an uncomfortable weight settle onto her shoulders when the man said that, and the way he patted her shoulder before leaving didn’t feel anywhere near as reassuring as he intended. She allowed herself to be left there, a cooled bowl of macaroni salad in front of her, and felt herself spiral further into her own head.

Chapter End Notes

Fun Fact: Shimizu Mako is 204cm tall, 16cm shorter than All Might.
Chapter Summary

Miyashi and Saitō warnings are my fake Japanese versions of the Garrity and Kalkines warnings in the US.

Also, latter half is just a bunch of twenty-somethings being stupid drunks.

Chapter Notes

mmmmmm too tired to say much

i wanted to post a main-line chapter, but this stuff needed to be addressed first. sry it's kinda filler, but it'll make sense and be important in the main-line, so it's okay

sorry it took almost a month, but that life shiz yo

thank you for all the support and art you guys have been giving me! i really adore all of it, and if you wanna see it, feel free to click my tumblr link down below. i would link them up right here like usual buuuuuut...mrh

lemme stress again the support, because even on days i couldn't bring myself to write, just lookin at y'all's comments made me so eager to come back and write again, and gosh i love it so much, i really like this journey we're taking together with this fic, it's super amazoids

gotta go to bed before work tomorrow

i wuuuuuv you guys

stay safe n don't drink n drive

EDIT: July 5th 2018
I’ve switched this chapter and the former chapter 28 for more ease whilst reading. It keeps this chapter from being a flashback and it evens out the timeline.
This was Chapter 29, but is now Chapter 28, and vice versa.

“Please take a seat, Detective Tsukauchi Naomasa.”

The detective obeyed the stiff woman’s orders without question, sliding the chair out and sitting at the metal desk with it. His jacket had already been taken, along with his phone, wallet, badge, and gun. The room was cleared of nearly everything that could be used as a weapon, even more stonewalled and cold than an interrogation room, with pale blue-gray walls and flooring all of the same shade. There was a manila folder on the tableside opposite of his and a single mirror at the back of the room, presumably for someone else to watch, but he wasn’t sure—it looked like a real mirror.
The woman in front of him had a brown pork pie hat on with a colorful quail feather stuck in the side. She had no hair, not even eyebrows, and her eyes were a shade of hazel that made her pinpoint pupil stand out. She made nearly no sound as she took a seat on the other side of the cold table, her fingertips tapping against it in a measured pattern.

He looked forward at her.

She gazed back.

He blinked.

She didn’t.

“I am Torame Mūso, an investigator with the Public Security Intelligence Agency. Detective Tsukauchi Naomasa of the Public Affairs Investigation Sector of the Musutafu Police Force, you are being questioned as part of an internal and administrative investigation. You will be asked a number of specific questions concerning your official duties, and you must answer these questions to the best of your ability. Failure to answer completely and truthfully may result in disciplinary action, including dismissal. Your answers and any information derived from them may be used against you in administrative proceedings. However, neither your answers nor any information derived from them may be used against you in criminal proceedings, except if you knowingly and willfully make false statements.”

He closed his eyes. A Saitō warning. He expected that much.

“Do you understand, Tsukauchi-san?”

“I understand.”

“Good.”

The woman didn’t look away from him as she opened the folder in front of her. She reached into her jacket and took out a pen. She clicked it once sharply, a sound that echoed in the room, and put the pen against the top left of the paper. All the while, she never once looked away from Tsukauchi. He swallowed and resisted the urge to shudder.

“I will ask you a series of questions. You will answer them to the extent you wish, though compliance is recommended. I am also obligated to inform you that, per the requirements to this questioning, I will be using my quirk.” He opened his mouth to object, but she bulldozed right over him. “It is not a fatal or long-lasting quirk. It is actually not too exceedingly different from yours. It simply ensures you're telling the truth for the time being.”

Her statements rang true, and he calmed immediately. “Can you tell me your quirk?”

“That would defeat the purpose, so I will not.”

_Not cannot, will not, huh…_ He sighed, then straightened in his seat.

“Alright. Please ask.”

She still didn’t blink.

“Firstly, you were the head detective on the investigation to pursue Minute Maid, correct?”

“Yes.”
“Did you have anyone else working with you?”

“Yes, Detective Hashiro Hayako, and several policemen in the force."

“Any notable names?”

“...Perhaps Tamakawa Sansa. He assisted me in organizing the other police, in handling Minute Maid once they were in custody, and doing small errands when he wasn’t on the field.”

“Hmm.”

Tsukauchi glanced down at the paper when he noticed a slight scritching sound. The woman’s—Torame’s—hand was writing steadily on the paper, not missing a single space, not creating big spaces. Her letters were uniform and well-written. When his gaze returned to hers, her eyes were still on him, unblinking. He looked off to the side, unable to stand how fiercely she probed into his discomfort.

“Secondly, you reported that you found and apprehended Minute Maid. Is this a true statement?”

“Partially. Hashiro and I found out who the person was only after All Might brought them in after a Gray Man attack. They happened to fit our M.O.”

“Their name?”

“Midoriya Izuku.”

“Sex? Gender?”

“Male. Presumably masculine.”

“Age?”

“15, as of July 15th.”

“Were you aware of Midoriya Izuku’s age when you cleared him for participation during the Kronos Incident?”

“...Yes.”

“Were you aware that Midoriya Izuku was supposedly without formal training and without a provisional license from any trademark class 41 or 45 service providers?”

His eyes narrowed slightly. “I was, yes.”

“As you were currently investigating him for the crime of vigilantism, were you aware that, by allowing a vigilante without formal training or a provisional license to act alongside qualified personnel, you were endangering the life of the vigilante as well as the lives of everyone else involved?”

Tsukauchi went quiet, his lips pressed shut. He wanted to explain everything. He really did, wanted to go down the line of exactly how damning that sentence was, how damning the actually situation was, and how that vigilante she spoke of wasn’t actually using a quirk.

But that wasn’t the question.

“...I made the decision I felt was best for the time being.”
“That was not my question.”

“...I made the decision I felt was best, and yes, I was aware of the dangers of that decision.”

“Were you aware that you were out of order with your acceptance of Minute Maid into the hero ranks for the Kronos Incident.”

“I made the order in Chief Kawamura’s absence, yes.”

The woman’s eyes narrowed a little, the first indication she felt something. “That wasn’t my question.”

“I made the order in Chief Kawamura’s absence, so yes, I was aware I was out of order.”

“Hmm. And where was Chief Kawamura?”

“I don’t know.”

“Deputy Chief Kawamura Kutsuna was the one who enacted the arrest order on Minute Maid, correct?”

“It was an apprehension order, but yes.”

The woman paused. She wrote something else down, then continued.

“Yet, when you successfully apprehended the subject, he was not present?”

“No.”

“Hmm.”

It would be a lie for the detective to say he felt bad for throwing the chief under the bus the way he just did. The chief had it coming after several years of constantly demanding work be done, only to never give his final stamp on it. He left it to the police and detectives to enact and enforce his orders without getting his hands dirty. He wasn’t going to let the man get away with it this time, not with Midoriya’s, Hashiro’s, Tamakawa’s, and his own name on the line.

“Are you aware of the full extent of Midoriya’s quirk?”

“It is not a quirk, it’s magic.”

“The question, sir.”

“It’s not a quirk, it’s magic, and no, I am not aware of the full extent of it.”

“Is it true that right now, Midoriya is in intensive care after sustaining a pole through his chest?”

“...Yes.”

“Is it true that Midoriya Izuku died from his injuries.”

“No.”

Her eyes moved like she would blink, but her eyelids never met.

“What condition is Midoriya Izuku in?”
“He’s in a restorative hibernation while his body repairs itself. From what Inspector Yayoi told me, there is no medical help we can give him that would viably help him. He has to heal on his own.”

“But he is in the hospital.”

“For care, yes.”

“Would you say, then, that he sustained these injuries due to your executive decision?”

The guilty part of him chanted ‘yes’. The reasonable part of his said otherwise.

“While I do take responsibility for sending an untrained minor into the battlefield, I cannot say that I personally caused his injury. But, yes, my decision regarding his approval contributed to his injury, even if it wasn’t the direct cause of it.”

“Did Detective Hashiro Hayako contribute to your decision?”

“No, she wasn’t present, nor did she contribute.”

“Did Officer Tamakawa Sansa contribute to your decision?”

“No. He followed my order to escort Minute Maid in retrieving his bag, but otherwise didn’t contribute. He did appear apprehensive of my decision.”

“Would you say he approved?”

“I cannot say that he did.”

“Hmm. Did Midoriya Izuku contribute to your decision?”

Tsukauchi thought back to the boy, peeking through the door with determined, four-point eyes.

“No. While he did express desire to use his magic against the Gray Man, his willingness was not the deciding factor. Whether he was willing or not, I was prepared to deny him.”

Suddenly, Tsukauchi found himself sniffled and blinked, a tad of fogginess slipping into his brain. He looked across the table to the woman on the other side. She stared at him, unblinking.

“Did Midoriya Izuku contribute to your decision?”

Tsukauchi thought back to the boy looking down at his own lap when forced to talk about himself. He thought back to the way his back and gaze straightened when in defense of others.

“He...He did not contribute. While he wanted to protect the heroes against the Gray Man, he is still a minor. Despite his successes, it was too dangerous for him. I was prepared to deny him if necessary.”

He blinked again, then a few more times. The woman’s figure wavered in his eyes, but he couldn’t quite clear it. The fogginess pulled him down further. He had a hand against the table to support himself.

When the woman spoke again, it was with an echo.

“Did Midoriya Izuku contribute to your decision.”

Tsukauchi thought back to the facts. The heroes that lost. The heroes that couldn’t win. The heroes could do nothing. He didn’t want the boy out there. But Midoriya looked him straight in the eye
when the boy collapsed to his knees, and they both knew.

“He...He did not. He didn’t con...he didn’t contribute. I...I made that decision. I knew it was
dangerous, and I told him to go. He...he wanted to go, but that meant nothing to me. I...I could have
told him not to go. I know I could have.”

He sank further, and felt sick. He felt like he was flashing back to his drunken days in high school,
those few times he had more than a few illegal drinks with his buddies under the bridge near the
neighborhood lake. The woman’s hazel eyes reminded him of the summer heat and the buzzing
cicadas. His breath created clouds against the cool metal of the table.

When she spoke, it was a whisper in his ears.

“Did Midoriya Izuku contribute to your decision.”

Midoriya spoke to him from the ground near the cracked door. His lips moved with echos of words
Tsukauchi remembered. The wide, teary eyes of a 15-year-old boy stared up at him with a request.
Freshly fifteen. Newly fifteen. Not even fifteen for a whole three weeks yet. And he knew. He knew
and was ready to give up everything.

A single hot drop of rain joins the clouds on the table.

“I didn’t want to say yes. I didn’t want to. But he and I both knew I had to. It was the only way. He
said it himself. ‘Only my magic can get rid of the Gray Men’, and he was right. He knew he was
right. I knew he was right. Even without him saying it, I knew he was right, but the fact he knew,
too... It’s our fault he had to fight. It’s my fault he went, but we both knew he had to go.’” He looked
up then from his slouched over position, his gaze still hazy and unfocused, a wry, self-deprecating
smile on his face. “Imagine that. I’m 36, and I listened to a 15-year-old because what he said was
reasonable. What he said was true, and I don’t doubt for a second some of us wouldn’t be alive
without him having gone. I don’t doubt that, had he not gone, Kronos would’ve gotten too strong for
anyone, even him, to handle. I told him to go because we both knew he had to. There was no chance
I could deny him knowing that.”

The woman blinked at him, and suddenly the haze was gone.

For a moment, Tsukauchi collected himself, sitting up straight from his slouch and waiting for his
face to cool. Then he blinked, frowning, and slowly rose a hand to his right eye. When he felt
moisture at his lower eyelid, his frown turned to surprise.

“...When did I—”

“That will be all, Detective Tsukauchi,” Torame said, standing to her feet. She was blinking
regularly.

Turned to the left and right, feeling like he was forgetting something, but stood when she came close,
her hand ready to help him up if need be.

“Am I not being arrested?”

“Not for the time being, no,” she replied, walking him to the door. “We will process the information
you provided to us and may commit to sentencing, but it is possible that we won’t. It is guaranteed
that you will receive some punishment for your executive decision, whether it be monitoring or
demotion or temporary suspension without pay. There are other options for punishment, though.”

“Great.” He sighed as he stepped out into the hall, relieved to be out of the stuffiness of the air, but
pressed by anxiety. “I suppose you all would have to do that at least.”

“Correct.”

Tsukauchi moved to begin walking away, but he felt a little like he needed to stay. Torame was looking down slightly, blinking every once in a while. Her arms were to her sides, and she seemed contemplative. Then her gaze rose to his, and he saw some emotion in the hazel irides.

“I do not say this lightly. I do not believe you will receive too harsh of a punishment. It is more likely that Midoriya Izuku will be facing a more drastic sentence than you would.”

The detective’s mouth twisted. “Will. So they’ve already decided to charge him in the court of law.”

“All things considered, yes. But that is all I will say about that. Anyway,” she blinked. “I can respect you for lying to me when it mattered the most to you, but I’d refrain from doing that again.”

Tsukauchi rose a hand to his chin, his other moving to support his elbow. “...When did I lie to you?”

Torame blinked, “You can retrieve your things if you go back out into the main hall and take the elevator one floor down. Then you can go.”

She closed the door to the interrogation room, leaving Tsukauchi outside.

Inspector Yayoi stood in a conference room in front of many of the surviving heroes from the media-coined Kronos Incident. There were no windows in the room, only a door with a peep opening through which the heroes could see two white dog-eared hoods. A hollow-middle rectangular desk sat in the middle of the room, with the inspector at one head, accompanied by Detective Hashiro. To their left, Fraction, Manual, Gunhead, Snipe, and Anthozoa sat. In the middle, Gang Orca and Selkie made room for each other. Following from Selkie, a representative for Copper Devil, Ingenium, Fourth Kind, a representative for Falcon, and Climantine were all arranged neatly.

At the head of the room, Inspector Yayoi stood up from her seat.

“Thank you, heroes and representatives, for being able to make it to this meeting. I understand that these are very trying times and the issue with the Gray Men is becoming more prominent, which is what I’ve called this meeting to address in part. All of you here had some part in the mission at the second Tartarus, and so, if you have any questions for me or any clarifications needed, please feel free to ask me at any time.” She glanced Hashiro’s way, just as curious as she was addressing. “Detective Tsukauchi couldn’t be here as All Might’s representative, so Detective Hashiro will be filling in for him. She’ll also be able to answer some of your questions, particularly investigation-wise.”

Hashiro bowed in greeting before retaking her seat. It seemed as though Yayoi would speak again, but one of the heroes shifted anxiously in her seat, her red cloak billowing with her movements. She rose a long-fingered hand carefully hidden behind brown gloves.

“If you don’t mind...have we...begun? I have a...question,” Anthozoa began, her gravelly voice pettering out from behind her blank white mask, two black slits high up functioning as the eyeholes. Her coral horns tilted with her head.

“Of course, what is it?” Yayoi answered back.

“I would like to...ask about...Copper Devil and Falcon...they were...severely injured. I am...worried
about them.”

“Yes, well, as far as their health conditions, if the representatives wouldn’t mind answering,” she said, turning towards the two people who stood up.

One, a woman with blue scales blooming by her eyes, began first. “Copper Devil is currently in recovery. She will need to take at least another month and a half off for recuperation. That being said, due to her quirk, her neck wasn’t broken so much as the stabilization that kept her neck in place was. It will be a faster process for the cells that make her neck to restabilize than it would for broken bones. Still, she has expressed interest in being in top shape the next time she resurfaces. For the time being, she will be out of commission.”

The other, a woman with dark hair much like Falcon’s, stood to her feet, keen eyes solemn. “Due to his direct contact with a second Gray Man, his quirk has been compromised.” She continued through the surprised gasps around the table. “His sight is no longer working as it should. His quirk...due to what the Gray Man took from him, he can no longer control his depth of field or focal point. He cannot see straight from the constant shifts in his now uncontrollable quirk.”

Fourth Kind scowled and Ingenium looked upset where they sat between the two representatives. Ingenium closed his eyes, seemingly haunted by something he remembered.

The woman breathed deeply, steeling herself, then she continued. “We’re currently getting him glasses that will help with his constant quirk shift to make his life less painful, but it’s the best we can do. I’m afraid Falcon will not be returning as a hero.”

Anthozoa nodded her head stiffly. “I see...He did his...best work. The...hero world will miss...him.”

Her statement was followed up by condolences from the other heroes, all who wished him well and hoped for his swift recovery, extending similar platitudes and wishes for recovery to Copper Devil’s representative as well. Both women took their comments in stride and returned to their seats.

“Speaking of the damage Gray Men cause,” Gunhead began, one of his arms still in a sling, “do we have a plan yet on how to minimize that? I don’t remember exactly what happened, but All Might was able to overpower it. At least, that’s what I heard. Does he know how he did it?”

Hashiro stood this time, fixing some papers on her desk before speaking. “That is unfortunately a mistaken statement. Some of you weren’t aware, but Minute Maid met with All Might’s secretary before the police and heroes went to apprehend Kronos. At that time, Minute Maid handed the secretary one of their arrows—the very arrow we’re currently using for Gray Man dispatch. All Might tends to be able to handle the unnatural energy the arrow gives off, so he’s the one using it most. All Might didn’t kill Kronos, Minute Maid did.”

Some of the heroes considered the thought with a lowered mood. Climantine, Fraction, and Manual didn’t look at anyone else. Fraction gazed at his fingers as he picked at his nails while Manual took notes. Climantine just stared down at her red pencil skirt, pressing her lips tightly together.

“Ahh...so we’re still at square one,” Snipe said, his back stiff against the back of his chair. “We’ve no weapons that can get rid of the Gray Men except for Minute Maid’s weapons, then.”

“For the time being,” Yayoi cut in. “Hopefully through studying some of the crystals and the goo that the Gray Man left behind, we can find some more definitive answers and begin weapon creation. Still, it’s quite possible that our studies will come up inconclusive.”

Selkie rose one of his large hands, whiskers moving as he began speaking. “Then, if that’s the case,
shouldn’t we try to collaborate with Minute Maid?”

“That’s what I was thinking, too,” Gang Orca agreed. “If we work with them, perhaps we can find a way to create those weapons faster. We could also keep them from doing vigilante work—it’s much too dangerous for a child to be doing. Much too dangerous for anyone, really.”

“They’d be much better off with formal training,” Selkie replied, nodding his head. “We should be able to work something out with them if we give them the chance.”

“I would not...object if that...were to happen,” Anthozoa said, her gravelly voice cutting off at points. “It would be best...if they...had legal supervision.”

The other heroes agreed, Ingenium and Fourth Kind included, speaking with each other, hopeful consideration on their faces, though three particular heroes remained quiet for a little longer. Climantine’s fists balled up in her lap, her lips pressing so tightly together that the flesh went pale. Then, she couldn’t take it anymore.

“It’s too late for that,” she choked out, her fingernails pressing dangerously hard against the palm of her hand.

The conversations pettered into a stall, several of the heroes turning to look at her.

“What...do you mean...by that?”

Climantine sucked in a breath, visibly frustrated and keeping her tears at bay.

“I mean...I was there as lookout. I saw everything that happened on the top of the platform. Including when Gladiator and Mr. Champion died, and when I had thought Copper Devil died, too—and it’s only by sheer blessings from the way that battle happened that she’s even alive. But...there’s some things you just—” She choked on her breath for a moment then, having to gather herself together and breathe. “...There’s some things you just can’t survive from. I watched as Minute Maid arrived on the platform with Manual and Fraction. I watched the heroes fight it only to lose, because that thing was too strong for us. And I watched Minute Maid try to fight it alone while everyone else was down.”

She went silent, closing her eyes. Then spoke again.

“I watched it—...I watched that thing impale them through the chest with a pole.”

The other heroes were shell shocked, some of them with their jaws dropped open. Falcon’s representative beside her gasped, Copper Devil’s representative covering her mouth and shaking her head.

“Wait, that…” Ingenium began, eyes on the wide side. “That can’t be right. Minute Maid’s underage, much more they’re untrained. How could they have been there?”

Fraction leaned back in his chair, still unable to look anyone in the eye. “It’s true, though. ...I didn’t see it when it happened, too focused on helping Snipe, but…” His eye closed. “I got a good look at the aftermath.” Beside him, Manual gazed at the other heroes with a pained smile, too tight at the corners to be genuine.

“I’ve been wondering how Minute Maid has been doing since the inspector’s press conference, but I didn’t know it was that bad.” Selkie looked over to Climantine with worry and sympathy plain in his eyes.

“An...untrained teenager…dead from fighting...” Anthozoa rose a hand to the bottom of her mask in
a gesture that would’ve covered her mouth. “...Sickening.”

“Ah, actually, about that—”

Most of the heroes turned to look at the inspector, though their attentive excitement was much more muted compared to just a few moments prior. The silver-haired woman grinned at them, much to their surprise. Climantine, even through her restrained sorrow, began frowning at her.

“I’m terribly sorry I wasn’t able to formally update you all previously about Minute Maid’s condition other than the press conference, but while Climantine is correct in that they were impaled through the chest, they’re a week into recovery and should be waking up after another week or so.”

Everyone in the room froze, Manual, Fraction, and Climantine in particular shocked beyond belief.

“...Is this a joke?” Climantine seethed, frustration budding tears at the corners of her eyes. “There’s no way any human could’ve survived what I saw that...that thing do to them.”

“In any usual case, you’d be right, but the point of Minute Maid’s magic is to break the rules of the universe. Manual. You remember being there when we initially interrogated Minute Maid, right? What was one particular fact we were shocked about?”

Manual jolted in his seat at the sudden attention he was given, and rubbed at the back of his head. “Ah. Well, I mean...there were quite a few shocking things, I think. But—” He blinked then, remembering something. “But one thing pretty strange was, ah...he didn’t need to breathe?”

“Doesn’t need to breathe, what?” Incredulity twisted in Gang Orca’s face, his eyes narrowing. “Exactly!” Yayoi grinned a little wider at the dawning horror on their faces. “Minute Maid has no need for their lungs because their body is run completely on the unnatural energy that allows them to defeat Gray Men. Now, because they don’t need their lungs, it can be presumed they don’t need a few other of their organs. We don’t know which ones are necessary, but their heart apparently isn’t one!” She turned to Climantine’s stiff, frozen body. “The impaling you witnessed wasn’t a fatal injury. It damaged his body enough to put him into a regenerative hibernation, but he’s still very much alive.”

No one could think of a reply for that for a few minutes.

Hashiro cleared her throat when she saw nothing was moving forward. “Now then, as far as how we’re going to interact with Minute Maid from here on out, we’re in communication with their mother and will monitor the government’s reaction to their previous vigilantism. We’re in the process of compiling a potential agreement that will benefit everyone involved, including the heroes fighting the Gray Men.”

“In the meantime though, I’ve been given the green light to initiate new policies for Gray Man capture and handling so something like the Kronos incident can be prevented,” Yayoi finished. She then handed a stack of papers to Climantine, who had to be tapped on the shoulder to actually start passing the stapled papers out. “I’ll repeat what you read on those in shorthand, but basically, the gist of it is to help promote the safety of the communities and the heroes who will be working to apprehend the Gray Men.”

She rose a finger into the air. “Firstly, all cities are to have predetermined hero groups ready to apprehend Gray Men. The group must be at least as large as three. From there, if groups like the Ingenium group want to stay as large as usual in Gray Man apprehension, that’s fine. Secondly, the heroes chosen for these groups must cooperate with each other’s schedules. If it’s not completely
possible, then you can have a team member or two that switches out with another hero at their appointed sign-off time. Third, while not required, it’s highly recommended that the heroes who apprehend Gray Men have mutant quirks or transformative quirks, or at least a long-range emitter quirk that affects the environment around them rather than relying on their opponent to be human.”

“Why those specifically?” Copper Devil’s representative asked.

“Because the Gray Men aren’t human, quirks that rely on human bodies or reactions won’t be effective against them. Let’s say, for example, someone with a mind control quirk tried to face off against a Gray Man. If they have no other skills, they’re as vulnerable as a civilian. Gray Men, on the other hand, are speculated to be able to use those quirks if they absorb some of the potential from that person. A Gray man with mind control magic is a recipe for disaster.”

“What about mutant and transformative quirks? Because Gray Men absorb energy through skin contact, wouldn’t those quirks be at the greatest danger of having potential stolen?” Gang Orca asked, frowning down at the paper. Beside him, Anthozoa and Selkie nod in agreement, as well as Copper Devil’s representative and Fourth Kind.

“That leads me to the fourth one, actually: costume redesigns may be required for those in the Gray Man apprehension teams, especially ones that show a lot of skin. The less skin shown, the better. Actually, all heroes in Gray Man-Active areas are required to have costume redesigns that cover more of their skin unless they’re already in compliance. You can see the map of active areas on the eighth through twelfth pages.”

Manual flipped over to it to see if he was in a Gray Man-Active area, and found he wasn’t, but he did see another place that very obviously was. “Oh...Midnight might not like this.”

Yayoi snorted then cleared her throat. “Fifth, all captured Gray Men are to be immediately reported to the police and any holding areas are to either be redesigned with the new technology the ISFU will provide, or a new location must be provided for the building of new Gray Man holding facility. This is less a duty for heroes and more just informing you of new changes. Sixth, any and all Gray Men sightings are to be reported to the police whether the capture was successful or not. We can rely on the citizens of Japan for a part of this, but most of all, you all, who will be the frontline defense against these creatures, need to keep a keen eye out so we can warn citizens which places to avoid for the time being.”

“Seventh, we will continue to use the Japanese Code System for warnings against Gray Men sightings. Please make sure you remember the code colors. For Gray Men, we’ll use Code Silver instead of Code Gray...though that’s a little ironic, but that’s because we don’t want to mix up Gray Man incidences with villain attacks, which are usually under Code Gray for police. Be sure that you specify that it’s a Code Silver with a Gray Man, or you can use Code SG. And eight, in the event of one of your teammates being compromised by the Gray Man, immediately call for backup and begin looking for possible paths to converge with other Gray Man teams. We’re still attempting to get a call center established so the ISFU can connect you with the nearest team, but we still need a bit more government clearance for that.”

The heroes spent their time taking in the information and asking a few more specific questions, but overall, they didn’t object to anything. Once they were done deliberating with each other and the inspector, they all collectively looked to her.

“Well, I don’t have any more questions. Anyone else?” Gang Orca asked, watching as the others shook their heads or replied that they didn’t. Climantine stalled a little, but in the end, she also shook her head.
Yayoi clapped her hands together. “Well, that’s all the information I have for you all today. I’ve also sent a digital copy to the other agencies and to your own in case you need it. With that, I conclude this meeting. Thank you all for taking the time to come!”

She began to gather her papers together as the heroes stood up and began to leave, chatting amongst themselves. Gang Orca and Selkie stood and waited to help Anthozoa stand up, handing her a bottle of water once she managed to. Fraction went to leave beside Snipe while Manual met with Ingenium and Fourth Kind to speak, the latter two seeming to have many questions. Yayoi watched them with a pleasant smile before looking to see if Hashiro was ready, but before she could, she felt a hand tap her shoulder.

“Uhm, Inspector Yayoi,” Climantine began. One of her hands held the papers she was given, the other held her opposite elbow, her body curving in on itself. “I...I was wondering. You know which hospital Minute Maid is in, right?”

“Yes, I do.”

Climantine pressed her lips together before she spoke. “Would it be possible to, uhm, see them when they wake up? Or at least leave them a card?”

Yayoi’s mouth opened just the slightest, but then she smiled softly at her. “While I’m not the one you have to ask about visitation, I can certainly ask their mother for you. As far as cards, perhaps we could have a mass package sent, since we can’t disclose his name or where he is to the public. Buuuuut—” She then reached into a pocket in her skirt and took out a wallet, she opened it and revealed it was full of business cards, one of which she handed to Climantine. “If you email me there with who the cards are from and such, I can arrange something.”

Climantine stared at the card before bowing her head, low enough that her curls covered her eyes.

“Thank you.”

Tuna and octopus sizzled in their respective pans, the smell of them wafting over the bar to the patrons sitting there or at the tables close by in the soothing, backroads izakaya. The lighting was a warm yellow color, with no music other than background conversations and cooking food, the seats full of sidekicks and pro-heroes. Kogawa and Suto sat at the bar, dressed in casual clothes rather than their hero outfits. Kogawa wore their braided hair over their shoulder over their loose white shirt, a long, dark blue skirt ending above their ankles and their black, stringy sandal heels. They looked over the menu with bright red-nailed fingers. Suto wore a thin, pale green, long-sleeved shirt and knee-length jean shorts with crew socks and hiking boots, already snacking on edamame and nursing a glass mug full of tap.

“When’d Mizuno say she’d be done with that post battle meeting?” Suto asked, popping another bean into his mouth.

“The lady text’d me a few minutes ago, declaring she wast leaving the meeting. I’d sayeth, peradventure three to seven minutes moo.” They then called the server over. “I’d like a small apple sake to start me off, thank you.”

Suto stared at them over his yellow shades, green eyes lidded as he sipped his booze. “Do you ever just kinda realize how complicated you make your own life? Like, even in hindsight.”

Kogawa gave him the most unimpressed look their narrow eyes could, eyebrows raised and eyes
lidded, supporting their head on their laced fingers, glossy red lipstick moving with their lips. “Being cultur'd, tis not a burden. Yet if ‘t be true ‘t is a burden, tis one I shalt bear.”

“Yeah, figured you’d say that.” He popped another bean into his mouth, leaned back in his bar seat.

A few moments after he did, he glanced over to the door when he heard the bell ring. His eyes widen has he sees Mizuno enter, wearing a tan shirt and long red pencil skirt, greeting the employees back with a lackluster smile.

“Yoooo, Mizuno!” he called out, waving a hand at her. This caught Kogawa’s attention, who turned away from the bar and looked over to their friend. They waved as well, but it was muted by concern.

Mizuno blinked when she noticed them and waved back, walking over to them and sliding wordlessly into the seat between them. Suto poked her shoulder.

“Hey, what’s wrong, Lala?” He leaned forward on his tool and crossed his arms on the counter.

“What’s that packet?”

“Wast ‘t yond lacking valor?”

Mizuno closed her eyes and sighed. “Kogawa, I love you, but I’m not going to try to translate that. Not today…”

When the server stopped by, she asked for tap and shrimp tempura. Her friends blinked at her then leaned back in their stools to speak behind her. He rose a hand to his mouth and created a small air barrier so they could speak discreetly.

“Oh damn, something bad must’ve happened,” Suto whispered through the air tube.

“The lady usually enjoys the way I speaketh. ’r teases me about t at least. Peradventure, if ‘t be true not something lacking valor, something troubling.”

“They didn’t...you don’t think they talked about Minute Maid, do you?”

Kogawa froze before they grimaced. “I would desire not, but I suppose t's inevitable yond they didst.”

Suto grimaced back, then let the barrier fade and quickly leaned back forward to put his elbow on the table to support his face. He smushed his cheek against the palm of his hand and smiled up at Mizuno. Kogawa leaned forward as well and silently asked for another sake cup.

“...Want some edamame? I’m sure I have a few pods left.”

Mizuno shook her head, but he pushed the bowl over to her anyway.

“Here, have some edamame.”

The woman frowned at him. “Suto…”

Then she heard a clinking noise on the other side and turned to look at Kogawa. They held up two sake cups with cool apple sake inside of them both, smiling lightly as they moved one closer to her.

“Doth thee smelleth ‘t? ’t's fragrant, isn't t?”

For a moment, she didn’t respond. Then she sighed and leaned forward, smelling the sake from a slight distance. She leaned back and narrowed her eyes at the cup, then took it from Kogawa’s
“Another cup, pleaaaaaase~” Suto sang, handing the server his empty mug, clapping his hands as it was filled to the brim with tap for the fourth time that evening.

The appetizers they’d ordered earlier were long gone, replaced with a growing check of assorted goods. At that moment, Kogawa sipped another cup of sake, a little red in the cheeks, with agedashi tofu on the plate in front of them. Suto was already halfway in on his grilled fish, a *hokke* mackerel, and Mizuno cheered as another server brought her some gyoza to go with the share of sake and tap her friends were giving her.

Suto took three big gulps from his fresh mug and breathed out in a loud sigh. “Ooooooh, that hits the spot.”

“Hey, end your drinking right there, mister,” Kogawa said, language clear of any old speech for the sake of being understood by their drunken friends. “Your fourth mug is enough.”

“Fine, Bibi. What, you gonna tell me to do my chores next?”

“I might.”

“Noooooo…”

“Aww, cut it out, you two!” Mizuno laughed, you’re gonna activate Suto’s daddy kink.

The man sputtered, a flush unrelated to his drunkenness spreading on his cheeks. “I...I told you that in good faith, how dare you.”

“Aaaaand you don’t deny it.”

Kogawa smiled at him, their expression pinched. “Never call me Bibi again. Everyone is banned from calling me Bibi.”

Their two friends then leaned over towards them, eyes watery with dramatic tears. “Nooooo, Bibi!”

“You were the chosen one! You were to bring balance to our trio, not leave it in darkness! You were my bibi, Kogawa! I loved you!” Suto lamented.
The three of them couldn’t keep it up after that and, after a brief moment of attempted silence, burst out laughing. It took them a moment to calm down, leaving them breathless and a little tired, trying to remember what they were doing before. Mizuno looked down at her plate and popped a gyoza into her mouth, humming happily at the taste of it. Kogawa grinned and turned back to sip at their sake, but Suto wasn’t done with her yet.

“You feelin’ happy again now?” he asked, poking Mizuno’s shoulder, “C-Cause...cause you were very, veeery upset when you got here and I was worried.”

At the reminder of the meeting, Mizuno’s smile faltered, but it didn’t fall. Instead, she started grinning.

“Yeah! I’m really happy now.”

Suto pouted, puffing his cheeks out. “Aww, I gin-...jink-...jinxed it.”

“No! No, you didn’t, seriously! I’m a lot happier now with you guys than I was before.”

“Well, I’m happy you’re feeling better.” Kogawa wiggled their cup of sake before taking another sip from it. “You did look startlingly numb. I’d love to ask what had you looking that way, but…”

Mizuno turned to them and nodded then looked back down at her gyoza. When she didn’t reply, Kogawa glanced at her, pausing their drinking. Suto reached forward and grabbed his mug, taking a few gulps of it.

“Minute Maid is alive.”

Suto choked, quickly puffing out his cheeks to hold the alcohol in his mouth, setting the mug down carefully. As he slowly drank down what he held, Kogawa’s mouth dropped as they finally comprehended what she’d said. Neither of them said anything until Suto finally finished his last swallow and gasped.

“What.”

“Minute Maid is alive.” Mizuno looked up from her plate, her eyes watery. “They told us that in the meeting. Inspector Yayoi confirmed it.”

Kogawa set their cup down. “I...I’m sorry. I could have sworn you said Minute Maid was stabbed through the chest with an industrial-grade pole and...tortured until All Might arrived.”

“And they were! They were! I saw it! But they...they lived. Somehow they lived. They’re alive.”

Suto and Kogawa looked at each other, then back at their friend, then at each other once more.

“...Holy shit,” Suto murmured. Then tears started budding in his eyes. “Holy shit, the little nugget made it. How the fuck.”

“Magic,” Mizuno said, staring at her plate, still mystified. “Something about not actually needing lungs or a heart and they’ve just been sleeping for the past week.”

“How the hell’d you not need a heart? How...how does that even work?”

“I...I dunno...I don’t know how magic works at all. I don’t’, but...but they’re alive.” She sighed like she’d been holding a breath in and was finally letting it out. “They’re alive.”

Kogawa, who’d been silent the whole time, swallowed heavily and placed a shaking hand on
Mizuno’s shoulder. A moment later, the shoulder their hand was on started shivering, Mizuno’s body moving with the force of her barely-restrained sobbing.

When she looked up from the plate, gazing at Kogawa, her eyes were filled with tears, but she was smiling as much as she could manage.

“They didn’t die. I...I didn’t kill them by just watching them up there, because they didn’t die. By some miracle, they didn’t die. Manō answered my prayers…”

Suto wiped his face on his sleeve, but the tears had already started running, and he couldn’t stop them. Giving up, he reached over his friend’s shoulders and pulled her close, Kogawa reaching around Mizuno’s waist to comfort her with a hug. Suto cried while Mizuno sobbed in relief. Kogawa’s eyes got a little wet as well, though no tears fell.

The three of them stayed like that for a little while, long enough for some of the others in the izakaya to get concerned, but they backed off when they saw the amount of drinks around them, and the stern look on the server’s face. Eventually, the three calmed, Mizuno managing to stop sobbing.

“Oh God—” Suto choked on his own breath. “I thought—fuck, I thought...I though’ when that kid died, that was it. They’d saved us and I wouldn’ even getta chance to pay’em back. But, shit, they’re alive. They’re fuckin’ alive.”

Kogawa quickly fanned a hand near their eyes, breathing in softly, but they didn’t say anything.

Sagging in the comfort of her friends’ hold, Mizuno closed her eyes and kept holding onto them. “I-I told the inspector I was gonna write him a card,” she muttered.

Suto sniffled loudly before backing up. “That would be...super dope. I bet they’d love them.” Then he blinked. “Holy shit, I can finally sign something for them.”

“Wouldn’t it be nice if they got a card from all of us?” Kogawa suggested, still fanning at their slightly runny mascara. “The little sweetheart will love it.”

The Air-Speed hero grinned, despite how ruddy his cheeks were. “You know, just a lil pick-me-up after he wakes up. Something to help speed up his recovery.”

Mizuno piped up between the two of them. “Maybe we could get a bunch of cards from different heroes for them, then have it delivered in a big package for them.”

“Absolutely!” Suto was getting pumped up, wild, wheat-colored hair bouncing as he moved. “If we send out a few messages to different agencies, we can get some cards. Especially from the heroes who were there on Tartarus.”

Kogawa cleared their throat, finally done fanning. “T would only beest decent of those folk if ’t be true they would maketh the effort to cheer the maid up at which hour they awaken.”

Both Mizuno and Suto gaped at them. Then Mizuno snorted.

“Aaaaand the usual Kogawa returns. I’m too drunk for this!” Suto bemoaned, right before getting flicked on the nose by the mysterious hero’s hair, too light to actually be hurt by it.

Mizuno, watching the exchange, coughed into her hand in a poor attempt to cover a laugh, the corners of her mouth tilting up even through the salty tracks at the corners.
Awakening

Chapter Summary

Warning: Bad Coping Mechanisms (Not Cutting, but still Self-Harm)

Chapter Notes

It's a lil late, but it happens ƪ(´◉◉‵;)))ʃ

I don't have much to say, but here's some cool fanart!!

Here's some fanart that have lifted my spirits over the past few days: alpaslath on DeviantArt, beigebagles, sethyathom, one submitted by starcade64, nirelaz, dokidekudoki, akcugrai, rhea-lockwing, an inspired piece by kurokotheninja, one with Gore and Blood by minty-heartz, and last but not least at all, a half-transformed Izuku by medaloop.

There were so many this time around--mostly cause I didn't put them up with the Intermission chapters QwQ--but anyway, it was super nice to look at them aaaaaaaaa

Thank you guys so much for your continued support! I look forward to hearing from you guys! (ノ≧∀≦)ノ

EDIT: July 2, 2018: Changed all "hare" references to "wild rabbit". What I was trying to do was a bit complicated because of what hares represent rather than rabbits, but they are different species. In the end, I've decided on "hare-looking rabbit".

July 5, 2018: Switched this chapter and the former chapter 29 with each other for easy reading. Chapter 28 is now the newer chapter published on July 5th, and this one is the one published June 8th.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Izuku’s senses faded into existence piece by piece in a slow gradient.

First, sound. Shifting fabric. A low humming noise. Wavy ambience with a musical soothe much like the sea, sweet tones twinkling like stars.

Then touch. He was lying stomach-first on cotton-stuffed clouds. A soft, cool breeze washed over his shoulders. His body was wrapped in a silken cocoon.

Smell. He rubbed his face into the sheets below as he smelled its freshness, like a mist rising ever upwards.

Taste. He felt no urge to lick anything outside of his body, but he could taste the nothingness inside of his mouth, as he usually did after hours of sleep, but it was muted. He rubbed his tongue over his teeth and tasted a slight copper tinge.
Finally, sight.

His eyelids blinked a few times before they fluttered open, his eyelashes shifting softly against the sheets.

The first thing he saw was pastel purple. They weren’t quite purple, actually, when he dimly thought about it. He shifted his arm and watched the sheets’ color gradient from purple to pink to yellow in a pastel wave. He stared for a little bit, shifting his arm just to watch the colors change.

Eventually, his sight flicked upwards from the sheets.

He saw the four posters of the bed, holding up a thin, filmy pastel periwinkle sheet through which he saw a window. The pane of the single, rounded lancet window was clear but designed with frost. The top half was arched, filled with reticulated yellow frost stars outlined by intricate stone designs. The bottom half of the window had minimal obstructions, two stone mullions supporting the top half. There was no glass there. Outside, deep blues and purples intermixed into a night sky, sparkling with white, four-pointed stars.

Ah, no, not time for that yet.

Something within Izuku lulled him back to sleep, his eyes fluttering closed once again.

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When he woke up again, he was still on his stomach, but the only similarity between where he had been and where he was now was a low hum. Even that had changed, low and constant.

All around him was pitch black. There was nothing to see or smell or taste or feel. He was floating, stomach down, body arched like he was hanging from the back of his pants, had he been wearing any. When his gaze shifted to take in his own body, he realized his feet and hands glowed bright yellow. It slowly turned white the closer it got to his chest. He couldn’t see his own face, but for some reason, he felt like he probably didn’t look quite like himself.

He blinked. Then blinked again.

He straightened his body out until he was right-side up, staring into the nothingness. He floated aimlessly, going nowhere. He wasn’t even sure he was anywhere at all. All around him was darkness, and he was the only light.

But he was not alone.

He could feel a familiar presence. It felt different, but there was that same underlying feeling that he was being watched. It was just amplified, and he wasn’t sure why.

“...Hello?” he called.

Ah, you’re awake again. Good, good.

Izuku startled. He’d always heard the voice in his head before. But now, wherever he was, the voice was all around him, an encompassing existence that even if he strained to, he still couldn’t see.

“Handyman?”

Yep! We make our fantastic return this chapter, Izuku.

Izuku felt his feet touch something in the pitch darkness, a floor of some sort. First his toes touched it,
then his heel, and the rest of his foot eased down onto it. It wasn’t cool or warm, solid yet nonexistent. When he blinked, he realized that he could kind of see the floor he was standing on. The glow from his body shined dimly off of the ground, showing a flat, black surface where there had before been nothing but aimless darkness.

He started breathing a little heavier, confused, and looked up, turning his head this way and that to find the source of the voice.

“What happened? What is this place? Wh-why am I here?”

Oh. You don’t remember? Hmm...well, I suppose that’s normal. You’ve been asleep for two weeks and all. Of course you’d be disoriented.

“T-Two weeks?!” Izuku sputtered. “What?!”

Yeah, buddy. You had it pretty rough. It would’ve been longer, but the Gin-chan and Naomasa-kun looked through your notebook and figured out they’re supposed to give you the crystals. They didn’t give you all of them, but they gave enough to boost your recovery a little.

Izuku pulled at his hair, eyes wide and frantic. “They have my notebook?!”

Well, yeah, they took all your stuff out of your backpack when you’d gotten taken in. After...ah, well, I can tell you what happened, but you might not like it very much. Either way, you’re going to figure it out.

Izuku paused from his attack on his own body, releasing his curls, before looking around at the nothingness. Something happened, Handyman said. That something was the reason why he was...wherever he was, now. He wasn’t sure exactly what that something could be but...there was this sickly, goopy suspicion bubbling up his ankles.

What do you remember last, actually?

“Well, ah…” He put a hand against his forehead. “I remember...being taken in. And I remember talking with Detective Tsukauchi. I...I went with Fraction and Manual because of a Gray Man attack and...and…”

Something in his chest sparked, a sharp, stabbing pain right in the middle of his chest. He gasped and covered his sternum with his hands. Sweat budded on his brow. He gasped for nonexistent air. His eyes went warm with forming tears.

“And...Gladiator...Mr. Champion and Copper Devil. They were dead. It had killed them and started attacking us. Manual told me to hide, but he was losing. There were several heroes against it, but it was still winning. It—it was going to kill him.”

The sharp pain struck through him again, starting from his back and speeding forward to his chest where it burst through his flesh like sharp stars. His breath choked, some hazy, static memory fizzing into remembrance at the back of his eyes.

“And I...I couldn’t just stand by and let it happen. I couldn’t. I’m the only one who can fight and kill Gray Men, so I jumped from behind the boxes and started fighting it. I fought it and—”

The memory flickered into clarity.

The arrow that pierced through the Gray Man’s wrist.
Using the skills Shimizu-senpai taught him.

Fighting using his umbrella.

Being dragged by his hair.

Having his face slammed into the ground.

Bleeding, struggling to get up.

The pole.

Izuku moved his hands from his chest and stared at them, eyes wide and body frozen as he saw them drip with his phantom blood. “I...I lost.”

Handyman didn’t say anything. Izuku plopped down from on his knees and sat flat against the floor, his hands dropping to his lap.

“I lost. I died.”

You did neither of those things, Izuku.

“But didn’t I?” His voice had lowered to a whisper, breathy and increasing as he spiraled down into a full panic attack. “I did, didn’t I? I did, I lost and I died, and, and, and Mr. Champion and Copper Devil and Gladiator and I, I died, I died again, it went black and I couldn’t see, I couldn’t hear and I couldn’t see and everything just faded away I faded away I faded away—”

He cut himself off, his mouth snapping shut with the click of his teeth.

He wrapped his arms around himself and dug his nails into the skin of his biceps, bowing over, curling up on the floor. Staring at his knees and the infinitely black floor below him, he tried to breathe. But he could barely hear over the whooshing flush of blood in his ears. His eyes hurt from how wide he held them, as sweat began pouring down his forehead and cheeks, dripping into his eyes and onto the ground below.

He couldn’t cry. Couldn’t scream. Couldn’t speak. Could barely breathe. His voice was strangled between an encroaching wall of hellfire and an infinite, infinite cold.

A shriveled wheeze puttered out between his lips.

Izuku.

He heard the voice like it was underwater. Distant. Far away. Somewhere smothered by the low hum ringing in his ears and all around him.

Izu...Izuku. Izuku, stop.

He wanted to stop. He couldn’t stop. He couldn’t stop because he was drowning and he was dying, he was going to die if he stopped. His fingers dug further into his muscle, and stinging pain ran up his arms. It wasn’t grounding enough. He wasn’t grounded enough. He needed more pain.

No, gosh, Izuku. Stop that, please. Izuku.

He didn’t want to hurt himself more. He didn’t want to dig into his arms. But if he didn’t, he’d die.
His chest would implode and he’d suffocate.

Izuku. Izuku, stop.

Something scratched against his fingers, and they loosened, startled.

It didn’t hurt him any, but the feeling of something scratching against him that wasn’t himself threw him for a loop. It also grounded him enough to release the tension in his hands just a little, just enough to no longer mark crescents into his skin.

The thing that scratched against him bumped softly against his head. He shuddered, still frozen. It was insistent though, and bumped again and again, softly, until he mustered just enough strength to raise up. His vision was hazy, but when it locked onto the being in front of him, it cleared just enough to tunnel-focus on them.

In front of him was a glowing wild rabbit, its fur a magnificent white, like white jade. Its body and legs were long, much like a hares, but its face looked distinctly rabbit-like. Something about it was softer than a usual wild rabbit, though—maybe it was its softer face or the loose, yellow ribbon tied around its neck. Its larger than usual ears faced him and its nose twitched at an even, slow pace, long whiskers shifting with the movement of its breathing.

The wild rabbit approached him without fear, breathing slowly and nudging his face. Its bright pink eyes bored into his, six slitted pupils in each eye focused entirely on him.

Hold onto me.

He couldn’t bring himself to move much, but the wild rabbit’s eyes soothed him. He managed just enough to raise his body and unclench his hands further, but he couldn’t reach for the rabbit. He couldn’t loosen up enough to take a hold of them and it made him want to cry. But he couldn’t cry, because he couldn’t breathe, and he really, really needed to breathe—

So the rabbit took the invitation without further preamble and slipped into his arms, slotting its head beside his.

Oh.

Oh…

Handyman was soft.

They were soft yet cool, and they breathed slowly against him. Even though his heart beat quickly in his chest, he could still feel himself beginning to match the rabbit’s breathing patterns. In...hold...out...in...hold...out... It was an easy pattern to follow. He could do it.

He could do it. He had lungs and he could do it. His heart was beating in his chest. He had a heart to beat in his chest. He was…

He wasn’t okay, but he was alive. He was alive.

Izuku couldn’t remember when his arms moved to encapsulate the wild rabbit into his arms, but every part of his skin that touched the rabbit soothed his body, like rubbing balm onto a burn. The fiery heat and the frigid cold faded into a soft coolness on his skin. In his chest. In his soul.

The coolness loosened the knot in his chest enough that he could finally breathe again, and he used his first official breath to sob. It was a wet, ugly thing that had been trapped in his chest, but it
bubbled out. Then another followed, and another.

He began to cry.

Tears streamed down his cheeks as he sobbed into the jade rabbit’s fur, holding them tightly as he tried and failed to keep his breath steady along with his friend’s patterns. They didn’t seem mad at him. They were quiet, breathing, calming, their head soft and still against his shoulder. His arms wrapped tighter around them and they didn’t grunt or squeal in pain.

He kept on crying. He just couldn’t stop.

...I’m sorry, Izuku.

He almost couldn’t hear Handyman speak through the clogging of his ears, but its voice, cool and fluid, echoed against his ears in a way it had never before. Every time Handyman had spoken before, it was in his head, yet not quite around him. Watching, but from afar.

But now it was close. The Handyman was close, speaking right into his ear. They were with him.

I’m so sorry, that you’ve experienced all of this. I never intended for you to suffer so greatly.

Izuku wanted to apologize back to Handyman, but he couldn’t even say their name.

All of this has been very, very hard on you, and you, time and time again, exceeded my expectations. I knew from the beginning that you were magnificent, Izuku, but watching you grow over all this time has only proved to me that I made the right choice in helping you. But...this is an unusual situation. Where you should’ve gained the support of other magicians, you’re still all alone. Even now, aside from here, I cannot hold you. I can’t comfort you like I’ve always wanted to.

Handyman went silent for a moment then, pressing their face into the side of his, not caring if his curly hair pressed into their ears.

You shouldn’t have to do this alone. I don’t want you to, and maybe you won’t have to for much longer. But, for what it’s worth, you’ve done well. You’ve done amazingly well, and I will never, ever regret making you my magician.

Izuku’s voice crackled on a sob once more, and finally he sat up enough to wrap his arms fully around the rabbit’s back, his body shaking. All the while, Handyman breathed against him, and let him hold them. They didn’t protest when one of his hand started to bet their back, fingers running through soft, silken fur as his hitching breath finally began to slow.

It took a long time.

Minutes of comfortable silence passed between them. Izuku sat in the void, and he held it in his arms.

“What...what do I do now?” Izuku mustered, his voice low and whispering. “I don’t know what to do.”

...Well, you can go back whenever you’re ready. You’ve healed up just about enough now, so you can wake up if you want.

“...Wake up?” Izuku backed his face up from the rabbit, allowing him to look at one of their glowing, pink eyes. “I’m asleep?” Then he paused. “Right...because of the whole...’stabbed through the chest’ thing. You...had to put me to sleep to heal me.”
Hearing Handyman start to slip back into their usual speech patterns rather than the solemn tone it had adopted to calm him down reassured him more than he thought it would. He sighed, leaning back, though he still had a hand on the rabbit’s fur.

“Mmh...two weeks...where is this, anyway? This darkness.”

Oh, Limbo, I guess.

His hand froze, some dull memory pulsing in his chest. “...Limbo.”

Yeah.

“Like…”

‘You died but you’re getting cleaned up before the Big Gates’ Limbo, yeah. That’s not exactly where this is or what it’s purpose is, but it’s basically that.

“So...” He wrapped his hands carefully around Handyman’s chest, holding the large rabbit up in front of his face. “I am dead.”

Nope.

“But...but you just said—”

Yeah, I just said that, but again, that’s not exactly where this is. Besides, letting you die would be against our contract.

That brought him to a stark pause. He stared forward at Handyman, whose nose had stopped twitching. He realized he couldn’t feel the rabbit breathing under his hands either. They weren’t blinking either, all twelve pupils staring straight at him.

“...Contract?”

...Aaaaah, I get it. You don’t remember. As in, at all. You don’t remember this place at all

Izuku didn’t remember. The thought of not remembering something as important as the place he was in made him shudder. Handyman’s constant, unblinking gaze stayed on his...non-body.

“No...no, I don’t.”

Well, this place, this limbo, is your Limbo. Think of it like a meeting room. A place where we can associate one-on-one without outside interference. This place is where we made our deal.

As they talked, the familiarity of the place began to fade back into his flesh. The infinite, moving darkness. The glow of his skin. The ever-present, watchful eyes of the echoing, inquiring void, whose voice he once didn’t have a name for.

The eyes…

Where were the eyes?

My eyes? Hah, Izuku, they’re right here. They’re always here.

Suddenly, the darkness wasn’t just that.
Along the walls of the space, a multitude of eyes opened up, all glowing pink, all with slitted pupils that trailed his every move. They were close and far, large and small, round and narrow, all with the same purpose of detailing him. Watching him. Recording him and his deeds with utmost care.

Something in him trembled at the sheer power of the eyes staring down at him, and he dimly realized that the low hum had changed. There was a shift in power, in energy. The hum filtered around them with cosmic intel, and if he listened closely, off in the distance, he could hear whispering.

Many voices, many, all speaking at the same time. Some of them saying the same thing, some of them saying something different. Detailing people, lives, beginnings, endings, everything in between. All of it came together in an amalgam of sound, a harmony shifting like tentacles in the unknown depths of the ocean.

The Voice of the World.

The Abyss themselves.

Izuku, don’t get lost in it all, now.

He shuddered, breathing heavily, yet not panicking. Something about the eyes and their ever-watchful gaze made him calm, even as he realized he spoke with a creature of infinite possibilities and power.

Since you don’t remember, let me tell you. As you faded out of humanity, you cried out to us, begging for someone to save you with a single-minded request: life. You wanted, more than anything else, to live. Many of us had the capability to choose you, but I was certainly the best suited for you. Life elongation is one of my specialties, after all. Anyway, I found you special, because you inherently are. That’s just how you are.

So I brought you here and made a deal with you. I decided that I would help you live. In return, you would help get rid of the pollution plaguing your world, that you would help clean up what even The Abyss can’t fix despite changing the very makeup of your universe. A hefty job, but one that, with help, I knew you could handle. Izuku, if I let you die, I’d be violating our contract. So let me say this to you now.

Before him, still held up in his hands like a mere rabbit, Handyman smiled, making its eyes squint, its pupils dilating a little in mirth. The rabbit’s mouth widened and opened, showing off a full row of perfectly slotted fangs. All around them, the eyes squinted as well, clearly proud.

For as long as we are together, for as long as I am with you, Izuku, you will never taste the rancid tang of a premature death again.

Izuku’s mouth dropped open, but he could utter nothing.

Now then, it’s about time for you to wake up.

His body shivered again, and the yellow of his body began to glow white, his chest beginning to beam with energy. It warmed him from his core, trickling through his veins like water. He trembled and gasped, but he was not in pain. There was no pain. Only the hum of magic. A magic so strong and vibrant his vision began to white out until the darkness was no more, and he was no longer able to see the grinning jade rabbit.

Remember Izuku, I am always with you.
Izuku came to with the view of a white, paneled ceiling and the sound of oxygen entering and exiting his lungs. One moment he was asleep, and the next, he was just...suddenly there. Suddenly conscious.

He felt sluggish, like his body was made out of molasses, though when he thought about it, he could be feeling much worse. Besides, he’d been asleep for two weeks, he was bound to be slow to move.

At some point during his recovery the nurses or doctor or someone had made the executive decision to put an oxygen mask over his nose and mouth. The oxygen tank hissed with every inhale, but he didn’t hear the tell-tale heart monitor. Once he thought that, it suddenly started beeping at a slow yet measured circadian rhythm at the same time his heart began to pump in his chest.

Oh. He was sleeping too deeply for his heart to remember to beat, apparently. That was...weird.

He shifted his head a little to look around the room more, trying to understand where he was and what was happening. Well, Handyman had explained it earlier, but still. Seeing was different than hearing.

His eyes slid past the cream colored walls to the multipurpose bedside table on his right. There were several colorful cards on top, all arranged neatly in a stack. He couldn’t quite see what they all said, nor could he really think of where all of those cards would’ve come from. A hero, maybe? More than one? But why would they send him cards? He narrowed his eyes a little in confusion, humming under his breath.

To his left, something shifted, and he realized that there had been a weight not his own leaning on the bed. Before he even looked, the person’s voice answered his question for him.

“...I...Izuku?”

Mom. His mom was there. Something about thinking that just made a knot start to form in his throat. Slowly, he turned his head to the left, just to see her.

She was sitting in a bedside chair, an off-white one with brown armrests. It didn’t look very comfortable, but he could see the way the imprint on the back of the chair didn’t quite fade away even as she leaned forward to look at him. Her eyes were rimmed red, dark circles having made themselves at home. Her hair was just on that side of ragged that a few strands seemed to refuse to be tamed. Izuku could almost swear she’d lost weight. Her face looked a little slimmer.

Her eyes widened at something she saw in his, but perhaps it was just because she was seeing him move after so long. It didn’t matter. She’d gone still after his moved and now they just sat there, listening to him breathe and to the heart monitor’s slow, slow beeping.

“...Hi, mom...” he mustered. His voice came out dry and low from disuse.

She looked like she couldn’t believe it, like she could have sworn she was daydreaming. She reached a trembling hand out to him, almost afraid to touch him. When her hand hovered right near his head, he turned it a little more, and he could finally feel the pressure of her palm against his hair. The knot in his throat tightened as his mother let out a sob, the hand going into motion, petting him like she’d done the time he truly died.

“Izuku...Izuku...my baby boy...my baby...” She sobbed, reaching to gather him as much into her arms as she could.
Izuku started to cry, too, unable to stand the sight of his mother doing so. He couldn’t move much, but he managed to reach his right arm up from sitting over the comforter to rest on the hand holding him tightly, as if he would float away in an instant.

“Mom…” His breath hitched and wobbled. “Moom…I’m okay now…I-I’m okay…”

She hushed him, holding onto his shoulder as she started rocking, crying against his hair. He fell silent, save for his own muted, wet cries.

A few minutes later, two doctors with white jackets and rat-looking symbols on their shoulders came in and inspected him. They worked silently, though they did ask him a few questions. It seemed to be like a normal procedure, but then one of the women asked him when his heart started beating again, and they didn’t panic over his low heart rate.

“Is this heart rate normal for you, or is this because you seem to be at a relaxed state?” one of the doctors asked, looking at him with a clipboard in her hands.

“Uhm…” He coughed a little then, his voice still creaky from disuse. “It’s...normal, I guess? I don’t really pay as much attention to it.”

She hummed and turned to her clipboard, writing down the information. She didn’t seem too phased by the information—given, there were some people who had slower heart rates than others, but she didn’t even seem surprised that he was sitting up (assisted by the bed at his mother’s insistence) and talking after spending two weeks without a heartbeat, and who knew how long without a heart entirely.

They asked a few more questions, almost always addressing him, save for times his mother could give the better answer. Their visit was pretty clean-cut and short. He would’ve loved to know why they were there instead of the usual doctors, but he didn’t say anything. Instead, he went silent and let his mother run her fingers through his curls and—was it just him or had they grown a little?

But, well, stranger than the extra length to his hair was his mom. Of course, he had no problem with the constant attention she was showing him—her hand had barely left his head since he woke up, and that was getting to be hours ago. But there was this defensiveness about her, too, especially when those strange white jacket doctors spoke with him. Her eyes had grown hard after he was able to get off of oxygen, the doctors confident in his ability to breathe himself. She glared at them (not in the sense that Bakugou glared, but in this muted coldness that seeped into the color of her eyes) and seemed in a hurry for them to leave him alone so he could rest, despite the fact he’d already had two weeks of it.

It only got worse three hours after he woke up, when the next time the door to his room opened, a familiar face and one he’d only seen in passing entered after a polite knock.

“Midoriya-kun, I see you’re recovering nicely,” Detective Tsukauchi greeted, dark eyes relieved. Beside him, a silver-gray haired woman in a white coat entered, her eyes closed and her smile colored like cherry blossoms. “How are you doing?”

He blinked, his eyes catching on the woman. For some reason, he felt weird looking at the her. There was something...odd about her presence, like something withheld into a glass bottle was tempted to burst open. It felt a little unnatural, though not nearly as strange as Handyman’s presence. But perhaps he’d just gotten used to Handyman’s brand of supernaturality and she really did have a truly odd presence. Maybe that was why his mother’s eyes were so cold.
He bowed his head and looked off to the side, snapping himself out of his own thoughts. “I’m...I’m alright, I guess.”

“That’s good, I’m glad you’re feeling better. After what happened...we weren’t sure you would survive. Yet somehow…” Izuku watched the detective shake his head, switching his melancholic look out for a more reassuring one. “Are you feeling well enough to talk for now?”

Before Izuku could as what he wanted to talk about, he felt his mom pull him closer, her hand on his shoulder.

“Can’t it wait a while longer? He’s just woken up.”

The detective blinked in a mild surprise, like her question was something he was expecting. “I understand, Midoriya-san. I was just hoping we could go over a few basic things with your son. Nothing too strenuous, just something to update him on what happened.”

“Well, you can ‘update’ him later. He needs to heal.”

Izuku opened his mouth, ready to say he was fine, but he caught a glimpse of her hard-eyed stare at the detective and pressed his lips together instead. He...he didn’t understand. Why did she seem to hate Detective Tsukauchi so much?

The detective, under the full effect of her glare, conceded. “Then, we can wait a while longer, I suppose. You can call a nurse to let me know we can—”

“Oh, what pretty eyes you have, Midoriya-kun,” the silver-haired woman spoke finally, her voice light and airy as she moved further into the room, contrary to the detective’s retreating form. “The yellow’s a surprising change, but perhaps that’s just the magic in your system.”

“I-My eyes?” Izuku felt his mother shift, but his attention was elsewhere, caught on the woman’s words. His hand reached up to touch his cheek. “What happened to my eyes?”

“Oh, you haven’t seen a mirror yet? Here.” The woman dug into her coat pocket and pulled out a small, circular cosmetics mirror. She flipped it open before his mom could say anything about it, handing it to him with care. “I’m trying to think of what relationship green and yellow have. Is it complementary? No, that’s green and red… It’s not analogous either…”

Izuku was barely paying attention to her. He was more shocked by the way his eyes looked. For the past 15 years, his eyes had been green, just like his mother’s in a sense. Now, as he angled the mirror and his face this way and that, he saw that the top half of his iris was the same dark green he was already familiar with, but the bottom half was a bright, twinkling yellow that seemed to glow dimly from within his eye. The green faded into yellow right about the middle of his irides.

“That’s...that’s weird. Ahh...wait, magic?” He looked up at her, a little dazed. “You know about magic?”

“Oh, of course! I study it for a living after all!” She then stuck a hand out for him to shake. “My name is Inspector Yayoi Gin with the Japanese sector of the International Special Forces Unit. It’s my job to study all unnatural phenomena and determine whether or not they are magical in nature.”

Izuku took the hand and shook it lightly without thinking, oblivious to his mother’s incredulous sputtering beside him. “Ah...nice to meet you.”

“Likewise! Well, I would love to inform you about the condition of the heroes you fought alongside, but if you would like to rest, then—”
He pushed himself up suddenly, a bit out of his mother’s hold. “N-No! Please tell me! Is Manual okay? Fraction?” When she didn’t reply immediately, her closed eyes seemingly looking at his mom, he turned to her, too, hoping he was channeling every bit of desperation he felt through his eyes—his new, strange eyes, probably caused because he had to get repaired so much. “Mom, please…”

She returned to her usual self, sputtering a bit as a little mini panic rushed through her. “B...But don’t you want some more rest, Izuku?”

“Please, Mom, I want to know. I really want to know.”

“Izuku…”

She gazed at him, then looked up at the inspector with some tinge of venom, then back at him. Then she sighed, closing her eyes and putting a hand on her head.

“...Alright.”

Inspector Yayoi placed her hands together and grinned. “Fantastic! Detective, mind pulling the seats over?”

Detective Tsukauchi’s shoulders dropped, the corners of his mouth curved in wry acceptance. “Sure, Inspector.”

Izuku waited as patiently as a hyperactive, worried teenager could, doing his best to not just vibrate out the bed altogether. The two barely had time to sit at the other side of the bed before he was leaning forward.

“Are Snipe and Gunhead alright, too? Weren’t they hurt pretty bad? And Climantine?”

“Haha, slow down, Midoriya-kun! I’ll tell you.” Yayoi leaned back in her chair, crossing her legs with ease. “Gunhead and Snipe sustained some gashes and Snipe had to get a few metal pellets removed from his back, but they received care right on time. They actually recovered faster than you did—they’re out and back to duty, though Snipe’s taking it a little slower. Manual had a few broken ribs, but they, too, have been healed up. He’s fine. Fraction just had a few cuts, so the worst he’s suffering from is a bruised ego. Copper Devil, despite all odds, survived as well. It turned out superheating her body gave her quirk a few extra abilities.”

“And All Might?”

The inspector’s eyebrows raised. “Hmm?”

“Is...is he alright? The Gray Man didn’t steal anything from him, did it? A-And my magic. I...I pushed more magic into the arrow before he killed it, and it started sparking against him. Uhm, I know it’s not a c-comfortable feeling for others so…” He paused, swallowing down his fear. “I didn’t hurt him, did I?”

Inspector Yayoi’s mouth dropped open a little, and Izuku could see the genuine way Detective Tsukauchi smiled. He ended up answering instead.

“He’s absolutely fine, Midoriya-kun. You didn’t hurt him at all. The only effect you’ve had on him is that he’s asked about you more than a few times.”

Izuku breathed a sigh of relief, leaning back in his bed. Then his face quickly flushed red.

“H-H-He’s asked about me? Really? I-I mean, I guess that’s expected, s-since he’s a hero and—”
“Well, he also just wanted to know because you left an impression on him,” Tsukauchi reassured.

“Ahh…” he put his hands to his face, trying to contain his excitement. “I-I did? I can’t believe he— Ah.”

“Hmm?”

Izuku went pale. “I had a pole through my chest. Of course I left an impression.”

He could hear the detective say something else to him and the inspector try discretely to cover a snort, his mother’s nervous energy increasing tenfold beside him, but he paused on that thought for a moment. All Might had been there, had taken him down from hanging on the pole and ended the battle. His most favorite hero must’ve thought he was dead.

“He...he knows I’m okay, right? That I’m alive?”

He felt the ball of tension release when the detective nodded at him.

“Yes, he knows. It was only fair to tell the heroes you worked with that you had survived your injuries, after all,” the man said, eyes warm with happiness.

“Besides, coworker openness is a good thing to establish early on,” the inspector cut in, grinning.

Both Izuku and his mother sputtered. “C-Coworkers? What?”

“Well,” Inspector Yayoi began, standing from her seat. “It’s as he said. You see, the magical event has only just begun. Without an ending in sight and without an adequate weapon against them, your magic is the only thing able to dispose of these creatures. Besides, we can’t allow you to go off and continue vigilantism, especially not alone. It’d be irresponsible on everyone’s part. Therefore, I’ve been in a few talks with the Japanese government, and we’re currently determining a position you can take that will allow you to legally dispatch of the magical residue.” The woman grinned at him, the lights from the ceiling making her hair glitter. “From the current meetings I’ve participated in and the tone of them, in the next few days, we may very well be able to turn ‘magician’ into a government work title.”

Izuku was shocked. Coworkers...with heroes? Working alongside them so early? He realized that this must’ve been what Handyman had meant by not working alone, but still, it was almost too fantastic for him to think of it. With his mouth dropped open a little, he imagined himself fighting gangs alongside Midnight, saving people from a landslide with the Wild Wild Pussycats, doing covert missions with the likes of Eraserhead, maybe even stopping buildings from falling with...with All Might. It would be his dream come true.

“No.”

The fantasy shattered as quickly as it started, his mother’s voice cleaving the visages in half.

The inspector looked over at her above his head, as did the detective, the woman frowning slightly. “Midoriya-san—”

“I said no. I can’t.”

Izuku slowly turned to his mom, eyes wide and hands clenching the sheets. Her eyes had taken on that cold energy once again, a much firmer wall than it had been just a few minutes before. She stood to her feet as well, and didn’t look at him even as he wished so desperately inside that she would. He watched her hands clench tighter, her resolve stronger than he’d ever seen it.
If only it wasn’t against his dream.

She, shorter and rounder than her opposition, stood tall and imposing.

“I can’t let my son keep doing this. This...this has to stop.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaah...I figured that’d happen.

That's how it is in this day and age, dear. The parents are more attentive now...well, sometimes.

Right, yours is having a different situation. How's that going by the way?

It's complicated, dear. I haven't been able to see her clearly for a while now. It may take much longer than I hoped.

Well, at least you're trying, unlike some Voices I know.

Oh, dear, don't give me credit for doing the bare minimum...anyway, aren't you happy? You've shown him one of your forms! When's the next time you'll do that?

Weeeeell, I may have a lil sumthin, sumthin in the works, but I'll have to wait and see where that goes. We'll have to get over this hurdle first.
The room smelled of antiseptic and clean sheets. After two weeks of silence, the heart monitor beeped unnaturally slow, but at an even, measured pace. Midoriya Inko stood firmly on the left side of Izuku’s bed, against Tsukauchi and Yayoi on the right side. Both of the latter were more than a little displeased by her reaction if only because of the implications only they knew; her protective nature wasn’t a part of it. In the bed, Izuku faced his mother, but pressed his lips together tightly to not say anything, passively watching her from his position.

“Midoriya-san,” Yayoi tried again, her smile curved a little tightly, “I certainly understand that you have poignant concerns regarding your son’s involvement with this situation, but at large, I cannot say he can be completely removed from the issue. Not with its present developments.”

“Why not?” Inko demanded, big eyes trembling.

“Well, first of all, there are a lot of legal issues to—”

“Legal issues? W-What about the legal issues that came with allowing a child without a hero license to fight alongside pro heroes against a villain?” When Tsukauchi’s eyes twitched, she didn’t address it. “What about the legal issues that came with his death? Are you...are you just going to overlook those?”

“Certainly not, and I agree that your son shouldn’t have had to experience that.” She looked down at the boy with a frown. “I cannot begin to imagine the pain you experienced, and I’m so sorry.” Then, her face turned back to the boy’s mother. “But, if I may be frank, Midoriya-san, the results would’ve been a lot worse without his presence.”
“Something worse than his death?” she seethed.

“That’s not what I mean, Midoriya-san. I have no intent in comparing what happened to anything else. When I say something worse, I mean something worse than the collapse of a city, such as total societal hemorrhage.”

Inko flustered for a moment, but then steeled herself and clenched her fists, large eyes squinting in frustration. “I want to make something very, very clear to you, because I don’t think you understand. My son should not have been anywhere, and I mean anywhere, near that battle.”

“No, no, I agree with you,” Yayoi said, splaying her hands. “He was untrained and unequipped for a fight of such caliber, and the heroes were not well-trained in methods for dealing with the Gray Men. Everyone was short-handed and under-informed. That’s why I was called in, but I haven’t been here for very long and haven’t been able to adequately organize everyone into collaboration, and your son hasn’t been given any formal training. If I were to have your permission, I would give my absolute best effort and the best resources possible to—”

“To what? To let you have access to my son after you all have already killed him once? To make him into some...some weapon?!?”

“No, absolutely not.” She opened her eyes then, kaleidoscope colors flashing in her irides. Inko nearly backed away at the sheer unnaturality that flowed over her body like a thin sheet. Izuku stared up at her in awe, his body shivering with a familiar yet foreign feeling. “I want to make him into a hero. I do not exaggerate when I say that your son is the only one who can efficiently help us. If he’s going to be out fighting, he’s better off trained and protected. I’m saying these things to be honest with you, because all in all, we need your approval to move forward.”

While Izuku’s eyes brightened with hope and wonder, his fists curling into the sheets, Inko’s dimmed with a severe, imposing shadow that the light in Yayoi’s eyes couldn’t hope to pierce. Everyone went silent once again, save for the slightly increased beeping.

Before Yayoi could speak again, her mouth opening with some phrase on the tip of her tongue, Tsukauchi cleared his throat and squared his shoulders.

“Midoriya-san, I understand how crazy this sounds. But, with the way things are playing out, I feel the best course of action would be to cooperate and establish an understanding between what we’re trying to do and our overall desire for his protection. If you could give us just a few minutes to explain, then—”

“Get out.”

Tsukauchi’s words lost strength before he could even continue. Yayoi’s mouth opened a little, though nothing came from between her lips. Izuku jolted, then turned to his mother, whose hands had unclenched and laid lip at her sides, eyes cold and lidded in a way not usual for her.

“I want the two of you out of this room. Right now. Izuku is still recovering. Do you really think he needs to hear all of this right now? Right after he just woke up from something he—...he shouldn’t have?”

The two officials didn’t say anything. It wasn’t as though anything they could say would reach the woman standing protectively behind her son. Izuku stopped looking at her, finding some dull, resigned interest in the bedsheets.

“He...he needs to just rest. That’s it. So both of you, get out. Before I call some other police to come
Tsukauchi had managed to school his expression into a muted smile, nodding before he collected his jacket from the seat. Yayoi rose her hands placatingly, a small smile curling the corners of her lips up as Tsukauchi returned their chairs to the wall.

“We understand, Midoriya-san. Please don’t be afraid to call for us if you have any questions. You know Detective Tsukauchi’s number.”

“Out.”

The silver-gray woman’s teeth clicked shut, but her smile didn’t abate at all. She turned her head towards Izuku, who glanced up at her from under his lashes. Then she bowed to the both of them, Tsukauchi following suit. The two officials saw themselves out, Tsukauchi closing the door behind them.

Izuku stared at the door, his fists curled into the sheets, as his mother’s hands pulled him closer and she finally calmed, breathing heavily as tears began trailing out of her eyes. His lips pursed as he felt the heat behind his own eyes grow, but he fought back the urge to cry, instead turning towards his mother and wrapping his arms around her shoulders.

“It’s okay…” he muttered, his shoulders slumped. “It’s okay.”

Outside of the door, Tsukauchi and Yayoi stood against the wall, silent and still. Tsukauchi’s jaw clenched and unclenched with a torrent of swirling emotions. There were so many things he wanted to say. So many. Because not only had she revealed the proposed coalition too early on after his awakening, but she had been too brash and way too forward. While those traits were usually her good points, especially when dealing with the media, in that delicate situation, it had been the bane of their conversation.

He breathed. Swallowed. Sighed.

“...Inspector, may I ask what happened in there?”

Had he not known the inspector better, he would’ve overlooked the woman’s subtle flinch. But sure enough, her shoulders shifted up minutely, a tiny tick in her overall calm exterior...though, she wasn’t looking at him either.

“I saw that press conference. You commanded their attention and clarified anything you needed to while deflecting information we’re not able to disclose. So what happened here? Inspector?”

She sighed, a little huff of breath heard only because the hallway was quiet. She turned to Tsukauchi then, and he blinked, surprised. Wearing a wide, close-lipped smile, the corners of her eyes and the middle of her forehead right above her nasal ridge were excessively wrinkled, like she was trying to be cheery but had smelled something sour.

“Aaaah, well, dealing with the government, scientists, politicians, and media are my specialties.”

She fell silent. Tsukauchi stared at her. A few seconds passed as a nurse in colorful scrubs bustled past them with a food cart. They turned a corner further down the hall without another word
exchanged between the two.

“Dealing with parents is not.”

“Then say that beforehand.”

Yayoi pushed off of the wall with a petulant frown on her face, nose scrunched with distaste, but she didn’t deny his statement. He followed her to the nearby elevator, on their way to return to their temporary base office in the hospital.

“Hhhhhnnnnnn—it’s so frustrating,” she whined, digging her hands in her hair. “I can talk my way through all those nagging camera-toting, self-righteous hacks, but talking to kids and parents together always brings out the impatience and anxiety in me. I want to be honest, but they never let me get to the good parts.”

“How did you get through it before, then?”

She paused speaking, still walking, and turned her head towards him.

“Well, honestly, this is the first time in a while we’ve had to speak to individual parents and their children. The first time was when quirks were still thought to be an outbreak. Besides...if I said that I just let Bōzu Team handle it when it came to that and haven’t actually interacted with parents and children together in several years, would you believe me?”

Tsukauchi’s jaw dropped open a little, but it shut a moment later. A tired, irritated frown scrunched his eyebrows. “Yes, yes, I’d believe you. Mostly because I could tell at least a bit if you told a lie.”

“Good, because that’s exactly what happened.”

Tsukauchi, suddenly feeling tired, brought a hand up to his nasal ridge and rubbed it, trying to stave off a headache.

“‘Bōzu Team’...like monks?”

“Mmmmmh, basically. They are my legal consultants, lawyers, anything to do with relating with those kinds of issues. Had I not be here, one of them would’ve been the ones telling Midoriya-san the news.”

“And why aren’t one of them here now?”

“Ah, well, they’re too busy trying to make sure Izuku won’t go to jail for vigilantism.”

That made Tsukauchi actually stop in the middle of the hall, Yayoi moving forward to press the up button. His hand dropped down from his head, hovering in front of is waist.

“What?”

“Mnhmmm, another reason I’m impatient to get them on board.” She turned to him with her hands in her medical jacket’s pockets, her eyebrows scrunched. “See, the city of Musutafu decided to take legal action against Minute Maid; they are suing him for damages to the city and citing him for unlawful ‘quirk’ usage as a vigilante. He only has a few more days in the hospital, which is why I thought popping the cap open from the get-go would move things along since we don’t have much time, but that doesn’t seem like it’s going to work.” Her head tilted to the side. “I’m surprised you didn’t know already, especially since the Prime Minister said he couldn’t excuse vigilantism on live TV. No one told you?”
“No,” he muttered, unlocking his phone with a code before quickly typing off a message. “I should’ve been told, though. But…” A thought came to him, one that made his hands clench. “Maybe they didn’t tell me because of the Kronos Incident. I gave him jurisdiction to act alongside the heroes, after all. And…I was under review.”

Yayoi’s mouth opened in a little ‘o’, dimly surprised by the news just as the elevator dinged, letting the two know it had arrived. “Aaah, I was wondering where you were that day.”

“Being questioned by a member of the PSIA,” he muttered, following Yayoi into the elevator.

She hissed through her teeth. “Was it a Miyashi Warning or a Saitō Warning?”

“A Saitō.” He pressed the button to their floor and watched the doors close. “Tell them everything and I won’t get charged, and if I lie, be prepared for the consequences. I apparently can’t be charged for what I said in that room, but that doesn’t mean I can’t be charged for my decision regarding Minute Maid.”

“Ah, they’re really serious, then. Well, you did tell them the truth, right?”

“Had to. They were...particular about their questions though.”

“Hmmm, how so?”

Tsukauchi’s mouth drew tight, looking off to the side.

She sighed, looking ahead at the closed doors, the light above it blinking with each floor they passed. “Can’t tell me, huh? Makes sense. The Public Security Intelligence Agency loves their secrets, after all. They told me not to tell anyone after my own investigation, too.”

“You’ve been investigated by them?”

She laughed lightly, a twinkling thing that lingered in the air. “When have I not been investigated by them is the better question. People get suspicious of you when you’ve lived as long as I have. They start questioning you about quirks and life span and whatnot.”

Tsukauchi rose an eyebrow at her. “You constantly make references to your age...how old are you, anyway?”

Yayoi paused, tilting her head in the elevator’s light, her hair gleaming with slight silver linings. Humming under her breath, she turned to him, the corners of her mouth curling with mischief.

“You really want to know?”

The detective was starting to regret his curiosity, because with the way she grinned at him, he almost wanted to deny he’d asked a question at all. Still, it would be a lie to say he wasn’t interested. She’d always been making comments about her age, even from the very first time he’d met her. All he knew about her was that she was apparently “old”, even though she looked to be in her early 30s, about as old as Midnight or Eraserhead. Or even as old as himself, but that seemed like a bit of a stretch.

“You really, really want to know?”

He sighed. “Inspector.”

“Hehe, fine, fine. I’ll tell you. Only because I like you well enough.”
She moved her finger in a ‘come closer’ motion, which he did. Then she did it again, prompting him even closer, as he did with a frown. She did it once more, much to his chagrin, but it brought his ear right by her mouth. Then, just as the elevator dinged, letting the elevator occupants know that they were on their floor, she whispered a number into his ear.

When the elevator doors opened, Yayoi stepped out, skipping a little in her amusement. Behind her, left in the elevator, Tsukauchi stood with his shoulders slacked, eyes wide, his mouth dropped open. He had to blink a few times to collect his thoughts, barely making it out of the elevator before the doors closed on him.

“Wait what?”

“You heard me the first time, detective!” she sang.

“But that...that doesn’t make sense. Are you joking?”

“Oh c’mon, Tsukauchi-kun,” she said, pouting. “I said I like you well enough. I’ve got no reason to lie about my age to you. Besides, if we’re going to be working together for as long as I suspect, it’s better off that you know now rather than later.”

Tsukauchi gaped a little, opening his mouth, but closed it again a moment later. Yayoi...had a point. With the government and ISFU now collaborating on the Gray Man phenomena, it was likely her presence would be a long-term one. He hoped that she was being honest and telling the truth, but still, with the number she’d just said…

Actually, it did bring up another question.

“Then, Inspector Yayoi,” he began. Then he stopped, looking up and down the hall before beckoning her to go to the room where they’d set up their office. She looked a little surprised, her eyebrows raised, but she followed direction without any fanfare.

Carefully, Tsukauchi didn’t say anything else to her until he closed the door to their office area, Yayoi already twirling in the roller chair in front of her temporary desk. He cleared his throat, prompting her to pause herself mid-twirl with a carefully placed foot. Closed eyes focused on him with interest as he finally found the right words for his question.

“Do you know about All For One?”

“There’s very little I don’t know about. A national terrorist with international ties would be within my scope of knowledge, yes.”

Tsukauchi almost choked on his own spit, though he concealed it behind a cough. He cleared his throat again.

“No, I mean...did you...did you know him?”

He watched as she relaxed into her seat, as she leaned back with her arms on the rests, crossing her left leg over her right. At that moment, despite how she’d interacted with the Midoriya matriarch, he saw a return to her natural dominance.

“If you’re asking if I met him, well, not personally. I mostly just saw the results of his control expanding through Japan, Though, I did happen to pass him maybe once or twice.” She shook her head like one would while rebuking a child, and for once, the detective didn’t feel demeaned by it. He watched as she looked back at him, the computer’s lights gleaming on her hair. She opened her eyes a little, just enough to wink at him with one of them.
“All bicentennials don’t know each other that closely, Tsukauchi-kun.”

Then she turned away from him, swirling to face her computer.

“But then, we need a game plan,” she muttered, opening her digital planner on her computer.

Tsukauchi blinked, whirlpaled. “What?”

“A game plan!” she said, repeating herself as she quickly began searching through her very few empty spaces to find good spots she was starting to label a certain word he couldn’t clearly see from the bright screen. “While I’m not accustomed to convincing parents rightfully protecting their children to help us help them, I do have one thing up my sleeve. A skill that I’ve cultivated over several years. One could say I’m almost the expert at it, honestly.” She hissed under her breath. “I don’t have much time to do this considering my other meetings and the arrangements with the Cabinet and the police force and heroes, not to mention the limited time frame we have to act...but at least I can get the ball rolling the first two days.”

Tsukauchi walked away from the door, approaching the woman with a previously absent caution. Her silver head turned to grin at him.

“You’ll need to follow up in the end, but let me open the door.”

Her digital calendar was stocked full of events. Day after day, the time she wouldn’t be in the hospital doing studies was filled with the meetings she’d detailed, plus others with her own specialized teams. The text was color-coded, red for severely important government meetings, blue for what looked to be meetings with her team, and yellow for meetings involving heroes. Intermixed with them was a new green color, the one she’d just typed in, squeezed in between her meetings for barely a few minutes at a time. A blip in her overall schedule, but important enough to be labeled.

It was simply called “Pester”.

“...Actually,” Tsukauchi began, deciding to look over the bomb the woman had dropped on him for the time being. “I may have an idea on how to help.”

“Good morning, Midoriya-san.”

Inko frowned at the woman in front of her standing against the hall wall on Inko’s way to the cafeteria the very next morning. Inspector Yayoi was reclined against the tan wall with ease, smiling seemingly without a care in the world. Down the hall, where the lights shined brighter like an escape, Inko could hear the passing voices of nurses and other caretakers filtering around there.

“If you have a little time, would you mind talking with me?” Yayoi asked, standing up straight with her hands in her pockets. “We got off on the wrong foot yesterday. That, and two weeks ago, I didn’t get to tell you much more than the fact your son was alive before I got shoehorned into a bunch of work.” Her mouth opened a little with a sudden realization. “Ah, actually, I’m pretty busy today, too.”

“Then you should probably get on with it, don’t you think?” Inko huffed, going back to walking so she could pass the woman.
“I mean, I could, but I have some things I’d really like to talk with you about regarding your son.”

“I don’t want to talk, Inspector.”

“Wanting to and needing to are two different things,” she replied, raising her hands quickly in placation at the seething glare shot her way. “Not to sass you, of course. It’s simply is fact.”

Inko sighed, putting a hand on her head. She was so, so tired. Her son still had another three days left in the hospital, and those people seemed hellbent on not letting him rest.

“Why can’t you leave my Izuku alone?” she breathed out, exasperated.

“Because he’s one of the few rays of hope we have in saving Japan, Midoriya-san,” Yayoi smiled a little tightly, but it dropped off her face at the wide-eyed confusion on the other woman’s face. “Oh. Oh wow, I’ve really done you a disservice. You’re really under-informed.”

“What on earth could my son have that you all need so much… Is it this…‘magic’ you’ve talked about? Is that it?”

“That’s exactly what it is, actually.”

Inko glared at her once again. “So you do just want to use him.”

“It’s less use and more help, to be honest.” Yayoi shrugged. “Considering his previous actions and his status as a vigilante, I’d hazard to guess that we’d be doing him more of a favor in understanding his powers and helping train him in a more formal setting rather than ignoring his potential.”

“You’d be doing both of us a favor by letting him just be a boy,” Inko said, turning away from Yayoi completely, her back to the other woman. “I’m done. Please don’t talk to me anymore. And if I hear that either you or Detective Tsukauchi went near my son’s room without my permission, I will call security.”

“That’s fair,” Yayoi replied, sighing. “One can only try, after all. Anyway, if you ever have questions, Midoriya-san, you know—”

Inko walked away before she finished.

When she returned to the hospital room, she asked a nurse if they’d approached his room, satisfied when they said no one had. After that, she opened the door and greeted her son, smiling with relief.

She caught the bare end of a conversation he was having with no one, his mouth open on a word before his lips snapped shut, sitting in the bed with his covers kicked to the end. The two of them went still until he gave her a wobbly, nervous smile and greeted her in return.

She smiled at him and closed the door, but something about his urge to hide from her made her feel...kind of sick.

When she tried to ask him who he was talking to, he averted the conversation to pointless nothings. Inko was...fine with that.
“Oho! Fancy seeing you around these parts again,” Yayoi cheered the very next day, waving a dainty hand.

“This...is the hall to get to the cafeteria from here, Inspector,” Inko replied, frowning. One of her hands straightened out her blue cardigan. “Do I need a restraining order?”

“No, I assure you you don’t.”

Her eyes lidded further. “I’m tempted to believe overwise…”

The woman held up her hands placatingly again, smiling in that strange, knowing way she seemed to. Inko wasn’t sure what it was about that look at made her a bit uncomfortable, but it did. It threw her off.

Inko sighed, putting a hand to her head. “How many times do I need to say I don’t want to talk?”

“Perhaps several, to be honest,” the inspector replied, her head tilting as the smile faded. “It’s pretty urgent—to be clear, it’s not ‘the world’s going to end tomorrow if you don’t consider what I have to say at least a bit’. It’s more ‘the world’s going to end within the next two years’.”

“...Because...of what?”

“Because your son isn’t getting rid of Gray Men,” the inspector replied, making Inko scowl almost immediately.

“How am I supposed to believe that you’re not going to use my son as a tool for your...y-your agenda, whatever it is, when you’re blaming him for whatever’s happening?”

“Not blaming him, no. I have extremely high doubts he would ask for this, considering his overall desire for general human safety. Anyway, surely you’ve heard of the Gray Men, right Midoriya-san?” Inko watched as Yayoi pushed herself off of the wall, putting her hands into the pockets of her coat. “Those static creatures that seem to steal quirks?”

Yes, Inko had heard about them. There had been a major attack by one while her son was on a school field trip. It’d had to be cut short. Just seeing images of that strange, twitchy creature sent shivers down her spine, the unnatural aura around them permeable even through television screens. After she’d heard he was safe, she’d wanted to be at home when he came back, but she had work...yet another distraction from actually taking care of her son and giving him the attention she should’ve.

“I’ve heard of them, like the one in Yokohama,” she closed her eyes, breathing calmly. “What of it?”

“Those things are made out of the same kind of energy that’s currently feeding his cells. The incompatibility between magic and quirks is exactly why your son’s the most efficient at getting rid of the Gray Men.”

“I don’t want to hear this...” Inko muttered, turning to walk away.

“What if he didn’t have to fight, then?”

That made her stop in her tracks, eyes narrowing at the light at the end of the hallway.

“...What do you mean?”
“I mean that right now, the arrow your son gave All Might is still being used even right now to get rid of Gray Men.” Yayoi walked closer to Inko until she was at her side. “Ever since the fight at Tartarus, the arrow’s been used to dispatch the Gray Men in the overpopulated jail cells and holding facilities the government’s been using to keep the invasion under wraps. The arrow is losing power over time, but if he could just provide weapons, perhaps that alone would be enough.”

Inko looked at the ground, her lips pursing. “...So he wouldn’t have to fight, as long as he makes... No.” She turned from the floor then, glaring at Yayoi with enough force to turn her to stone had she not been so impervious to Inko’s emotional state. “No, that’s just a stepping stone, isn’t it? First it’s weapons, then it’s more time, then the next thing I know, you’re having him trained to get rid of them himself. And...and what kind of mother would I be to let him make...make weapons? He’s fifteen for goodness sake!”

“Well, if it’s any consolation,” Yayoi stuffed her hands into her coat pockets again. “He’s been making weapons by himself for a few months without our help. I didn’t think you could weaponize an umbrella further than adding a gun or a knife to it, yet he made a shield by using his magic on one. So really, we wouldn’t be the ones forcing him to do anything, unless it’s something he doesn’t want to do anymore. But really, again, he willingly became a vigilante despite it being against the law, so I don’t think he’d have a problem with helping.”

“Why are you so hellbent on using my son?” Inko seethed.

“It wouldn’t be using if we were cooperating like I would like to. And also, there’s that whole ‘he’s the only one who can get rid of them’ thing, too.”

“You—”

“Midoriya-san.” Yayoi rose her hands again, splaying her fingers like she was confronting an angry predator. “I understand that you want to protect him. I do, and I too would like to keep him safe from some of the things this world’s willing to offer him. And I certainly beg your forgiveness for my impertinence, but this is something I absolutely need cooperation on.”

“And if I say no? What if I say I want to take my boy back home without any of this mess following him?”

“Then you may not have a home to return to for much longer.”

Inko clicked her teeth in frustration, and turned from the woman and her placating hands. Without another word, she quickly walked away, her small heels clacking against the floor as she headed to the cafeteria. She didn’t look back even once.

On her way back later, she passed by Detective Tsukauchi. He stood around a corner wall in a nook with several humming vending machines, getting a hazelnut coffee if she had the smell of it right. He leaned on the machine as it poured his drink, and she watched him rub at his nasal bridge, frowning with what looked to be a headache, some dark baggage growing under his eyes. He must’ve felt her eyes on him, because a moment later, he blinked his open and caught her gaze.

Before he could rearrange himself and sit up from off the machine to speak with her, Inko scurried off, her shoes clicking away at the linoleum floor.
She didn’t want to hear a single word he had to say. It was his fault. He was the one who let her son go with those heroes and get himself killed trying to save everyone. She couldn’t fathom why he would ever do that, and for once, she really didn’t want to try to reason with or understand someone who was trying to let her son get hurt. She’d done that enough with the school he went to, and she wasn’t going to continue that any longer.

She had to be stronger, more firm. It’s what Izuku needed.

That time when she entered the room, Izuku was perusing some of the cards that had come in for him. He had several on the bed, all of them in all sorts of colors. The one he held in his hands was white and blue, the front with a blue painted bird on it and someone’s signature. Whatever was written in it made him smile, tears budding at the corners of his eyes.

She peered in, watching him open another card, and marveled at the genuine, heartfelt smile she watched raise his freckled cheeks. She hadn’t been able to get a single smile like that out of him aside from when he’d first awakened—ever since the detective and inspector came to talk with them. It made her wonder what was in those cards since she’d never had the mind to look at them.

Suddenly, as Izuku reached for another card, his gaze snapped up to the door behind which she hid. Realizing she’d been caught, she entered and greeted him, smiling lightly when he greeted her back.

It faltered a little when he put those cards away, pushing them to the side like he didn’t want her to know what was in them, all while smiling at him as he usually did. The longer she looked at it, the more false it appeared.

Since when...since when had he gotten so secretive?

Inko’s eyes slid open in the middle of the night to the tinkling sound of her son’s whispers.

She barely moved in her cot as she blinked the sleep from her eyes, but the slight movement was enough to get the whispering to cut off. Once she was still and kept her eyes closed for long enough, it started up again, too quiet for her to quite hear, but loud enough that she could recognize it was her son’s voice.

Laying still, she opened her eyes again and peered into the darkness. Izuku was sitting up in his bed with the covers kicked off yet again, turned away from her. His back looked so small from the way he was curled up.

“...B-- s-- won’t e--- li---- to them...I know, but...I e--- tell h-- about th--.” Inko watched as his shoulders rose and fell with a sigh, then waited for him to speak in the following silence. “...I wa-- to b- ab-- to --ust that --e would, but...I do-- think s-- --uld. S-- w--ldn-- -- a--- to ---e it...”

The woman felt concern seep deeper into her chest the longer she listened, even as her hearing turned muddled from slowly falling back to sleep. She couldn’t see who he was talking to, like he was having a conversation with an imaginary friend. All this talk about magic and mess, things that she didn’t understand...she knew there were things she didn’t know about it yet, about magic. She hadn’t asked anyone else much more about it since she realized he was alive. Then...maybe he really was talking to someone, just someone she couldn’t see or hear.

The thought of there being someone influencing her son that she didn’t even know scared her, and
that fear followed her into unconsciousness.

In an attempt to avoid the inspector, she decided against going to the cafeteria that morning. She wasn’t feeling very hungry that day anyway, her mind’s eye replaying the whispers she’d heard so early in the morning it still felt like night. Each attempt at decoding her son’s words was met with disappointment, and she didn’t think he would tell her if she asked.

It was likely he wouldn’t. Nothing they talked about those days had much substance to it, and discussing magic was an unforeseen taboo that neither of them had yet to defy.

With her mind still reeling on what she’d seen in her son, she decided to reduce her own stress regarding the situation by avoiding the one person who seemed hellbent on bringing everything to the forefront as quickly as she physically could.

It wasn’t so much that she felt everything was the woman’s fault—she was at least a bit grateful to her anyway for finding out that her son was…”alive”. But she and the detective...they kept facilitating this idea that he could be physically involved in whatever was happening. What if the next time he got hurt, he didn’t get up again? What if that magic or whatever they said he has only works a few times? What if they run her son into the ground trying to use him?

She wasn’t a very firm or suspicious woman, but she hated her son being used as a tool enough that she would be that person if she had to. And, from what she’d seen so far, she did. She...she hadn’t protected Izuku enough, that much she knew now. She had to be more active, to put her foot down more. She knew she was late to doing such things, but it was better late than never.

That much she knew as she stared at the vending machine, hardening her resolve. Yes, it was for Izuku, for his own good. Besides, sweet buns could be breakfast food. She just had to be a little creative was all. Maybe eating some of the fruit snacks a row lower down would make it better. Not right, no, but better at least.

Bright, colorful bags of choices sat behind the glowing glass, numbered for her convenience as she tried to decide what to get. It was a nook area similar to where she’d seen the detective yesterday, but hers was in a waiting area, for people who saw their loved ones and just needed some time to refresh. For the most part, Inko was alone, but there was one other person, sitting in one of the hypoallergenic chairs of the waiting room without making a comment about anything, too focused by whatever was on her computer screen.

Inko hazarded a few glances her way, but otherwise made no attempt at conversation. Inko was just there to get snacks, and the dark-haired young woman had yet to glance up even once from her screen. Her laptop was settled in her lap, but the chair beside her was pedestal to her frayless, well-kept backpack, a small collection of what looked to be get-well cards sitting in front of it. She alternated between whirlwinds of clacking keys and pin-drop silence. With her pretty makeup, pressed jacket, and sleek black hair tied back in a ponytail, she looked to be the epitome of Net Gen intelligence with a mix of the classic working woman.

She looked remarkably like Detective Tsukauchi.

Save for the bright green of her eyes and her beauty mark, even their jawlines had some similarities. She almost wanted to go up to her and ask her directly if they were related, but she didn’t really want
to do that. If they were related, then what would she say? That her brother allowed her underage son on a mission that killed many? That her brother killed her son? Not directly...or permanently, but still.

It was better off unaddressed really. Besides, she’d look crazy just going up to a random woman about something so confidential.

Maybe she was just stir-crazy, being in the hospital surrounded by a woman who wanted to say almost too much, a son who didn’t want to say anything in the slightest, and a man she didn’t want to talk to at all.

Inko swallowed, turning back to the vending machine, clicking the numbers for a sweet bun, some fruit snacks, and a bag of shrimp chips. Bending over, she dug her stash out and gathered it into her arms before she turned to leave the area. She looked up to walk back to Izuku’s room.

The young woman was looking right back at her over the rim of her computer, blinking with what looked to be the shock of recognition.

“Excuse me,” the woman said, blinking, “Forgive me if I’m wrong, but would you happen to be related to Midoriya Izuku?”

“Uhm.”

For a moment, neither of them moved, the young woman and Inko having something of a surprised stare off until the former broke it off with a laugh tilted towards embarrassment, waving her hand dismissively.

“Aaah, sorry, I must be wrong. Please don’t mind me.”

In her mind’s eye, Inko said that it was okay, that people mistook her as being related to someone else all the time. In her mind’s eye, she walked away with her small stash of snacks back to the hospital room. She opened the door to find the butt end of Izuku doing something strange and hidden again, and sighed tiredly at his behavior. She opened up one of her bags and shared some with her son regardless because she knew they were his favorite. They crunched their teeth into dried crustacean-flavored potato slices and said nothing meaningful.

“No. No, you’re correct, I’m related to him,” she said instead. “I’m his mother.”

Before Inko could ask who she was, her bright green eyes turned even brighter, and her smile widened, mixing between shrewd and giddy to form something inexplicably charismatic.

“Oh, I was hoping so! It’s so nice to meet you!” She placed her computer into the chair beside her not already occupied, and stood up to greet her. When she put her hand out—her nails shiny and nicely manicured—Inko managed to wrestle her snacks into one arm to shake it politely, completely drawn in to her rhythm.

“Likewise? I mean...I’m sorry, who are you?” Inko was still shaking her hand.

“My bad, I didn’t introduce myself at all,” the young woman laughed, her hand stopping but still holding Inko’s. “I’m Tsukauchi Makoto. You know my older brother, the detective, right?”

Inko’s face scrunched for a split moment. That moment was enough for the woman’s smile to drop just a fraction. “...I do.”

“I’m sorry. With what’s going on, I imagine you two aren’t really getting along?”
“I...can’t say we are…”

“It figures,” the woman—Makoto—clicked her tongue. “He tends to be the bearer of bad news.”

Makoto’s hand loosened on Inko’s, and the older woman realized that they were still holding each other’s hands. Flushing pink with mortification, Inko released her hand quickly, moving to steady her snacks.

“I-I’m so sorry, I didn’t even realize—”

“Oh no, it’s alright! It happens,” Makoto smiled, settling back into her seat. “Anyway, I was hoping I was right because I came with a small delivery for Midoriya-kun.”

That made Inko frown a little. “A delivery.”

“Yes! You see, little Midoriya has a few comrades who wanted to make sure he was getting well alright.” Inko watched as she reached over to the chair with the bag and patted her hand on a small stack of get-well cards. “They were hoping he’d be able to cheer up during his recovery, so I tried finding a way to get these to him. You wouldn’t mind taking them to him, would you? I heard there’s a ‘no disturbance’ zone around his room, so I can’t take it personally.”

There were seven cards in all, carefully stacked with the top one clearly displaying a handsome caricature of All Might with his muscles bulging. She kind of sees one under it with a pink flower on it with a bright yellow painted background. They look lovely, like the other stack of cards back in the room that had come with a fruit basket and crackers with cheese. Izuku had still been...unconscious when it came in, so he couldn’t enjoy the edibles, but he’s constantly looking at the cards when she’s not there.

“Oh…” She stared at the card stack without taking them. “Who are they from?”

“Ah, just some folks he’s met. A friend at my school, a high school girl, my friend’s trainer and his daughter, and three other guys we all know.”

“Are they good company?”

“Yes! They have some real hearts of gold.”

Inko was almost disarmed. Almost. But there was a nagging question at the back of her mind, one that would usually be ridiculous at any other point in her life.

“...They wouldn’t happen to be...vigilantes...would they?”

Makoto smiles brightly. “Not all of them.”

Inko felt her mouth open, shocked, but then she had to remember, Izuku was acting as a vigilante. He had to have encountered others during his escapades. When she first heard of his activities, she could’ve never imagined he’d get fans from it, much less comrades. But if what this woman was saying was true, then he’d managed it somehow.

Makoto grinned at her with some amusement coloring her eyes, her arms crossed behind his back. “I sense a skeptic.”

“Admittedly…”

“Have you seen him fight? A Gray Man, I mean.” She clenched a fist, a shine in her eyes. “His
dedication’s what’s garnered him a lot of fans, from heroes and vigilantes alike!”

“Goodness, no!” Inko’s shoulders puff up with indignation, starting to see the unfortunate similarities between the Tsukauchi siblings. They seemed hellbent on having children do an adult’s job. “Why would I watch him do that?”

She blinked back at him. “To know what he’s doing.”

Makoto said it so matter-of-factly, it threw Inko for a loop. She ended up gaping at the other before settling into a frown that had the other sweating just a bit.

“Well, I understand if you don’t. It would be hard to watch such a thing, right? His fights could get rather scrappy. My bad.”

“...It’s...alright. You made some sense…” Inko pursed her lips. “I...I think I could...watch one. Just one.”

Makoto nodded and sat down again, moving her computer back onto her lap. Inko hesitated, glancing at the now empty chair before she decided to commit and sat down as well, her stash of goods still carefully in her arms.

A video editing software gleamed in shades of dark gray on the young woman’s screen. In the center of all the boxes and selectable options, there was the image of a building Inko recognized from downtown Musutafu with some smoke coming out of it. Before she could get a good look at it, Makoto minimized the program and maximized her browser, showing off a lot of YouTube tabs at at the top. The title on the video was “MM Sighting 14.6.24”.

“This one’s a little rougher than some others, but it’s still a good video,” Makoto said, clicking the play button before Inko could back out of the viewing altogether.

The video on the screen is a little hazy at first. Whoever recorded it wasn’t steady, backing up in the alleyway like they were battling an earthquake at the same time. The audio was low because they were in a hospital, but she could still hear some distant yelling in the background. The person recording moved back fast enough for a young man with a face-mask and a cap on and a girl in a short, shiny red dress carrying her own heels to shifted into view, her hair curled and her face caked with makeup.

The young man was starting to leave her behind, something she seemed to be yelling at him about, but then she tripped and fell hard enough for Inko to wince. When she started sitting up, Inko gasped, able to see the scratches from the concrete on her arms starting to bleed.

Suddenly, behind them at a building further away, the front door to a building burst open with dust and smoke, and a disgusting-looking creature scurried out of it. It was a dark gray with some undertone Inko couldn’t quite see in the dimness of the darkness of the video, with arms bent much like a mix of a lizard and an insect, its arms out to the sides, with a long tail trailing after it that whipped in the air. Its face was filled with static as it’s head twitched this way and that. All along its body, there were glowing sparks of yellow.

Just the sight of it made her tremble.

The woman on the ground turned over onto her back and started screaming, attracting its attention. In one moment, it was twitching its head around. In another, it thrust its body in her direction, skittering quickly until it was almost on top of her, so quick and close that the cameraman startled and almost fell themself. The woman cried out, covering her head with her arms, and screamed.
It looked like it was going to nearly bowl her over to get to her and she’d get seriously hurt. Inko meeped and almost turned her face away, too afraid to watch.

But before she could, there was a flash of yellow light in the background, and the thing skidded short of her, straining to reach her body but unable to. It began screeching loudly enough that Inko could hear its static cries even with the lowered volume, and it strained harder, but its tail was pulled taut—it couldn’t move forward if it tried.

The cameraman redirected the view of the camera to back where its tail was, and Inko gasped, covering her mouth with her hand.

Holding onto its tail for dear life was a person in a pink and white dress, digging their pink shoes into the ground as they held onto the tail with their arms and white fingerless-gloved hands clinging tightly. Inko couldn’t see all of their body clearly, but the yellow-lined green of their curly hair told her enough.

That person…that person was Izuku.

And those shoes might have been pink, but she’d seen and bought enough of the red ones to know whose they were. And the backpack, it had to be her son’s. And he was clinging to that strange, frightening creature without any sense of self-preservation.

“Oh no, no, Izuku,” Inko mumbled, leaning forward. “Baby, get away from that thing! It’s too dangerous!”

Almost as a response, she watched as her glowing son’s clenched eyes opened, four-pointed stars gleaming brightly in his pointedly angry, determined gaze. He stepped back and tugged with his whole body, the monster screeching as it was dragged away from the weeping woman. He stepped back again, and again, his feet creating holes in the ground from how hard he stomped to give himself good footing.

Inko’s eyes widened as she watched. What was happening? Since when had he gotten so strong?

The monster fought against him as much as it could, its thin handless legs scraping against the ground to try skittering forward, but it couldn’t. She could see the effects of some ability briefly creating something like an air barrier in front of its head, but Izuku’s grip always tightened before it could escape, stopping it short and dissipating the sight of the barrier.

Finally, it’s loose grip on the ground worked to Izuku’s advantage, and its legs slipped wildly, falling face and shoulder first to the ground. Inko watched as Izuku’s eyes narrowed, his analytical mind working quickly as he made a decision. He stepped back once, twice, thrice, dragging the creature’s body on the ground.

Then, with a hefty cry, she watched dumbfounded as Izuku swung its tail, and its body, into the row of buildings on the other side of the alley, the static screeching increasing in volume.

Izuku wasted no time, though. He was quickly running from his original standing point out to the side, with the creature still disoriented on one side of the alley while Izuku ran to the other. Inko didn’t understand why at first, but then she watched as he reached back, a bright light surrounding his wrists until his hands came back down with Muay Thai training gloves on his hands. He posted up in a martial arts defensive stance, his face well protected and his legs bent at the knees, watching and waiting for it to attack him as if he expected it to.

It did.
Before the dust could fully settle, the thing was up on its spindling legs and, with a loud screech, it thrust its body at him instead. Inko had to cover her mouth to keep from screaming as it approached him at such high speeds. Izuku couldn’t counter that! Why was he just standing there? He needed to run away!

He didn’t. In fact, he started to grin. It was wobbly around the corners as his smiles tended to be, but she recognizes who he’s trying to imitate immediately.

She watched as his feet shift, and his stance took a slightly different turn. With a speed she’d never expect out of Izuku, he began turning his hips, his foot rising off of the ground. The Gray Man screeched and was nearly upon him.

But Izuku’s preparation was spot on, and by the time it was close enough, his calf flexed, and the tip of Izuku’s foot was colliding with its face, snapping it to the side. It was a powerful one, too—some wind blew from the force of it, and a bright strike like lightning buzzed through the creature’s body from its face.

Inko watched with awe as the creature convulsed minutely before its facial static went a solid yellow color then cut off, like a TV screen being turned off. Izuku stood triumphantly as its body began dissipating into strange crystals, and the group of people still around began to cheer.

She...couldn’t believe her eyes. That Izuku could...that he would fight against such a scary thing. And those moves! She’d never seen him train to get good like that, but, well, he’d been training with Shimizu without her knowledge. His kick was...amazing.

The video kept on, with Izuku disappearing the crystals off to somewhere before he rushed to the injured woman’s side. His bravado was gone now, and all that was left was the empathetic boy she’s known since birth. Even through the haze of his bright skin, she could see his worry plain on his face. He even pulled a first-aid kit out of his backpack to patch the woman up with meticulous care as she cried and held onto his shoulder with her other arm.

The cameraman got closer and seemed to be relaying what had just happened as others in the small group began crowding around to see her son, taking pictures. One called out the name Minute Maid and...well, the dress did look kind of maid-ish, didn’t it? Izuku didn’t pay as much attention to them, focused on helping the woman get better, wrapping up her arms and feet with care, even when she started fussing at the young man who left her behind, reaching into her purse to throw money back at him.

Then, someone in the background called out that a hero was coming, and she watched her son stiffen up, his eyes darting up to the end of the alley.

Inko watched with her jaw dropping open as the people began ushering him away, trying to protect him. The woman he’d just helped even held his shoulders and pointedly, even through the lowered volume, told him to run. Izuku looked hesitant, wanting to finish patching her up, but she shook her head, probably saying she’d be fine, and ushered him to go. Her precious boy, so kind and obedient, nodded at her and quickly threw his first-aid kit back into his bag, standing to his feet.

The crowd opened up towards the alley as he ran away, the small crowd cheering as he went.

Then the video paused.

Inko blinked when she realized it wasn’t moving anymore and looked up to Makoto, who smiled back at her.
“There’s a few more clear ones like this, not all from the same person, but all showing him doing his best. This is one of his better ones, honestly! You can definitely see how he’s improved compared to when he started in April.”

...April?

“I...I almost can’t believe it.”

“Right? Compared to how he usually acts, Minute Maid’s almost like an alternate persona at times—he gets this confidence about him, you know? But he’s a sweetheart all the time, that’s for certain.”

“H-How many of these videos did you say were up?” Just the thought of Izuku fighting more of those...creatures...made her shiver. She hadn’t paid so much attention to the Gray Man news even after she got to the hospital, mostly because she was watching over Izuku, but now she knew she’d need to know more about them. They’re dangerous.

“Oh, there’s many, some I haven’t seen yet. Little Midoriya’s been pretty active—”

“Since April.”

Makoto blinked. “Yes, since April.”

Inko hummed, a question brewing at the back of her mind, but it wasn’t meant for the woman beside her.

“I can’t say...that I like this. I can’t.”

“No worries, I agree.” Makoto laughed heartily when Inko stared at her like she grew a second head. “Don’t get me wrong! I like seeing how he’s improved and I love the logistics behind vigilantism. I just wish he’d wait till he’s older. But I don’t think the Gray Men will wait for that.”

“Wish he’d wait’?”

“Yes. I mean...” Makoto’s smile muted a little, turning a little sad. “It must be much more scary for him than the rest of the world when I think about it. He’s had to do this alone for a long time, and even those who do try to help are a potential liability. The Gray Men take potential, something normal people with quirks can’t replenish, but that he can if his magic’s stolen. He’s putting a lot of weight on his own shoulders to protect others, and it looks like he has to do it now lest the Gray Men get too strong without him fending them off.”

“He can wait,” Inko replied, clinging to her hopes. “He can wait. The heroes—I’ve heard that All Might used one of my son’s arrows to kill the Gray Man. Maybe...” She cringed a little. “Maybe if he just gave them weapons, that would suffice.”

Makoto blinked at her then looked up, putting a finger to the side of her mouth. “That’s not a bad idea. It’s a very good one, actually. Keep him out of danger while the heroes do the handywork. It’s not like he’s not helping by providing weapons.”

“He can wait,” Inko replied, clinging to her hopes. “He can wait. The heroes—I’ve heard that All Might used one of my son’s arrows to kill the Gray Man. Maybe...” She cringed a little. “Maybe if he just gave them weapons, that would suffice.”

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“Yes, you agree, right? Then maybe—”

“But it won’t work.”

Inko paused. Then curled her arms closer to her body, her bags crinkling. “Why don’t you think so?”

“Because it’s little Midoriya, honestly,” she replied, easy as air. Her fingers began typing something
on her computer, but Inko didn’t bother looking to see what it was. “See, I’ve only gotten to know
him a bit, but from what I do know, I know it wouldn’t be enough for him to provide weapons. It’d
be the safe option, yeah, but it’s little Midoriya, the boy who jumped headfirst into vigilantism to stop
the Gray Men rather than even considering telling heroes what was going on. Provided, I don’t
actually know what got him into fighting Gray Men or how he got the ability to, but he dived in
without hesitation. Telling him to stop fighting in-person now would be like trying to stop a freight
train mid-travel.”

Makoto smiles lightly at the computer, though there’s some emotion in it that took Inko a little longer
to decipher. One she’d seen on the older Tsukauchi’s face more than once.

Resignation.

“Believe me, he may be a timid and shy kid, but he’s stubborn as a rock when push comes to shove.
There’s no leashing up a boy like him—though I’m sure you knew that.”

...That she did. But not to that extent.

“I’m back, sweetie!” Inko greeted, opening the door with her vending machine stash and a stack of
cards in her other hand.

For his greeting, Izuku attempted to stuff the cards he was reading away, until he noticed that she
was holding more. He blinking owlishly at them curiosity bleeding into his expression. Meanwhile,
she stood at the door, frozen by his aborted, hurried attempt to conceal his actions.

It took him a moment, but he seemed to realize that they were just sitting there staring at each other.
He actually looked at his mother. Her dark green eyes gazed into his green and yellow ones until he
smiled, the corners of his mouth easing into some mock attempt at one.

“...Hi Mom.”

Inko stared a moment longer before she returned his attempt at a smile. “Hi, sweetheart.” She moved
into the room and closed the door. “I...passed by someone on my way to get some snacks today. A
Tsukauchi Makoto. Do you know someone by that name?”

“Oh! Tsukauchi-san’s sister! I met her...a, uhm...while ago.”

“Well, she seems like a nice person.” Inko moved away from the door back to her seat, setting the
new stack of cards on the table near the other ones. Izuku locked onto them like a cat eyeing their
prey, but seemed to restrain himself from looking through them in front of her. She really, really
wished he wouldn’t.

“She is. She seems like the kind of person who has her life together.”

“That she does.”

Inko sat down in her chair, her food still on her lap, but she didn’t move to open them. Izuku’s gaze
stayed on the cards a little longer before he finally tore it away, looking over at her.

“...Why didn’t you get breakfast?” Izuku asked.

“Ah...what makes you think I didn’t?”
The boy flustered immediately. “Ah, well, I mean...you usually don’t eat junk food like that, so, so I, I just thought—”

“Oh, honey, it’s fine. You’re not wrong. I was just...wondering.”

“Mmh...”

Izuku’s gaze turned to his lap, his fingers fiddling with each other as they both lapsed into silence. She watched him a little while longer, then blinked as his fingers slowly curled around the edge of the cover over his legs.

“Well...I’m a bit tired so...I think I’ll take a nap.”

“Are you sure? You...you don’t seem tired, sweetie.” She rose her hands, belatedly reaching for him a little. “You can stay up if you want. Bedrest doesn’t mean you have to try to sleep all the time. Besides, won’t that ruin your night sleep?”

He paused, jolting still, his hair covering his eyes.

“You...you haven’t really been sleeping at night, have you?” Inko asked.

Izuku doesn’t reply.

“Are you...are you sleeping at all? Really? Because, well...your heart rate is the same almost all the time.”

Izuku acted as though his lips were glued shut, and he turned away from her a little.

She hated this. Hated how reclused he’d become, even more so than before. Hated how afraid to act he’d become. At the very least he could sort of be himself around her, usually, but even that seemed to be out of the question.

Things had gone too far without her having the answers she needed. She’d let it go too far. Let herself be blind for much too long.

The shark girl, Shimizu...she was right, wasn’t she? About her just watching him and crying in her own pain without solving his. Even now, was she really considering how he felt about everything? Did she even know how he felt?

“...Izuku.”

He seemed reluctant to look up at her, but he managed, green and yellow irides gleaming in her direction from under slightly lidded eyelids.

For a moment, she didn’t say anything, and the two just watched each other. She had to word this just right. Had to make sure she made what she wanted to say clear. She needed him to understand her...no. No, he’d done enough of that.

She needed to understand him.

“If I were to say no to...to letting them use you, what would you do?”

Izuku turned to her fully, surprise raising his shoulders and widening his eyes.

“W-What?”
“If I were to say that I didn’t want you near them and I didn’t want them to have access to your powers, what would you do? Would you...would you stay at home and go to school and do everything a child your age should? Would you...embrace the time you have left to be a kid?”

His face shuffled quickly through three different expressions. The first two she didn’t quite get a handle on, but they didn’t look pleased. The last one wasn’t very please either, but he was trying to smile. When he failed, he pursed his lips and couldn’t look at her.

“I...would.”

And it hurt. It hurt so much to be lied to in her face like that, because she could see in his eyes that it wasn’t true. In those green and yellow eyes. Eyes that had half to do with hers and Hisashi’s genetics and half to do with the mysterious force taken hold in his body.

“...Please, be honest with me.”

“Mom, I—”

“I mean it, Izuku.” It hurt to watch him flinch and look down. She wasn’t trying to hurt him. She just wanted him to be honest. Needed him to. “I mean it. I want your true answer, no matter how much I wouldn’t like it.”

He was silent after, no longer facing her. A part of her was yelling at herself, telling herself that she was stressing Izuku out, that he didn’t need that pressure, that she should be kind and defensive for him. That she knew what was best and he was fine with it, that it would all be okay if she stuck with her own plan.

But another voice, suspiciously sounding like Shimizu Mako, like the Tsukauchis, like Inspector Yayoi...that one needed an answer.

“Izuku...please.”

The heart monitor’s slow beeping increased, not by much, but enough to be noticeable. He said nothing for a bit longer, but then his head bows further, and his fingers clenched into the sheets.

“Mom...Mom, I—...I...I would...sh-show up to get rid of Gray Men still.”

Something in Inko’s heart began to settle. Something she’d been fending off as much as she possibly could, from the time she realized his magic was apparently essential to getting rid of the new threat, and from the point directly after where she’d flashed back to her baby boy, proclaiming loudly in their house that he’d become a hero.

“And if I locked you away as much as possible? If I put cameras in the house and watched you and told you to never, ever leave the house if you’re not going to school? What would you do then?”

She wouldn’t do that. A part of her screamed that she would, but she knew she wouldn’t. She didn’t even have the money or time to do something like that. But she still had to know.

She broke out of her inner thoughts the instant she heard Izuku’s breath hitch.

When she focused again, Izuku’s shoulders were slouched and curled, much like a child afraid of being hit. It reminded her much like the kind of body language he’d started carrying after he was outted in his class by his own teachers that he was quirkless. Even after she’d complained, the
damage was already done.

Goodness, how she hated to be the cause of that look.

“I would…” Izuku’s breath hitched again and Inko worried her lip. Her eyes widened as she watched her son break down, sobs choking his words off, tears beginning to patter onto his lap. “I w-would sneak out, a-and I’d still fight, and I-I’d get rid of as m-many Gray Men as I could b-before you got home and—and I’d just have to g-get used to y-you h-hating me—”

“No! Oh, goodness, Izuku!”

Inko was out of her seat faster than she’d ever risen up before, mindless to the plastic-wrapped goodies dropping to the floor below, wrapping her arms around her son’s shoulders as he leaned into her shoulder and kept crying. She placed a hand in his hair and held him close like he was going to fall apart.

“Baby, no, I could never, ever hate you. Not you, never you,” she cried, her own tears dropping into his curls. “No...I could never hate you, Izuku. Ever.”

“B-But I—I’ve been out b-being a vigilante and—and I’ve gotten people in trouble and I-I...I’ve lied to you—lied so much cause I-I wanted y-you to be safe and I d-didn’t know what to tell you, or how to tells you, or—”

“Shhh...it’s okay, son.”

It was not okay. Far from okay. But she had to make it okay. She’d cried into his arms too many times for her to not let him have that moment.

They sat in silence as he weeped. She wept as well, but for once, she did it silently, letting her sorrows slip from her eyes only.

Some time passed with them just holding each other, Inko’s arms wrapped around his shoulders with a hand in his hair, his clinging to the back of her shirt like he’d done as a younger boy. The nostalgia made her ache, her bones turning old under her skin. If they could turn into solid rock and stay cradling each other, she would...but she couldn’t. She had to face the reality Izuku was living, even if it meant breaking the silence.

“Honey, I just...please try to understand...you are my one son. My only son, and the only child I’ve ever wanted. I brought you in this world with the intent on making you happy and keeping you safe and—” I failed. I’ve failed you. I’ve made you suffer more than anyone, haven’t I? “I...I can’t see how this could ever be safe. It can’t be. I know it can’t. You...you fighting against those things cannot be safe for you and I can’t allow it under a good conscience.”

She waited, and heard nothing in reply. She realized that she’d done what she’d been doing all along.

“But...but if you can just...tell me...why? Just. I don’t understand.”

She felt Izuku shift against her then, and she felt him trying to look at her. He settled for looking at her shoulder apparently, because he didn’t push her away to actually see her face. With his head near her neck the way it was, she could feel him open his mouth, a puff of breath flushing over her shoulder and neck—cooler than usual, a person’s breath wasn’t usually that lukewarm. He closed his mouth, then opened it again. He tried three, four, five times, then finally began to speak.

“I...I want to do this b-because...no one else can...not like I can. I...e-even if it hurts, this is something
I’m d-dedicated to.”

“Why? Why are you so dedicated to this?” Inko hugged her son tighter, trying to keep him in her arms. “Why, when they couldn’t even protect you?”

“Hmm?”

Inko felt herself scowl, and distantly felt glad that Izuku couldn’t see her face.

“They-They killed you! Their decisions out there killed you, and—and you’re only here because of whatever strange ability they say you have! M-Magic, right? I don’t know what that is. I don’t know, but it kept you alive this time. This time. But if I let you go, what if it happens again? What if they’re too slow? What if they don’t do everything in their power? What if they leave you all alone? What if you...you get some other injury that you can’t heal from normally? How am I supposed to know that you’ll come back like you have this time? Baby, Izuku, I’m scared. I’m scared for you, for myself! Why don’t you care that you could die?!?”

Why is Shimizu right? Why don’t you care about yourself?

Is all of this really my fault?

Izuku stiffened in her arms, then shivered. For a moment, she considered that maybe he hadn’t thought of the unsustainability of him coming back again, that he realized his own vulnerability and finally sees her point. But then, his hands release from her back and he pushes on her shoulders a little.

It took her a second, but she obliged, keeping a hand on his shoulder in return as she wiped at her tears. Izuku didn’t bother with his, crying onto the sheets below even though he was no longer sniffling.

“...I...uhm...Mom?”

“Yes?”

Izuku went silent again and looked down at his lap, playing with his fingers. She swore he looked at his watch for a moment, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Do you...do you remember the—...the way I looked when I cam home? On that one day in April?”

April again.

For a moment, nothing came to mind, but then she quickly remembered. There was a day in April where Izuku came home much later than usual. He’d been crying, apologizing to her over and over again. Hadn’t gone to school the next day because he was too tired. Had clung to her like he’d slip loose into nothingness if he didn’t.

April 10th.

The younger Tsukauchi had said something about him starting his vigilante escapades in April, hadn’t she?

Why was everything starting to line up? She wasn’t sure she liked where this was going.

Izuku cleared his throat and sniffled. “Uhm...that day...that day was, uhm...the day I got my magic. The way I got it...uhm…”
“...Izuku?”

Izuku began to shiver, wrapping his arms around himself. He got this slightly far away look in his eye, like he was remembering something bad. Then he bowed his head and she couldn’t see his eyes anymore.

“Ah...uhm...o-on my way home that day, I...I-I was attacked...b-by a villain.”

Inko gasped, but he kept going.

“H-He was made of s-sludge...a-and he t-ried to suffocate m-me so he could w-wear my s-skin and go around u-undetected. I-I fought back against him, c-cause I didn’t want to die. I-I didn’t want to die so badly, s-so I kicked and—and struggled a-and I tried to breathe, I wanted to breathe so badly —” His breath hitched.

“Oh...oh baby...” Inko smoothed her hand over his hair. “But you...you made it! You made it out! You’re here with me, right now.”

“...B-But Mom...”

Before she could reply, suddenly, her son began to change. His hair, still the same black-gone-green in the light, began to glow yellow around the edges, bright enough the green overtook the black. His skin took on a yellow haze that sparkled a bit like glitter. It was...it was admittedly lovely to look at, but it felt strange. Not so much that she couldn’t recognize that he was there, but that his skin, his hair, even his clothes, started to feel strangely unnatural, like he was there but also not. Like he had one foot there in the natural world and another somewhere different.

He looked up at her then, and she froze.

His eyes were wide and rimmed red with tears still streaming down his glowing cheeks. His irides had turned fully green again, but it was a brighter shade than she was used to. His pupils had changed entirely, both cutting unnaturally into brighter green of his irides in four-pointed stars, inside which the yellow that had once been bled out into his irides overtook his pupils in that gleaming light. A shiny yellow star surrounded by a bright green circle.

“I-I didn’t. I didn’t make it. Th-That’s the whole point.”

...What?

“I got th-the magic...a-after I...after I...”

Inko covered her mouth as tears welled up in her eyes.

“No...No, Izuku...” She put both hands on his shoulders, which he didn’t move away from. Instead, she watched as he closed his eyes, letting tears track their way down his cheeks. “Izu...Izuku...”

“I-It was back then,” the boy sighed out, seemingly out of energy, like he couldn’t really cry so much anymore. “It w-was back then, Mom. The inspector, Detective Tsukauchi...d-didn’t kill me. ...They can’t kill someone who’s already dead.”

Inko felt herself drop and disappear.

Neither of them said anything for a good moment, but eventually, Izuku’s words began to filter into her ears as she stared at those starlit eyes, even if they weren’t directly looking at her.
“The only reason I’m here now is...is because of Handyman.” He rose his right wrist in display to his mother, who finally understood what the watch meant. That watch the magic was coming from, the dark spot on the magic scan. The watch he hadn’t had until after April 10th.

The watch was sentient.

That night she’d heard Izuku, he was speaking to the watch.

The answer had been right under her nose the whole time, and she hadn’t even bothered to consider it.

Izuku continued. “Th-They granted me the ability to c-come back f-from the de-de-...dead, b-but I had to make a deal with them. They c-couldn’t just give me magic for the s-sake of giving it. So, I made a p-promise to them that I would fight against the Gray Men and get rid of them so everyone can be safe, th-that I would try to find the cause of th-the Gray Men’s creation and p-put a stop to it t-to protect everyone. And...and even if I didn’t have to do it, I’d want to.”

When he looked up at her again, his eyes were full of tears, red around the rims and irritated, but they were bright with determination, with focus, with drive. It was a look that she hadn’t seen in his eyes for years. It had just simply become a thing to grow up with—she couldn’t protect him from the school or the students going there, so she’d resigned herself to watching the light leave his eyes. But now it was back, small yet strong, in eyes that would never look the same, gleaming with magic.

She’d longed to see that look, but now it was bittersweet. Those eyes of his gleamed in favor of her opposition.

“This is...this is the first time I’ve felt so needed. I mean, I feel needed at home, and that’s nice, but...but heroics—I mean, I can actually do something now! I’m actually helpful! I’ve dreamt of being a hero all of my life, and now I get to see that happen. No, I get to make it happen myself! Actively! I don’t have to worry anymore, because I actually have a way for making this happen. I can actually... I just...it’s what I want. W-What I need.”

Her hands stayed rooted on Izuku’s shoulders the whole time, barely moving a muscle. His eyes searched hers, and she watched as he realized she wasn’t all there. His eyelids lowered until they closed, and the glow left his body until he appeared normal, his hair dark again. When she still didn’t move, she watched as Izuku shifted closer and hugged her tight around the waist, pressing his forehead near her collarbone.

She could feel his slow heartbeat from their chests being so close to each other.

“I’m sorry, Mom.”

“I need to go think,” Inko said after some time, and she left the room.

Izuku felt pretty exhausted himself, and laid down to sleep, his heartbeat slowing even further to the point the monitor almost began to alarm a few times, his chest moving steadily with each usual-paced breath.

Outside, the sun rose high in the sky, then began to dip the other way.
By the time Izuku woke up again at 1pm, Inko was still gone, the snack foods still laid out on the
ground. Izuku waited around to see if his mom would return, but when she didn’t, he began to eye
the shrimp chips.

He wasn’t really hungry, per se, since he didn’t really feel hunger in general anymore. But he would
feel pangs like hunger, most likely just his cells running on the memory necessity to eat, even if he
didn’t need to. He could still taste either way.

...Eventually, he decided that his non-necessity hunger won him out, and he grabbed the chips,
popped the bag open, and began munching. They tasted good, salty, crunchy, and meaty. He wished
they were actual dried shrimp, but he could only expect so much from a hospital vending machine,
even if the hospital was for heroes.

The fruit snacks were perfect, though—not too gooey or hard, just the right consistency, and the
sweet bun was pretty good, too, though a bit too saturated with sugar.

After one of the strange doctors in the white jackets from the ISFU brought him some water to wash
it down, he waited in his bed a bit longer.

When 3pm came and went, he went back to looking at the cards again, reading the new ones.

Haimawari-san’s All Might card was very well picked out, All Might’s words filling him with
determination, and the flower card from Haneyama gave him some really warm feelings—her words
inside heartfelt and smudged with what looked to be some teardrops. Oguro-san’s card was...well, it
was like his personality. His daughter’s card was attached to it, with a special thanks for saving
someone close to her. He didn’t know the other three all that well, but it was probably from the
former four talking about him and gathering their cards, too. They weren’t as heartfelt, but he
appreciated them no less than the other cards.

He added the stack to the cards from the heroes he got. Over and over again, he found himself
looking over Climantine’s, Nightquake’s, and Mach Barrier’s cards. Climantine’s was blue with rain
clouds on the outside, but on the inside there was a shining sun and a wobbly “sorry” scratched out
in the lower left corner, meant to be hidden from him. Nightquake’s was obviously hand-made, the
calligraphy on it in their professional handwriting. It was very traditional but emotional, a haiku
written inside:

    Shining star dimmed now,
    But only for this moment,
    To shine once again.

He had to restrict how many times he read that one; it always made him really tearful and he didn’t
want to ruin any of the cards he got. The last one, Mach Barrier’s, had his signature written on the
front of it, the inside saying “See? Told you I’d sign something for ya!” It always made him laugh.

He entertained himself with the cards for a long while, reading over them several times, until he
finally heard the door to his room open. This time though, he didn’t try to hide the cards away.

When Inko entered the room, he could tell she’d taken a long time to get her thoughts together. She
looked drained, but settled. Tired but resolute. The brand of tiredness was new though, nothing like
the exhaustion he’d see from her when she’d return late from work. This was a bone-tiredness, one
that could take years off of anyone else’s lives.

Izuku didn’t say anything as she shuffled back to her seat and settled into it, still not saying a word.
The boy closed the card in his lap.
“...Mom?”

She looked at him this time, and for the first time since he woke up, he didn’t see the same judgement as before—he realized now that the judgement wasn’t against him so much as it was against the inspector and detective, but he hadn’t known that then. She gazed at him, then scooted her chair closer and moved to hug him, which he quickly returned. Her hand immediately began to pet his hair, and his arms wrapped around her waist. He closed his eyes at the feeling of her petting him.

They stayed like that for a while until Inko whispered.

“Izuku.”

“...Yes, Mom?”

“...Is this what you really want?”

“Hmm?”

“The fighting. The Gray Men. The dress. Are these things you really want?” When Izuku twitched, she petted him more. “I saw a video, dear. Then I went to see more and...and I understand some more things now, I think. I just had to actually look at it. But be honest with me. Is this what you really want?”

“Yes,” he replied without hesitation. “I...I want this. I want to keep doing this.”

Inko didn’t say anything for a long moment again, then she backed up in their hug to look her son in the eye.

“You’re doing this because you’re worth something, right?”

“I...uhm...”

“Izuku.” Her hands tightened on his shoulders, though not painlessly. “You’re doing this because you’re worth something, right?”

He wasn’t sure where she was going with that. “Uh—y-yes. Yes. I’m...I’m doing this because I’m worth something.”

“Even if you weren’t doing this, you’d still be worth something.”

Izuku fell silent again.

“Izuku.”

“...E-Even...Even if I-I wasn’t...uhm, d-doing this. I-I’d still be w-worth something.”

Inko nodded in approval, then pushed the hair on his forehead up to kiss him there. He closed his eyes and felt the warmth of her lips on his skin, and sighed at the pleasant feeling. He’d been missing her affection, especially now that he wasn’t so withheld.

She kept him in her arms, hugging him close and kissing his cheeks and forehead every once in a while, and he absorbed it like a sponge, nuzzling against her shoulder as his touch starvation returned to him without the heavy weight of stress. He felt like his muscles relaxed and he was just being supported by her love.

It reminded him greatly of the hand in his hair after that fateful day.
The knock on the door knocked him out of his reverie, though.

“Come in,” Inko said, surprising Izuku a bit.

He was even more surprised when Detective Tsukauchi and a quiet Inspector Yayoi entered the room, the detective closing the door after his comrade. The inspector looked at him and smiled at his still slack position against his mother, but despite the embarrassment he felt at being caught leeching hugs from his mom, he didn’t bother to move.

The two stand straight, the inspector’s hands sitting one over the other on her stomach, though one briefly reached up to help her stifle a yawn. Detective Tsukauchi looked like he’d seen better days himself; even though his appearance was still rather impeccable, Izuku recognized the signs of eyebags very well.

He heard his mother’s voice vibrate against his ear as she began to speak.

“You knew.”

Detective Tsukauchi answered first. “Knew what?”

“You knew what happened April 10th.”

Ah...so Izuku told her. The two officials glanced each other’s way, though how Inspector Yayoi managed to do it with her eyes still closed, he wouldn’t know.

“Not until recently,” Tsukauchi replied. “I had given him the OK to participate in the Kronos battle before I knew of his current body condition.” He looked over at the younger Midoriya in her arms when he said so, the boy returning his gaze without any sort of ill-will.

“...I see,” Midoriya-san replied, petting her son’s head. “...but that’s how he got this...magic.”

“Yes.” The inspector answered instead of him that time.

The older Midoriya went silent again. The two of them watched her breathe and hold her son without a single word, not even one from the inspector. She’d given them permission to come into the room, and neither of them wanted to ruin that trust by making a stupid mistake.

It took her a minute or two to speak again. Her eyes set on them with a glare that demanded respect, despite her naturally wide eyes and round body.

“I want to make something abundantly clear. My son is a 15-year-old boy. He...he cannot work as hard as the other people you work with.”

They both nod rather than reply with words, though something in the inspector’s demeanor was turning from tired to a bit giddy. Tsukauchi didn’t quite understand why. Then Midoriya-san spoke again.

“I want him to have breaks. At least one day a week, no different than if he was going to school.”

Oh.
Detective Tsukauchi must have looked a bit shell-shocked, because the inspector nudged him a little. Though, to be fair, the younger Midoriya was staring up as his mother like she’d told him the directions to the Holy Grail, so apparently he hadn’t been expecting that either.

“Oh.

“Absolutely,” the inspector replied for them both, smiling lightly, her high, airy voice set a little lower in her more business-appropriate tone.

“Speaking of school, I want him to keep going to school. I don’t care if the world’s getting destroyed—he needs to have an education.”

“Well said, Midoriya-san,” Inspector Yayoi nodded beside him. He nodded as well for good measure. “We have access to an online school program that will be more than willing to take him on in the event you want him to leave his current middle school.”

The way the younger boy flinched said enough for all of them, but Midoriya-san still spoke.

“...I do.”

“Understood, we’ll arrange for him to start the courses after we get his current transcript. We just need to know how far he is in his current courses and how his grades look.”

“He should be in good academic standing.” She paused then and glanced down at her son with a raised eyebrow.

“I am, I am, don’t worry,” the boy replied quickly. “I-I did all my h-homework and p-projects. I g-get As usually.”

Midoriya-san nodded, satisfied. Then she turned her attention back onto them.

“I don’t want him unsupervised. If he...does field work.”

“That would be against my proposed policy, Midoriya-san,” Yayoi informed her. “The ISFU is working with the police and hero agencies to start a buddy system to combat Gray Men. If your son was working alone, that’d be against the rules we’re attempting to enstate with professionals in the field.”

“Good...and...and are you...trying to do...tests on him?”

“Some tests, yes, but they’ll be little different than a yearly check-up. You’ll have clearance to view the process, of course, and will have jurisdiction to stop us if we’re going too far.”

“Thank you...and...how are the police involved in this?”

Tsukauchi cleared his throat before speaking, feeling a monumental pressure on his shoulders. “The police will continue correspondence with the heroes and now with the ISFU as a means of bridging relational gaps between the two groups and with the public. As I’m in the Public Affairs Investigation sector, I’ll also be in charge of investigating any Gray Man attacks, though with the new merger, I’ll specifically be in charge of monitoring Musutafu’s main heroes and their encounters with Gray Men. Your son will be included in that list.”

The older Midoriya nodded, breathed, then settled into what felt like a sealing request.

“I...I want to know what’s happening with my son. I don’t want to be left in the dark if you can help
it. I want to know everything you can tell me. And—and if for some reason my authority isn’t enough...I want to be able to trust you two to act in Izuku’s best interest.”

She stared directly at him, a question in her eyes.

He answered it promptly, bowing.

“I promise you, Midoriya-san. I’ll do everything in my power to ensure his safety.”

“As will I,” Yayoi said beside him, following his example.

He heard Midoriya Inko sigh, and the two rose up a bit from their bowed positions. She was looking off to the side, a small, smile on her face, even though her eyebrows were tilted up in some distress. Then, her shoulders dropped, her eyes closing.

“Then...let’s...let’s discuss how to move forward.”

Tsukuachi blinked, then smiled as Midoriya Izuku, encased in his mother’s arms, went beside himself with joy and squealed, hugging her tightly around the waist, whisper-yelling thank yous into her ears.

Chapter End Notes

See you in Season 2.
Aaaaah hi hi hi, hello.

This is super late, but I've been very busy <:<

Anyway, thank you guys for all your support! Let's get on with it quickly today, shall we? (っ°ω°;)っ

Today's chapter has more fish.

Science had definitively proven that office jobs were technically qualified as grievous torture.

The enclosed space without any privacy, the scent of lackluster coffee, the mercury lights inspecting them all like ants in a petri dish, the printing, the paper cuts, the irate phone calls, the Godforsaken clacking... Then the computer had the audacity to throw Excel sheets full of nonsensical numbers at any unwitting, unfortunate sod because some nutcase edited the wrong file and now the Toshima ward numbers were terribly, terribly wrong.

Well, that’s what Mako got for getting a degree in accounting of all things.

Luckily, instead of her, a more recent hire, that unfortunate sod ended up being one of the older hires to the company. Which, good on them, get some extra brownie points while they can. Because you can never be too old of an employee to still get some points. But from the way the poor young woman was squinting at the screen, a calculator in one hand as she tried to determine whether those were all supposed to be sixes or if a nine was supposed to be in that number, Shimizu felt a severe amount of pity. No brownie points were worth that.

“Magakuro-san,” a low voice bellowed from the smaller but singularly occupied desk of the department director. His desk was piled with stacks of messy files to be passed of onto someone else, his long, snail-like eyes pointed directly at his phone. Behind his desk was an aquarium with only kelp and algae in it.

The woman beside Mako jolted, her rectangular glasses slipping on her face when her long ears raised at the sides of her head. She hurried to sit up, her dark blue, almost black puffy curls bouncing and framing her face, interrupted only by the curving gray of her horns.

“M-Meehh, s-sir?” her nasally reply came.

The director didn’t bother to look away from his phone, sniffling and rubbing at his moustache before his nose settled.

“Tea.”

Magakuro looked conflicted immediately. Her dead-fish eyes widened as she glanced quickly between the work on her computer and her boss’ desk, bleating under her breath. Her fingers trembled as she tried to decide, but then the director cleared his throat. When she looked back at the
man, he glared at her this time, his long, lidded eyes angled towards her rather than the screen.

“Don’t you understand what ‘tea’ means, Magakuro-san? I’m sure you learned it in second grade. I don’t need to repeat myself, do I?”

“Myeh—...N-no. No, sir. One moment.”

Her head bowed, and she stood from her seat, pushing it in before she trekked over to the small office kitchen. Mako watched her go, but began hearing whispers from the other female employees around them.

“There he goes again, bullying her around.”

“Isn’t she already redoing the district numbers?”

“That’s technically his job, too.”

“Gosh, why doesn’t she stand up for herself? She’s such a pushover.”

“He’s always on her cause she’s not that cute, isn’t he?”

“Well, she’s Maguro-kun, after all.”

Mako slid back, her chair rolling from under the desk as she stood up, startling the chatting ladies around her who quickly went back to work. The director shifted in his chair to see who moved, but the instant he saw who it was, he turned back around and scrolled quickly through his phone. Her eyes narrowed at his back, but otherwise she said nothing about it.

“Toilet,” she said, pushing her chair in and moving away, her tail carefully over her shoulder and covered by the additional cloth attached to the pants of her suit.

Instead of going to the bathroom as she said she would, she crept over to the kitchen and peered in, hearing the low bubbling of the kettle. The stove top glowed a dim red in the darkness, Magakuro apparently having decided to not turn on the light. She stood before the kettle with her head bowed, counting her fingers. She’d been in the middle of calculating a number when she’d been interrupted, and now Mako could see she was trying desperately to keep the right number in mind. She knew what it meant when the smaller woman’s shoulders slumped and her hands dropped to her sides.

Mako scrunched in and stood near the door and watched for a moment, unsure of what to say. She pressed her lips together tightly and juggled with a few different ways to introduce her presence—she didn’t want to scare her coworker after all, but she did want to try doing something and that meant making her aware of her presence. She waited for a while, even till the kettle started squealing, Magakuro moving it off of the heat. Then, deciding to do it before the woman could burn herself, Mako coughed into her hand when she turned the heat off.

The woman let out a choked off bleat until her gaze settled on who it was, then her dead-fish eyes calmed and lidded half way and she put her hand on her chest.

“Maaaahh, you’re silent as a mouse.” She calmed and blinked slowly at her, this time her small, somewhat thick frame absent of fear. “What is it, Shimizu-san?”

“...Ah, if you’d like, I can pour the tea for you.”

Magakuro blinked widely. “Meeh? What for? The boss wants me to do it, after all.”
“You were busy,” Mako said, walking further into the kitchenette. “And he should be pouring his own tea. If he can’t do it himself, the least I can do as your coworker is let you get back to work.”

She looked a bit shocked, like she was unsure of what to do or say next. Then her ears drooped, shoulder relaxed further, and a lopsided smile tilted onto her face. “Maaaah, if you insist, I’m not gonna stop you. Actually, if you don’t mind, I’d like to stay in here with you. I’m losing the definition between what sixes and nines are.”

Mako nodded and moved further into the room, taking control of the kettle and the mug the tea was to go into. The tea bag was already prepared, so Mako began to slowly pour the water over it, pressing the bag in the bottom with a spoon to let it steep. Magakuro leaned against the counter and sighed, pushing her glasses up to rub at her eyes.

“Maaaaaahh, you’re so reliable, Shimizu-san. A really nice person.”

“I try to be,” Mako replied, finishing the pour before putting the kettle back on the stovetop on a part that wasn’t hot.

“No, really, I can see why they hired you. You’re good with numbers and you catch stuff quickly, and no one even dares to mess with you, not even after a whole month,” Magakuro mused, her eyes closed as she supported her head with one hand on the counter. “You give off this really cool vibe… You know, I’ve been working under Tsubugi-taichou for three years, and this is the first time anyone’s poured the tea for him instead of me since I started. You’re really one in a million, you know?”

Mako thinks back to someone else who fit that bill more. A young boy with a shock of green hair all over his head, and a wobbly smile that endeared her more than most others, whose heart was too big for his body.

She hasn’t heard from him in a while.

“Hmm…”

The two fell into a comfortable silence for a while before the woman sighed and pushed off of the counter. “

“Maaah, his majesty needs his tea. I’ll—”

“You can go back to work, Magakuro-san.”

“...Meh?”

Mako looked over to the older woman and smiled a little, just a slight tilting of the corners of her mouth. “I insist. You can go ahead.”

“...A-Are you sure? I mean, he likes his tea sweet, so—”

“I’m sure. It’s fine.”

Magakuro looked as though she would protest, but bleated instead. Her eyebrows scrunched with worry, she left the kitchen and headed back to her desk. Meanwhile, Mako stayed and waited for it to steep just a tad longer, then picked up the tea mug.

Back in the office, the ladies murmuring amongst each other again. Magakuro was back to her assignment, mulling over the numbers, while the other ladies seemed confused by her presence. That
was, until they saw what she was holding.

Mako didn’t look at them directly, only vaguely noticing them out of the corners of her eyes. Instead, her gaze was set to the director’s desk, the hot mug on top of the holding tray in her hands. Slowly the clacking faded as more of them watched to see what would happen.

She made it all the way to his desk without him looking up even once, his long eyes focused intently on his phone screen. Mako narrowed her eyes at the reflection, noting some nearly monochromatic orange-ish puzzle game with numbers multiplying by each other as he swiped the squares. Without a word, she picked up the mug and slid it onto his desk near his hand. Likewise, without a word, he picked up the tea mug and sipped from it, still not looking up.

He smacked his lips after sipping and hummed grumly.

“What’s this? It tastes bitter. What kind of woman are you if you can’t make a simple cup of tea, huh?” Tsumugi grumbled.

His gaze left the screen then, looking right at the height Magakuro would usually be standing at, only to realize he needed to look up further. Brown irides met black sclera and gleaming green, and he spittook, nearly spilling tea on his phone. Above him, Mako’s eyes narrowed minutely, a tiny movement, but her done-up hair gave him a perfect view of the action.

“Hmm?”

“I...said…” The director looked at his cup of tea then back at Mako’s hulking figure. His long eyes shrunk back towards his head, almost making him look normal. “…this is delicious! It’s wonderful, even! You made it just the way I like it!” He clicked his phone off and sipped the tea again for good measure, poorly attempting to cover the cringe at the bitterness.

Mako tilted her head a little. “If you’d like, I can go get you sugar.”

“No, no, this is fine, Shimizu-san! I’d hate to keep you from your work! This is. Wonderful.” He sipped it again, and his left eye twitched. “Delicious.”

...Now that was just sad. Workplace discrimination was alive and well in all different kinds of forms it seemed.

Mako nodded, then bowed. “Good. I hope you enjoy it.”

She turned around then and went back to the kitchenette to put the holding tray back where it belonged. By the time she was back, the ladies were all working again, and the director smiled at her and sipped until she took her seat and appeared to not be paying attention to him anymore.

When he scurried off to the kitchenette to put sugar in it by himself a few minutes later, she huffed, but kept doing her work.

“Maaaaah, that was amazing,” Magakuro praised, her nasally, easygoing voice not carrying much in the lunch area.

Several little white, circular tables were set up for employees to sit at and eat in front of a large window with a view of the skyline, the vending machines off to the side humming with different
drinks and packaged snacks on display. Mako had brought her own lunch—smoked salmon, rice, a salad with lettuce, olives, tomatoes, and a light garlic vinaigrette, and a bottle of homemade green tea lemonade—and Magakuro had a small stack of lunch breads from the little store on the first floor and a strawberry milk. While they hadn’t made a habit of eating together before, that day just seemed to call for it.

Magakuro held a tuna and mayo bread in her hands and smiled up at Mako. “I’m not a vindictive person usually, but I very much enjoyed that. The look on his face was priceless. Seriously, you’re crazy cool, Shimizu-san.”

“Mmmh.” Mako couldn’t say much around a mouth full of smoked salmon.

The other woman bit into her bread and chewed it for a bit before she sighed. “You know, I’m pretty jealous of you.”

Mako’s eyebrows rose in surprise, and she swallowed her fish. “...Why?”

“Maaaah, I mean, people take you seriously. You’ve got such a big, strong body, no one messes with you. And even though I’m your senpai, you’re the one who’s gone and stuck up for me.” Her ears flopped down onto her shoulders. “Not that I’m not thankful, because I really am, but I don’t feel very...ahhh, adequate. Seriously, big people like you are fortunate. All you have to do is just look at them, and they get scared into submission.”

Magakuro bit again into her bread, realizing belatedly that Mako didn’t reply. The shark-quirk woman was staring at her lunch, eyes lidded and wistful. After a moment, she hummed lowly and ate a piece of her salad.

“I wasn’t trying to scare him.”

“...You weren’t?”

She shook her head. “I was trying to get him to see that he could’ve asked someone else. Either that, or he could go make it himself. But...well, as you said. I scared him instead. ...Most of the time...most of the time, I’m never trying to scare anyone. They just get scared all on their own.”

“Maaaaah...well, I mean, I’m pretty sure he’s going to go get it himself for a while now, haha. Haha...ha...”

Mako hummed, saying nothing more as she ate.

They fell into an awkward silence, the voices of their coworkers floating around them as they spoke and laughed amongst each other.

“...I’m sorry. Saying you were scary wasn’t very nice of me.” Magakuro rubbed at the back of her head, eyes shifting from her bread to the side of Mako’s head. “Maaaah, let me make it up to you. See, there’s this karaoke place that I like to go to every once in a while. It’d be really fun if you came with me, I think. We could just have some girl talk and sing our hearts out if you’d want.”

Mako turned to her with wide eyes. “...Are you sure?”

“Of course! I mean, it’s not like you’re bad company, Shimizu-san.” Magakuro smiled with a lazy turn at the corners of her lips, easygoing and lax. “I might be your senpai here, but out there, we could just be hanging out, no problem.”

She blinked at the older woman once. Twice. Thrice. Then it seemed to catch on to her that
Magakuro wasn’t joking.

“Are you...sure?”

“Yeah! Why not? We could go some time soon—not tonight, but definitely later. Maybe Friday night?” Magakuro took out her phone, clicking on it to set her schedule. “Maaaaaah...how does 8pm sound to you?”

Ah, that’s no good, I—…” She paused then, and then her shoulders sagged, her eyebrows scrunching up. “…Actually, I’m free. I used to have something to do on Fridays, but...well, I don’t now.”

“Oh, really? What did you have to do?”

Mako are another piece of salmon. “Training.”

Magakuro waited for more of an explanation, but when she didn’t get one, she shifted to look at her phone again, a little sweat running down the side of her face. “M-Maaaaaah...well, if you’re free, then we could set it for that time.”

“...Mmhmm. That’ll work.”

It made Mako upset to say that, honestly. Ever since Midoriya had gone to the hospital, she hadn’t heard a single peep from him. She’d kept her time open, hoping that maybe his quirklessness would be an advantage for him in a vigilante case so she could talk some sense into him while he did some community service or something. But, well, it had been weeks now. She’d expect some sort of contact by now, but her messages were presumably left unread, and none of her calls had been returned. She wanted to think maybe he was ghosting her. At least that would mean he was okay.

“I’ll put it in my phone,” she said, taking the device out of her pocket. She unlocked it and clicked on her scheduling app, scrolling to that day only to see the repeating alert she had prepared for training days with Midoriya. Her lips pursed and she sighed, her thumb hovering over the bright red Delete Event button.

Whatever was going on with him...she hoped he was safe.

Before she could click it, her screen went black, and she paused, blinking. Moments later, it started vibrating, and an unknown number showed up on her screen with the green option pick it up or the red one to hang it up.

It wasn’t that the ID was unknown, just that she didn’t recognize the number. There was no name to it either, so it wasn’t a commercial phone number or one in her contacts. Was it spam? She got those sometimes.

“Maaaaah...you gonna answer that?” Magakuro asked, gazing at her with her ears slightly raised.

Mako considered it for a moment, her thumb hovering over the new red button. It was probably spam. Telemarketers were getting access to more cell phone numbers day by day. She never really answered them unless they left a message, and even then, if they revealed themselves to be a telemarketer in the message, she never replied. So all of her usual habits told her to click the red button and plan to go singing karaoke for the first time since she was eight.

But. Well. She wanted to answer it.

She wasn’t sure why, but she kind of wanted to see who would call her during work hours. If an
automated voice came up or someone trying to sell her something came up, she’d just hang up and keep going. Answering it this one time would hurt.

So she clicked the button to answer, and put the phone up to her head, near where her ear would be if she had any external ones.

“Hello, this is Shimizu.”

“Ah, hello!” a light, airy voice filtered from the other side of the call, clear yet slightly robotic through the device. “I hope I caught you at a good time!”

“You didn’t,” she replied with a tone flat as a board, ready to hang up.

“My apologies, Shimizu-san.” There was a sort of smile in her tone. Easygoing yet professional. “This is an urgent matter that I hope to get resolved soon if I could have just a few minutes of your time to set up an appointment, that would be lovely.”

“And you are?”

“I’m Inspector Yayoi Gin, head inspector of the Japanese sector of the International Special Forces Unit.”

And right then and there, Shimizu’s brain stalled like a broken record, the woman’s last sentence playing over and over again in her head. See, it didn’t make sense to her. She knew that name pretty well—she’d seen the woman speak before the media at the press conference. Silvery-gray hair, small build, closed eyes. But the woman had been on television—she was somewhat of a government assistant in a sense, wasn’t she?

So how was she on her phone?

“...Wha? Ah.” She stood up, holding up a finger towards a curious Magakuro. “Ehhh, give me just a moment.”

She couldn’t hear what the woman sitting by her was saying, too focused on closing up her bento and scurrying away from the table with her things, finding a hallway to search for rooms in. Searching the clean, shining halls until she found a filing room, she jiggled the doorknob with the blessed luck of finding it open. She slipped in before shutting the door behind her, company only to herself, the woman on the other side of the phone, and several aisles of boxed supplies.

“Okay…” She breathed. “What.”

Yayoi laughed on the other side of the line, her giggles tinkling like wind chimes.

“Shimizu-san, I was hoping that you could meet with a few people at the hospital in regards to Midoriya-kun. You see, he’ll be working with us on a particular issue, and we were hoping you could provide some input. It seems Midoriya-kun favors you—he asked for you himself.”

“He...he’s okay? No one told me what happened to him, just that he was in the hospital... Wait, how do you know him?”

“Mmhmm! He’s recovering well from his injuries, so we’re taking the next steps.”

“What steps? What are you talking about?” Shimizu resisted the urge to punch the wall in frustration.

“Right, well, I unfortunately cannot explain everything over the phone. But I will say this—
Midoriya-kun is doing well. He wants to see you in the hospital to discuss some pretty sensitive matters in regards to his own development and his participation in our anti-Gray Man action plan.”

Gray Man? Like, those weirdly shaped, humanoid monster creatures? Like the one that attacked in Yokohama? The one that devastated heroes and police in Rirossu?

Like hell he was doing that!

Shimizu’s body shook with rage. “…Are you serious? He told me he’s quirkless.”

“Oh, make no mistake, he is. By the laws of genetics and his own blood, he does not have a quirk.”

She gritted her teeth, her voice lowered dangerously. “Then, please explain to me how you’re trying to have a kid without a quirk fight monsters that not even grown heroes who have trained their abilities can handle.”

In direct contrast to her own basal tone, the woman on the other end laughed lightly, like the tinkling of a windchime. Mako wanted to strangle her.

That was, until her laughter cleared.

“Shimizu-san, have you ever heard of Minute Maid?”

Several hours later, noon had shifted into afternoon with a bright sun preparing to blind drivers later and Shimizu was following two figures in dog-eared white windbreakers to a hospital room in Rirossu.

She’d managed to convince her boss to let her off early for an emergency, though she did promise to work one more hour to finish her work before she left. He’d practically ushered her out when that hour was up, thanking her for her time. Magakuro was strangely silent the whole time after the call, but she decided she’d just talk to the older woman about it later. Right now, her friend took precedence. One, because he was alive and well, and two, apparently he’d signed up for some kind of government plan without her knowledge.

The two strange people were mostly silent as they directed her to the empty hallway where Midoriya’s room sat. When they walked up to it, they took their positions on either side of the door and waited.

Shimizu glanced at the two cautiously, a little sweat running down the side of her head. She swallowed and looked forward, pulling her hair out of the bun she’d had it in before before moving forward. She curled her fingers around the door knob before pulling it open.

Midoriya sat in his bed, covers up to his waist, sitting up as he played a game on a phone that wasn’t his. It looked like a game anyway, from the way his fingers slid across the screen. He looked paler than she remembered, but the bags under his eyes looked lighter, so he must’ve gotten some good sleep while recovering. There was no heart monitor or IV, so it looked like he was just hanging out in a hospital bed, save for the pile of cards on the bedside desk, and the cot put up in the corner of the room.

She didn’t have to say anything for him to look up from the phone, and she blinked, startled by the gleaming, sparkling yellow that took over the lower half of his still green irides. The boy’s eyes
widened, and she watched as he dropped the phone onto his lap, tears quickly welling up in his eyes.

“Shi-Shimizu-senpai!”

There were no words on her tongue, nothing ready to leave her lips. She was so filled with awe, frustration, and a bone-deep relief that she couldn’t manage to say anything yet. Instead, she rushed forward despite herself, and watched as, instead of cowering from her as others would, Midoriya scrambled to get up onto his knees.

Subconsciously, she remembered that most of her skin was covered. With that, she didn’t have to restrict herself to just a pat on his head.

Her arms wrapped around his body as soon as she was close enough, and his arms quickly curled around her neck, the boy crying into her shoulder. For a moment, she couldn’t do much else other than hug him, shocked by her own actions and shocked to see the boy alright. After more than two weeks without contact, she’d started to wonder if he was alive or dead.

Why was she so attached to him? Why had she missed him so much?

One of her hands reaches up and rubbed at the back his his head.

“She’s so Attached to him? Why had she missed him so much?”

“Hey.” She cleared her throat and tried again. “Hey. Gosh, where have you been?”

She could vaguely hear what he was saying in reply, muffled apologies confessed into her covered shoulder.

She sighed and rubbed his head, not unlatching from him as her tail managed to find a chair and pull it vaguely in her direction with her tail fins and rough skin. She was sure she pulled a few strands of the corded cloth that made it loose and frayed, but the hospital had the money to replace it if need be. Sitting down, she kept holding him until her usual awkwardness started bleeding into her cells and she patted his back in stilted movements, prompting him to let go.

He did, though his face had got blotchy and a little snotty. She couldn’t help snorting at him.

“Hey…”

“I’m so s-sorry I didn’t c-contact you before now.” He sniffled and wiped his eyes with the backs of his hands. “S-So much h-happened and I c-couldn’t reach you and I was too f-focused on other things but—but I’m so happy to see you again!”

Her lips turned up at the corners, squinting a little from her smile. “Same here, kid.” Then her smile muted, falling as she thought. “I...Look, I’m not holding it against you, not contacting me. I just...don’t understand. What the hell have you gotten yourself in to?”

Izuku looked down and fiddled with his hospital gown. “Uhm...well...i-it’s a long story, but...uhm...h-have you heard of...Minute Maid?”

Mako bent forward in her seat more, both to pay attention and to give her tail more room behind her. “Yeah. I hadn’t really paid much attention to them before, but Yayoi-san, that woman...she told me about you. And I watched a video on the way here.”

When she’d gotten picked up by the sleek black car, she was surprised to find them more amicable than she’d expected, showing her a screen with a video of Minute Maid on it, fighting a Gray Man in front of a dilapidated apartment on the outskirts of downtown Musutafu. She had to watch it twice to get over her initial shock, the second time around showing her exactly who it was. It was easy to tell
if you knew what to look for—the twist in his hips at each kick, his tendency to rely more on his legs, the way he got nervous and self-conscious immediately after the fight was finished. They were all tell-tale signs that it was Midoriya.

“But...what I don’t understand is...how’s that not a quirk?” Mako frowned at her laced fingers. “I don’t really understand all of this...magic stuff. I mean, maybe they are different, but...when you told me you were quirkless, I was thinking I was helping you defend yourself from bullies. Not fighting these...whatever they are.”

It wasn’t a lie—if magic was different from quirks, then Midoriya hadn’t lied to her about his quirklessness. But. She still felt strange about it. Uncomfortable.

She heard a sniffle and looked up at the boy.

“I-I know.” He trembled like he was forcing himself to look at her. “I...I u-used you. I used you to t-teach me how to f-fight, even though I k-knew how you felt about kids fighting. I knew that you d-didn’t like it, I-I did...b-but I still...it’s...y-you’re the best t-teacher I could’ve asked for! I-I don’t mean it as an excuse, I don’t! I-I just...” His gaze finally fell back to his lap. “I couldn’t...i-it wouldn’t have worked out...if i-it hadn’t been you. I would’ve...I would’ve failed a long time ago.”

“Failed? What do you mean?”

Before he could answer, there was a knock on the door, before it opened without waiting for a reply. She turned and watched as a tall man with short black hair and dark, honest eyes entered the room alongside a woman Mako had already met before, Midoriya Inko smiling mutedly at her. There was also what looked to be a woman in a white windbreaker, only instead of dog ears, there was a flower insignia on it. The lower half of her face was covered by the dark blue of her turtleneck, but the upper half showed her dark green hair, bright green skin, and yellow, serpentine eyes, not too unlike her own.

“Hello, Shimizu-san,” the man began, walking closer to her. “I am Detective Tsukauchi Naomasa, detective for the Musutafu Police. Midoriya-san tells me that you two have already met.”

Mako went stiff and bows to him as respectfully as she could while still sitting, ignoring the surprised interest of the boy on the bed near her. “Uh, yeah. A while ago.”

He smiled and nodded before directing her attention to the still silent woman in white. “This is Sakura, a member of Hana Team in the International Special Forces Unit. Inspector Yayoi would have been here, but she’s been pulled aside for other matters. Sakura will be standing in for her for the time being.”

Sakura bowed in greeting without a single word, and Shimizu awkwardly bowed back.

“Right...so...uh, what’s this about?” She glanced between all of the new people with caution.

“You’ve been told about Minute Maid, correct?” Tsukauchi asked, and watched as Mako nodded in reply. “And you know that Midoriya-kun is Minute Maid, correct?”

Mako turned only her eyes to look at Izuku, who blushed and found an intimate interest in his own gown. “Yeah...they showed me in the car. He also just told me.”

“Right then, if you don’t mind listening, I need to explain exactly what is happening between Midoriya-kun and the police.” Tsukauchi moved over to the wall and grabbed two chairs, one for Inko and one for Sakura. But Sakura moved over to the wall at the same time, picking up her own chair, so he kept one for himself. All three took seats near the bed, and Izuku, in his bed, shuffled
Mako tried not to make the cold sweat on her skin obvious. Gosh, everything was getting so official and such. The police was there, a member of an international organization associated with the government was there, the mother of the kid she’d been training without her permission was there...it felt like that time she was going to detention in elementary school all over again. Only more serious and with a much greater potential for jail time.

The detective leaned forward in his seat a bit. “You see, Shimizu-san, the Gray Men are constructs made of magic. Do you know what magic is?”

Mako frowned. “...Kind of. I saw the press conference. Something about...energy similar to quirks, but not the same. Deriving from the same energy.”

Sakura, who had been quiet, chimed in then. “That is mostly accurate. Magic and quirks are intimately related, though not the same. That said, it is likely that magic and quirks are not similar as siblings are as our studies first indicated. We are still looking to find their exact relationship.”

Tsukauchi nodded. “Understood. Then, at the least, Shimizu-san, you know the basics about magic as said in the conference. You also know, then, how a normal human reacts to the touch of a Gray Man—some of the energy from their quirks factor is taken from them and they are left unable to use their quirks like they had before. They also tend to sustain some level of brain damage or loss of ability. Quirks are also, as stated in the conference, unable to get rid of a Gray Man. That is where Minute Maid, Midoriya Izuku, comes in.”

The shark woman turned to the boy, who managed to glance up at her shyly, flushed at the fact the conversation turned to him. The yellow in his eyes glitters like twinkling stars.

“He does not have a quirk, but has obtained magic,” Tsukauchi said. “With him having magic, he is currently the only human able to eradicate Gray Men on a molecular level. No one else can get rid of the ever increasing population of them, so his power is necessary in ridding our country from them.”

Mako swallowed thickly, then looked down at her lap, nervous at her next words.

“Ah...well...I hear you...but...he’s a...” Mako turned to Izuku then, looking to see if she could get any understanding of what was happening.

Izuku instead was staring back at her, his hands curled in his hospital gown, hopeful for something from her. Her heart clenched and she looked away. She couldn’t imagine what he was looking for, couldn’t imagine what he wanted.

“...I mean...is this...is this something you even want?” she managed after a moment, not looking at him.

It was a stupid question. She already knew the answer to it.

“Y-Yes. Yes, this is what I want to do. It’s...it’s one of the o-only things...I’ve ever wanted to do. I-If this is the only way I can be a hero...a-and I need to. I need to do this.”

“Need to?”

Izuku stiffened then—she didn’t even have to look at him to tell, but she still turned his way. His teeth worried at his bottom lip just as the detective cleared his throat.

“You see, the way Midoriya-kun came into his magic is...unconventional, I should say. And the way
regulated magic such as his works is also odd, and confidential. Which is why I was hoping to ask you if you would like to take a proposition we have to offer to you.”

Mako blinked at him with her third eyelid, then frowned. “...What proposition.”

Sakura spoke up again then, sitting straight like a statue. “Your previous training has worked significantly to improve not only his effectivity, but also his personal health. He sustained fewer injuries the longer he continued his practices with you. While we could easily find him another trainer to continue his combat education, Midoriya-kun personally suggested that you continue it instead.”

Her eyes widened and she turned to face Izuku sharply, the gills at her neck flaring. “What?”

“Y-You don’t have to if you don’t want to!” Izuku rose his hands placatingly. “I-I’m just...I just...I’m familiar with you. A-And I like training with you...it was fun when we talked, and...I didn’t...want to lose that.” He laughed then, a wry thing that could barely constitute for one. “It’s...a selfish request.”

Mako wasn’t sure how to respond. He knew...Izuku knew how she felt about hero schools and hero training from a young age. She’d waxed poetic to him about how much she hated what society was doing—teaching teens how to battle while telling adults to run away.

In her mind, she flashed back to a villain attack during her senior year of high school on a small city mall complex, the bright blue sky an accent to the rising cloud from the fire. She and her mother were running away from the attack as heroes ran towards the destruction the villain caused, his large porcupine-like quills piercing through metal and brick, some threatening to stab through people as well. She’d been cut on the cheek narrowly missing one.

As she and her much more human-looking mother fled, a smaller body caught her eye, running in the opposite direction of the crowd. She reached out and grabbed their sleeve, telling them the exit was the other way.

The kid looked back at her, maybe fifteen or sixteen, and suddenly she seemed to realize that they were in a hero suit, with big gauntlets on their fists and a dark hood over their head. The shook her hand off and demanded that she follow the others out of the building, then gave her a smile that was supposed to be reassuring, proclaiming they would take care of everything. They turned away from her at the same time her mother tugged on her and pulled her away. To anyone else, the sight of that kid’s back heading into the battle would’ve been reassuring.

She’d been haunted by it instead.

“...Can you all...excuse me for a moment?”

Without waiting for them to approve, she stood from her seat and walked over to the door, for once mindless of her tail swaying behind her. No one said anything or stopped her as she opened it and walked out into the cool, echoing hallway. She turned left, then right, then found the sign she was looking for, and walked away from the door without a single word to the people in white.

Forty-five minutes later, Izuku curled up into a ball, hugging his legs close to his chest.

“I...I knew it. I knew she’d say no.”
“Technically, she didn’t say anything conclusive,” Sakura replied.

“I know, but...b-but sometimes, n-not getting a reply is an answer, too, isn’t it?”

“True.”

Tsukauchi leaned forward and patted Izuku’s shoulder, smiling though the boy couldn’t see it. “She’s probably just a bit overwhelmed. We did tell her quite a few things in a matter of minutes. She’s probably just trying to take in all of what we’ve said. Do you think you could find out where she went?” He turned to Sakura.

“Yes.” She stood from her seat and headed to the door. “I’ll ask Akita-san.”

“Akita?”

She didn’t answer him, opening the door before whispering to one of the people in white. After a moment, that person turned and looked into the room, their dark brown eyes stark against their alabaster sclera and reddish-tan skin, their face framed by a mess of medium-length teal hair.

“She’s in the bathroom, though not to potty,” a feminine voice replied, alto-toned but surprisingly easy-going. “She’s been in there for the past few minutes, ever since she left the room.”

Inko’s head tilted slightly. “The bathroom?”

The person known as Akita turned to the other dog-eared coat bearer—the other taller with short, platinum blond hair, sharp blue eyes, and a hawkish, humanoid nose—and said something to them. After a moment, they nodded in return to whatever they said, and Akita entered the room, closing the door behind them so both they and Sakura stood at the door.

“Yeah, see, she walked into the women’s restroom down the right hall, to the right, fifty feet forward then to the right again. She’s been pacing around the bathroom for a while, but then she thought someone would come in there and see her because she doesn’t know this section of the hospital’s been blocked off for the most part.” Akita rose a hand to their mouth and giggled into it. “She thought she’d look weird, so she hid in a stall. How considerate!”

Izuku brought his face away from his knees, curiosity bleeding into his somber demeanor.

“...Your quirk...it’s kind of like Ragdoll’s.”

Akita perked up, grinning. “You mean from the Wild Wild Pussycats? Yep! Only, Ragdoll can track a hundred people, I can only do about forty if they’re close by. That said, she knows their weaknesses and quirks, while I know their location for a few hundred miles or so. Also, depending on how close they are, I can determine what their most prominent emotions are, or at the least, if they’re still far away, I can tell what they were thinking! Much like a dog, you know?”

“So it’s based off of scent.”

They snapped their fingers and grinned even wider, so different from their usual guarding behavior it surprised the others. “Exactly! As long as I can smell them, I can trace them! Through tornado or hailstorm, they still can’t escape this nose! Though, I’ve gotta say, Shimizu-san’s a bit harder to trace since she doesn’t sweat as much. Shark scales and whatnot.”

As they spoke, Inko stood from her chair. “Uhm, excuse me, Akita-san?”

“Yes?”
Inko focused on her hands for a moment, but then she looked up to the curious guard.

“Would you mind telling me where she is again? I...I was thinking maybe I could talk to her.”

The guard blinked at her, but then they grinned, and with the ears on their hood, it was hard to not imagine a wagging tail behind them. “I’ll do you one better, Midoriya-san! I’m supposed to guard you guys, so I’ll just take you there.”

Mako’s head was in her hands as she stared at the shiny tile of the bathroom floor, the tall walls of the stall her willful cage. Despite the risk of pushing one of the buttons on the toilet and making water splash up onto her pants, she sat on it and contemplated her life choices, because obviously, she’d gone wrong somewhere. She had to have for the boy to ask such a thing of her.

She was so caught up in her own thoughts, she barely heard the restroom door open, but she especially heard it when the intruder knocked on her stall door, startling her out of her thoughts.

“Um...Shimizu-san? Are you in there?”

“...Midoriya-san?”

She didn’t sweat much just based off the fact her skin wasn’t the same as a base-bodied person, but she still felt like she could sweat bullets if she gave her skin the chance. Considering the situation, she’d imagined that Midoriya Inko would be the last person who wanted to talk to her, considering her possible influence on the woman’s son.

“Yes, it’s me. Do you think we could...talk?”

“Oh, uh…” She floundered for a moment, unsure of what to do or say. “Yeah...sure, I suppose. Uhm...wait, one sec.”

She leaned forward on the toilet and unlocked the stall door, pulling it open to reveal the short, round woman on the other side. Midoriya-san smiled at her kindly, but her smile twitched, and she had to hide a giggle behind a slightly closed fist. Mako couldn’t blame her—she must’ve looked weird with her large body curled up in a bathroom stall. Besides, her tail was starting to strain, unable to find a good position to lay in.

It was now that the two were up close that she could see the slight bags under the woman’s eyes—not as bad as her son’s were, but bad enough to make her heart clench.

“Are you alright? I imagine everything’s been a bit much.”

Mako looked off to the side, making a noncommittal noise from the back of her throat. After all she’d said last time they met, how was she supposed to confide in the woman?

Despite her lack of reply, the older woman moved over to the sinks and leaned against the counter of them, closing her eyes. After a moment, she opened them, her gaze soulful and, if Mako had to choose another word for the unexplainable darkness in her eyes, solemn.

“What...what do you think about all of this? And I understand...if you say something...true enough to offend.”
Mako blinked, surprised, and she sat up a little more. Though not as much—her tail twinged with the beginnings of a pulled muscle. It took her another minute of silence before she could even open her mouth with confidence.

“I...don’t understand...this society,” she confessed, glaring down at the floor. “I don’t understand why our society is fine with throwing kids into what’s essentially a battlefield. I don’t get why so many people think it’s okay. I mean, there’s heroes out here now that are my age, but when I was trying to pass a math class, they were trying to stop someone from bleeding out, trying to prevent villains from murdering people. It’s the adults making all of these problems and they—we should be the ones to take care of it. Yet, if you want to use your quirk as an older person to get rid of villains, you’re a vigilante, which, understandable, but then there’s no avenue for training older people to become heroes. They all come in young, no matter what. Like we’re making child soldiers then showing them beat each other up on live television for attention.”

After that, she closed her mouth, slotting her teeth together, and waited.

She heard Midoriya-san hum lowly before she spoke up.

“I...I understand that. Why you’d be upset about it. I...I confess I’ve never thought about it too much like that. I just felt that, well, if they had the training and the strength and the will to do it, children who attend U.A. were fine with it. They made the choice to attend the school.”

Mako resisted the urge to snort. *Years of hero/villain propaganda will do that to you.*

“But...well...that’s not exactly Izuku’s case. With the magic...it’s different.”

Midoriya-san leaned back a little on the counter and looked up wistfully.

“When they first told me everything, I was in shock for a while, I think. I shut them out and refused to listen to a single thing they said. Things like...how much Izuku’s needed for everything to work out. How he’s needed to fight those strange creatures. I refused for days to even humor the notion.”

Rightfully so, Mako thought.

“But then...well, I had a bit of a change in perspective. To tell you the truth, I thought about what you said to me that day, Shimizu-san. And...” Inko smiled wryly, her her fingers lacing. “You were right. I wasn’t listening to him enough. He’s...he has enough ideas in that head of his, he could fill an encyclopedia. He’s wiser than I’d realized, and even though I’ve raised him from a baby, I’ve never seen him so stubborn. I’ve never listened to him, not about his desire to be a hero. But now...with this situation the way it is,” she shrugged. “I can’t help but listen.”

Mako’s eyes went wide, her shoulders stiff and her teeth clenched, but she didn’t let a single sound filter out her mouth. Her heart beat wildly in her chest because, oh no, this was partially her fault, wasn’t it. Clearly, she’d said enough.

Midoriya-san, please, when I said you needed to listen to him more, I didn’t mean it like this.

“And...and Izuku told me something that changed my mind. I’m not sure if I can tell you, but I do know he’ll tell you if you ask. But, well, despite my dissent earlier, I’ve...kind of come to accept this. I haven’t completely, but this is something he wants to do, something he has the power to do, and with the consequences being what they could be, it’d be wrong for me to stop him.”

“That’s not—”

Midoriya-san paused, blinking at her, and Mako’s eyes trailed down to the floor, her own words
stopping in her throat. Her tail twitched behind her in the stall, knocking against one of the walls.

“...I know that.”

“What...do you mean?”

Her gaze didn’t leave the tile, her words choking out of her piece by piece. “I...I know that he can’t be stopped. I know that he’s not going to stop. There’s no way I could tell him not to do it without disappointing him. Everything...ever since I’ve gotten here—no, even before I have, I’ve realized that everything’s already been decided. Whether I join or not is of no consequence, but the show’s gonna go on. That’s why...that’s why…”

Her hands clasped together, and she grit her teeth before she spoke again.

“That’s why this hurts so much. Because I know what Midoriya’s asking me to do, and he knows what he’s asking me to do, too. And I...I want to say no.” She finally looked up then, eyes wide with the panic flowing under her scales. “I want to say no, because I’ve spoken out about all these people, talked crap about the society that breeds kids into heroes, and Midoriya’s asking me to become a trainer so he’ll be a better tool. He’s asking me keep doing something I’ve liked so far in the name of something I hate. And I...I can’t do that with a happy heart. I don’t want to.”

She watched as Midoriya-san’s mouth dropped open a little, realization coloring her expression somber.

“Ahh, I see... Then, why don’t you say no?”

Mako didn’t see Midoriya Inko anymore.

Instead, she saw the pale door to a rickedy two-story apartment squeak open just from knocking on it, the waves of heat from that near-summer day creating a haze that washed out all the colors around her. She saw her hand reach out and cautiously push the door full of mail stuffed through the slot open, and caught sight of the scuffed brown shoes and the fallen mail all across the genkan. The apartment looked empty, but someone was home.

Someone was home, but the house was completely dark inside, without a light on or window open. The cicadas were screaming on the trees behind her. Even so, she stepped inside, taking off her shoes before walking further in.

She blinked, and she was back in the bathroom, standing when she didn’t realize she’d stood. The toilet was flushing because her tail hit a button when it shifted behind her, the water swirling down the pipes. Her throat felt dry, and despite her scales, a bead of sweat trailed down her neck at the memory, cicadas still screaming at the back of her mind.

“Wouldn’t that...just be abandoning him? I can’t do that either...Can’t accept what continuing his training means for me, but can’t abandon him either. That’s why I’m frustrated.”

“Because you know what you’re going to do, but can’t accept it.”

“...” Her gaze dropped down to the floor again, her tail sliding down to the floor as much as it could in the constrained space. “...Yeah.”

Silence lulled between them for a moment. Mako’s eyes opened a little wider when she felt the older woman’s hand on her forearm, patting it in what she guessed was both reassurance and sympathy.

“I understand,” she heard Midoriya Inko say. “...I understand completely. It’s alright if you need
more time to decide.”

At that, Mako laughed, choked out and ingenuine.

“I’ve already decided. I’m just coming to terms with it.”

When she returned to the room with Inko, the tall guard at the door entered the room instead of Akita, who smiled and stayed outside of the room that time around. Izuku was still sitting on the bed when she returned, looking like he was going to burst out of his own skin out of anxiety, right up until she said she agreed. Detective Tsukauchi asked if she was sure, and though it took her a moment, she replied that she was.

From there, the two of them started giving her the lowdown on the situation, explaining to her more specifically what Gray Men were and explaining their studies on the strange creatures’ unknown origins, as well as detailing further what Izuku’s place was in everything and how she’d be helping. All the while, Izuku, hyped up on gratefulness, hugged her arm until his nervousness got the better of him and he released her. She put her hand on his head without a word.

The more they went in on the specific details, the more her head spun, but she wasn’t going to back out. She hated the idea of going back on her word for anything, really, but especially now, when she had someone relying on her. Ah, speaking of reliance, she needed to rely on one thing at least, too.

While Tsukauchi was in the middle of a sentence, she suddenly rose her other hand. “Ah...wait. I hate to ask this so late but...ah. How much...is the pay, actually? Am I getting paid?” Her tail swished against the floor behind her. “I need to pay for my apartment and all that...”

Sakura nodded. “Of course, my apologies for not clarifying that to you earlier. Here.” She pulled a paper out of her pocket and handed it to Mako.

Mako took a hold of it and unfolded the paper with the number. She blinked. Then blinked rapidly another four times. Peered at it closely. Then backed it away from her face.

“...Is this...what...every two months or something?”

“It’s bi-weekly.”

She blinked rapidly again.

“Oh.”

Chapter End Notes

Ah, the other guard’s name is Borzoi, by the way. That’s not her real name of course, but just for the record. :}
New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

Holy FUCK this took a long-ass time.

HEY GUYYYYYYS

I honestly don't have much to say other than I'm super happy to be able to post again and I hope to do so again soon~!

Ah, also, I asked about some popularity opinions earlier, but I didn't get too many replies if any from over here. So anyway: popularity poll result art!!!

And another without the magic shenanigans :3

Thank you guys for being so patient all this time! I really appreciate it! (ง’̀-'́’'ง) kilograms

Let's get started with Season 2~

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“...How much does all of this stuff cost?”

The stuff Shimizu referred to was the wide open area with a track curling around the edge within in the right wing of the ISFU Testing Facility. The white walls of the building formed a large dome with bright lights lining the ceiling. It had to be at least the size of a football field. Reinforced plexiglas lined the hall they passed through to give a good view of the open arena. Having been recently built by local construction workers with some helpful assistance by Cementoss for the more quickly needed structure, it still had that new cement aroma.

The mystery that was Inspector Yayoi laughed lightly, walking ahead of the group as Inko and Izuku glanced around in awe as well. Akita and Borzoi flanked them on each side as several Tanezumi’s with different numbers on their backs scurried around the building, preparing it for further use.

“Ah, no need to worry about that. This place is built by funds the ISFU has been saving up for several years. The only buildings taxpayers are investing in are the prefectural containment centers. The Gray Men in those will eventually get transported to the left wing here if a hero doesn’t use one of Minute Maid’s weapons on it.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Because it doesn’t need an answer,” Yayoi replied, shaking her finger at the shark-quirked woman. “It’s our organization’s money, after all.”

Shimizu grit her teeth tightly, then released the tension as she leaned down towards Inko.
“Is she always like that?”

Inko sighed, shrugging. “It seems like it.”

“This building is going to be the only one of its kind,” Inspector Yayoi spoke up, moving her arms to show off the design of the area. “Our main testing center will be here while the left wing will become a large containment center for Gray Men. It’ll be more convenient to have them close for testing, of course.”

“And the track?” Inko asked.

“Oh, the track and other training facilities here will be for our Inu Team and Midoriya-kun.”

Izuku startled a little, his face flushing. “F-For me, too?”

Inspector Yayoi turned back towards him so he could see her smile. “Of course it’s for you, too. After all, what’s the point of having a trainer if you can’t train in your full potential?”

“And that’s why I’m here…” Shimizu trailed off, subtly moving out of the way of a particularly hurried doctor.

“Precisely! See, Midoriya-kun relates with you the most as far as training goes, and you’ve been more than sufficient so far, so I saw no harm in allowing Midoriya-kun to be comfortable and offering you a job!” Then her mouth opened in a small O, like she suddenly remembered something. “Ah, also, about the track, it’ll be used to witness what happens when Midoriya-kun gets rid of the Gray Men.”

“It’ll be safe, right?” Inko asked, her hands wringing nervously.

“It’ll be as safe as we can get it, for certain.”

The group passed through the hall towards an intersection, where a double door to right lead towards the viewing platform in the dome and another to the left lead somewhere most of the group didn’t know nor cared to know for the time being. They continued forward through another hall lined with windows on both sides, shorter than the last one, that gave a view of the hills and mountains of Toyama Prefecture, away from Musutafu and Tokyo.

Close by, there were a few areas being cleared out, trees moved from their place to make room for another pale building, but there remained enough woods for the already standing structures to look more integrated into the environment rather than destroying it.

“What are they clearing that area for?” Shimizu asked, her hands stuffed in her pockets.

The inspector glanced back at her curiously before gazing over where Shimizu was looking, all with her eyes closed. “Oh, over there? Just some storage. We’re also setting up some back-up generators and other ways of making energy through the rivers nearby. There’s a few more buildings that need construction, but it’ll be done in the next few months.”

“Months? Didn’t you just get this place built by Cementoss?”

“Well, she’s leaving that building and some others completely to the construction workers.” Akita chimed in, waving her hand dismissively. “Something about feeding the economy.”

“Precisely!” The inspector put her fists on her hips and puffed one of her cheeks out in a pout. “What’s the point of building all of this stuff if I can’t put some food on a few plates, huh?”
Izuku gave her a small smile, rather pleased by her answer, and Inko sighed, but she seemed happy as well. Shimizu nodded, agreeing wholeheartedly. Even if the woman was a bit of a pain, it wasn’t as though she had a bad heart.

At the end of the long hall with the windows showing Toyama, they took a right through some double doors into what appeared to be a small hospital. There were a few nurses arranging the bedrooms, and a nurse station was already set, the two noticing them bowing at their entrance.

“This is the hospital area in case we get some emergencies. The other double doors we didn’t pass through back there actually lead to the surgery and check-up areas, so that way we’ll have quite a few things close to the testing area. Nothing too far away in case of injuries.”

The group nodded in understanding, looking around the beige walls and photos of different flowers.

For a moment, Yayoi didn’t prompt them to move anywhere else. Though the group was initially distracted, they realized they weren’t moving and focused back on her. She remained still for a few more moments.

“...Ah, I didn’t think this through.” She turned on her heel and faced them again. “Anyway, let’s walk back.”

The three visitors all blinked, confused. “Huh?”

Yayoi laughed and put her hands on her hips, her smile a little tight at the corners. “The testing room I need us to go to is back in the other building. I just wanted to show you the health facilities for future reference. But yes, we’ll need to go back.”

“...Thanks,” Shimizu mumbled, her eyes narrowed in pained exasperation.

“You’re welcome!” she replied brightly.

Though Borzoi, tall and imposing, remained stone-faced, Akita turned her face off to the side and snorted into her hand.

The room she brought them too looked and smelled a lot like the one at the hospital with the MRI scanner, only the room and window were bigger. Inside the testing section, there was a square on the ground with a red circle to indicate a standing position, as well as pads on the sides of the room and various arms attached to the ceiling with different cameras and other devices attached to them. There were also small amounts of exercise equipment, like a treadmill and some dumbbells of various weights. The lights were dim in the viewing room, but bright in the actual testing area.

There were already two Tanezumis waiting at a desk full of different buttons and computer screens, all calibrating and waiting for the subject to enter the room.

“We’ll stay in the viewing section. Now then, Midoriya-kun, would you mind going over to the other side of the glass?” Inspector Yayoi asked, walking further into the room.

Before Izuku moved, he looked over at his mother for approval. At Inko’s nod, he turned back towards the inspector.

“Ah, y-yes ma’am! I’ll go.”
He walked away from the group then, entering a side door to get to the other room. Inko watched him go, worry coloring her features, but Shimizu placed a hand on her shoulder wordlessly. It gave the older woman some more strength in the very strange situation, and she steeled herself. The two followed further into the room, closing the door behind them as Izuku walked into the testing room, eyes somehow not squinting even under the bright lights.

“Now then, just to let you both know, Midoriya-kun won’t be doing anything strenuous today,” the inspector began, watching as the two Tanezumis directed Izuku to stand in the red circle and began calibrating their machines. “He’s fresh out of the hospital, of course, so he won’t be doing much. This is just for us to do some initial scans on him and understand more about the magic in his system.”

Just like in the hospital, a scan eased onto a big screen to the back of the room from top to bottom, showing Izuku’s body moving within the circle, the boy fidgeting around.

“We’ll watch him transform, then do a few minor exercises to see how his magic moves through his body. I know the treadmill’s in there, but we won’t be using that today. We’ll also start him out with a low-weight dumbbell. Will that be alright?”

Shimizu glanced down at Inko before looking around the room on the other side of the glass. Meanwhile, Inko thought for a second before she looked up and nodded.

“Yes...I think that will be fine.”

“Perfect!” Yayoi cheered, then she nodded towards the two Tanezumis.

One of them nodded, then pressed a red button right by a microphone sticking out of the desk.

“Beginning test MM-0001-24.08.22. Midoriya-kun, whenever you’re ready, please go ahead and transform.”

Izuku breathed in a heavy breath, then released it slowly, dissipating some of his nerves. Then the boy nodded, deciding to get started. He reached for his wrist, ready to press the small button on his watch, but he paused short of doing so. They watched as he blinked then straightened up.

“Ah, s-sorry! I’m doing it now.”

Then, without touching his watch, he began to change.

It started as a glow right around his chest, where the pole had gone through his ribcage. Yellow sparks light lightning began to fizz around him, the yellow in his eyes glowing brighter, bleeding into his pupils before he closed his eyes. His back arched a little as yellow ribbons stretched out from his chest, Inko covering her mouth with a gasp.

It only took a moment, like the blink of an eye. The screen showing the magical pathways through his body flickered as something dark and undefined bled out from his wrist watch before the pathways lit up like a star, blinding out the intricate network. One moment, his body was encased in the ribbons. And the next, they were gone.

There was a round of gasps from the civilians in the room, while the two Tanezumis mumbled amongst each other as they recorded what they saw.

On the other side of the glass, Izuku’s entire body changed visibly.

His skin glowed dimly with energy, not as vibrant as his body had been once before, but still more
than average, fluorescent in the dim light. His dress looked different as well, much more like the maid he’d been named for. It was still the same shade of pink, but the apron had become a corset-type, beginning right under his chest, with four circular yellow buttons arranged in a square. The apron strings were criss-crossed like a corset and tied into a bow. The dress had changed a bit as well, replacing the dress’ collar with a scooping neck cut. He wore a white dress shirt under it with a tab collar, a big, bright yellow bow tied neatly on his collarbone. The puffs at his shoulders were covered with a small white cape, so small it didn’t even cover the sleeves.

His wrist-length white gloves had cuffs with two yellow buttons on the outer sides of his wrists. White socks with petal-like shapes at the top went all the way under his dress so the tops couldn’t be seen along with his white shorts. His shoes had changed from a pink version of his usual hightops to bright red ankle boots with the same petal pattern as his socks around the ankles. Its short, 2” block heels and soles were black, the only dark think on him aside from the wristwatch over Izuku’s right glove.

He still wore the rabbit pin in his slightly longer hair, with it’s white button for a face and two yellow cloth ears. It was now pinned to a white frilly maid headband that went over his yellow-lined, light green hair, a more pale rendition of his usual color. The other side had a small string bow, barely visible through his mane of hair. He blinked his eyes open slowly, revealing that his pupil had turned into a yellow, four-pointed star, contained within his bright green irides.

He blinked once again, then started looking down at himself, taking in his new clothes. On the other side of the glass, Shimizu stared at him with wide eyes as did Inko, and Yayoi cheered.

“Aaah, an upgrade! So cute, too. We don’t have any preliminary scans from his last outfit, but I’m guessing there’s some upgrades here. I’ll have to ask if Handyman will tell me what they are…” She moved over and clicked the button for her microphone on the desk. “Midoriya-kun, do you feel alright?”

Izuku looked over at the window and nodded. “Uhm, y-yeah! Yes ma’am, I feel fine. It’s just...a little different.”

“You’re not uncomfortable are you?”

“No, I’m not.”

Inko’s hand dropped down from her mouth as understanding began to color her features, like something clicked and was finally making sense. At that moment, Izuku seemed to remember his mother and trainer were there, turning towards them with a sheepish smile on his face.

“Uhm...h-hey Mom.”

Inko blinked at her son, then smiled lightly, moving forward to press the button for her microphone on the desk. “Okay, Midoriya-kun, let’s run through a few tests and see how
your magic works, alright?”

That snapped him out of his giddiness, and he straightened up, facing the group. His face was still red from the compliments, but he frowned slightly in seriousness and nodded.

“Y-Yes ma’am!”

Aizawa always liked for things to be discrete, the personality of his boyfriend his one exception. So when they picked an apartment together, Hizashi humored him and got a private apartment deep in the city at a complex indistinguishable from the others around them. Since the apartment provided housing for those working in the hero industry and their families exclusively—whether they were heroes, hero trainers, or were nurses working at the nearby hospitals—it was guarded well and didn’t cost as much as other complexes in the center of the city would.

As he walked up to the entrance, he approached the watcher at the onyx-black gate, the tan skinned, pastel pink-haired woman in the watch box appearing to be asleep. Her arms were crossed over her chest, partially hiding the apartment’s logo. But once he was up to her, her dark purple eyelids opened, revealing pale green irides and white pupils.

“Welcome back, Aizawa-san,” she said, her voice sliding out from between her lips like silk. Her gaze slid over vaguely to where he stood. “That purple-haired kid’s getting closer to finding you, you know. Almost made it to this street, but he lost confidence in himself.” She chuckled a little. “It’s cute.”

“Hmm.” He pressed the buttons on the smaller gate next to the car entrance to let himself in.

She turned towards him a bit more, tipping the concierge hat on her head back. Her eyes still missed his body. “Also, it seems you have a new neighbor. Not directly next door to you, but a door down. Basically next door.”

That gave him pause. It’d been a while since someone’s lived nearly next to them. Not that they couldn’t live next to them—Aizawa was allowed to have the walls soundproofed due to his boyfriend’s quirk. It was just something about the two of them that made neighbors not live close by.

“Another hero?”

The woman smiled at him, tapping her finger against her bicep. “You could call them that.”

His eyes lidded further. “No need to be cryptic, Annie.”

Annie closed her eyes and waved her hand. “I’m not really being cryptic. I hear that there’s not a word for who they are right now, I don’t think. If there is, I don’t know it.”

Aizawa watched as her shoulders settled and her face turned away, and he knew she was done talking. She was a woman of few words like himself, so he could understand that. It didn’t make him any less perturbed, but it was something he could deal with.

He sighed under his breath before moving through the gate.

His building wasn’t far from it, thankfully, so not too much time passed to get to it. And just as Annie had warned, a white moving truck sat parked in front of the complex, the back open with a
few boxes sitting further inside. The driver’s seat was vacant, and the hazard lights blinked. He stared at it as he passed before heading to the elevator.

The doors opened smoothly with a melodic ding, and he walked in, pressing the button for the fifth floor. A moment later, the door slid closed and the elevator rumbled with its upward motion as a small tune played in the background—some song from a bossa nova musician he didn’t recognize. Aizawa’s eyelids drifted a little lower the longer he was in, his hands in his pockets with his work bag tucked under his arm, blinking drowsily.

_Hizashi won’t be home till about 6. I might as well take a nap before then_, Aizawa thought, closing his eyes briefly as though he could sneak in a few seconds of unconsciousness. But then the elevator dinged once more, and the doors slid open just as smoothly to welcome him as they did to evict him.

He stepped out and walked to the right in the hall before taking a left, peering down into the center courtyard with a small garden of shrubs and greenery. The front doors of numerous other apartments from blocks B, C, and D were visible all around him as he lumbered down the long balcony walkway so he could get to his apartment, but stopped upon looking further down the line. His eyes opened a little at the sight of more boxes by a door near where he and Hizashi lived. They really were close...the first near neighbors they’ve had in a few months.

Heading forwards towards his home, with the wall of apartment doors to his left and the bright summer afternoon and sounds of the courtyard birds to his right, Aizawa began inspecting what he could without seeing another person just yet.

There were many just sitting outside of the room...moving the boxes up before moving them inside rather than one after another? Probably more than one person moving in then, since if it had been one person, they would’ve moved the boxes in already. A lot of them were small, probably lighter weight. So the person probably didn’t have too much strength to them, or they just didn’t have big enough boxes to pack their things in.

He was at his door before he knew it, and he shook his head to focus, digging deeper into his pocket to get out the house key. He couldn’t hear anyone speaking, so perhaps they were the quiet kind. There was no harm in that.

Anyway, there wasn’t really a point in speculating so much. He wouldn’t be able to know anything else about them until he saw them. So he pulled out the house key and stuck it into the lock, ready to turn it—

But then his neighbor’s beige door opened up just a moment before he could retreat into willful solitude. Muffled voices quickly cleared as someone approached the entrance, and he recognized the voices as belong to a woman and a young boy.

Aizawa sighed, his shoulders sagging as he rubbed at the back of his head. He really wasn’t up for socializing too much at the moment...but...well...neighbors and the sort.

So he turned to face the family, ready to at least be cordial.

“C-C’mon Mom, I can carry something!” he heard the boy call out, closer to the door than the inside of the house.

“No buts!” he heard from deeper inside. “You just got out of the hospital, so you don’t need to do any lifting. Just leave it to us, okay?”

“Yeah, I know, but...”
At that moment, a large woman—*not the one speaking*, his mind supplied—walked out of the door. Her skin was covered with white and blue scales, a long tail following her outside a few moments later. A baseball cap caused her dark hair to curtain around her head, and she wore a long sleeved shirt and a tail sleeve that matched her gray sweats. Her back was to him, so she didn’t see him, and he didn’t feel the need to make himself known.

Right after her, a young, lightly-tanned boy followed out, a green—almost black—mess of hair all over his head. He wore a plain white t-shirt that said “polo shirt” on it and khaki shorts, and interestingly enough, a small, yellow Hello Kitty hairpin.

“Please, Shimizu-senpai…”

“Nope,” she replied, her tail swishing. “You heard your mom. Hospital boys don’t carry boxes.”

“Oh, c’mon! P-Please?” The boy, for some reason he’s not sure of, turns his way briefly before turning back, then turns towards him again. It was then that Aizawa noted the smattering of freckles across his nose and cheeks. “I promise I won’t drop anything, and—oh.”

Damn. Now he really did have to be social.

He nodded once without a word, holding the key between his pointer finger and thumb, fully ready to retreat into his home if possible. The boy nodded back, a fidgety, cautious movement, but that wasn’t all he intended to do, moving forward to greet him. *Escape failed!!* an annoyingly familiar voice chimed in his head.

“Uhm...h-hello! I’m, ah, m-moving in next door. Ah, w-well, door after next.”

“Duly noted,” Aizawa replied as his eyebrows rose a little, the boy laughing stiltedly in reply as he shrunk in on himself. Though, there was a curious tint in his eyes, like he was trying to decipher something.

Aizawa’s door was mere inches away, just to his left. He could hear the siren song of his bedsheets his from within his apartment. All he had to do was just turn and unlock it and slip inside, just go inside and—

“Ah, meet someone?”

Aizawa’s eyes lidded further, but he still looked up as the shark-quirk woman returned, nodding her head at him in a short bow. He nodded back just out of general politeness, which she accepted. The boy turned to her, flustered.

“Yeah! Uhm, our neighbor...uhhh…” His eye still had that strange, prying curiosity.

“Aizawa Shouta.” He blinked slowly, gravity pulling at his eyelids.

“Shimizu Mako, and Midoriya probably introduced himself already.”

*Shimizu, huh? Then they aren’t related? Or is it something else…*

“Oh.”

Aizawa was knocked out of his thoughts by the boy’s breathy response. He focused on the boy’s face and watched as...recognition and awe slowly colored his face pink, his eyebrows rising.

“Oh...oh my God.” The boy’s mouth dropped open. “You’re Eraserhead.”
Aizawa blinked as the kid staggered back two steps before latching onto the end of the woman’s shirt, tugging on it lightly as he stared at him with starstruck eyes. The older man felt more than a little put on the spot...weren’t those looks reserved for, he didn’t know, All Might or something?

“S-Shimizu-senpai, it’s really him, it’s really Eraserhead, oh my gosh! I thought he looked sort of familiar! His hair’s so different when it’s down... I know the inspector said some heroes live here, but to live right next to Eraserhead! Shimizu-senpai, I’m dreaming. Pinch me. I’ve got to be dreaming.”

Shimizu’s tail stopped swaying behind her, and a regretful wince pinched her expression.

“...Eraserhead?”

Aizawa watched as Midoriya—that’s what she called him, right?—turned towards his senpai with such an affronted look on his face, it was as though she’d personally offended the boy by saying his mother was a hamster.

“Eraserhead! One of Musutafu’s most prominent underground heroes! He holds the twenty-third spot on drug busts in the inner-city area, the seventeenth on yakuza regulation, and the unofficial fourth spot on crime reducibility in this city! I say unofficial only because they don’t put underground heroes on those ratings, but his presence scares villains and yakuza more than even Edgeshot! The only reason he’s not labeled with the public pros is because he needs the secrecy to be the most effective, and if it means sacrificing some of his paycheck to not get the benefits of publicity, he still does it! He’s an inspiration to heroics and—”

Midoriya, as the shark woman had called him, suddenly began turning a startling shade of red.

“—he’s standing right there, indeed, right there as he’s going home, because we’re neighbors now and he knows where I live, yeah, I didn’t say all of that, please forget I said anything at all.”

The boy was shaking with just how embarrassed he was. Shimizu was as well, but judging by the way she hid the front of her mouth behind her fist and occasionally let out a huff, he knew it was for a completely different reason. Midoriya quickly turned back towards him before bowing sharply.

“H-Hi, yes, I’m s-so sorry, I’m a disgrace, p-please ignore me.”

“Hmm.” Aizawa rubbed at the back of his head, looking off to the side. “It’s not often people know that much. I’m wondering where you got those numbers from, though.” And judging from all that you said, I need to be more discrete.

“A-Ahh, w-well, I just...ah...c-calculated up the rankings based on p-police reports and g-general stats that I s-saw on different p-peer reviewed w-websites, a-and a few s-scholarly journals, i-it’s nothing special.”

“Hey,” Shimizu said, staring down at the boy. “Say what you just said again, but erase that last bit.”

When the boy remained silent, the woman sighed and turned towards him, pointing a thumb at the boy who looked about ready to combust.

“He’s a stupidly smart hero nerd, basically.”

Aizawa hummed as the boy wheezed, a little tidbit in his memory reminding him that he’d seen a kid before who also seemed to know quite a bit about heroes.

“I see,” he hummed. “So...not to pry, but you mentioned an inspector.”
The boy was too busy still wheezing and generally trying to get over his own embarrassment, so the woman replied. “Inspector...ah, Midoriya mentioned one? He probably means Inspector Yayoi.” She looked to be ready to leave it at that, but then she seemed to realize something, smiling stiltedly. “Ahh...you, uh, do know who that is, right?”

Yes, Aizawa knew exactly who that was. The puffy-haired woman had made herself at home at the agency he worked at, drinking tea in their break room with the agency supervisor. Immediately upon seeing him pass by, she’d hopped right up in the middle of the man’s sentence and asked if he’d work with her on a little test for the then vigilante Minute Maid. He’d been inclined to decline at first, but after she explained the situation, he decided to dedicate some time to it. Now she was spearheading the ISFU’s interaction with several hero agencies and the government itself, as high as the Cabinet and the Prime Minister.

There was no hero in Japan nowadays who didn’t know who she was.

“Yes, I know of her.” His head tilted forward tiredly. “How do you know her?”

It obviously wasn’t because Shimizu was a hero or anything. The fact she’d asked that question said that alone. So then, maybe it had something to do with another occupation, or the occupation of the boy’s still unseen mother.

Who, apparently, had some type of mindreading quirk or something of the sort, because she was peeking her head out of the doorway, drying her hands on a dish towel.

“Oh, there you two are!” the small, round woman said, slipping on her outside shoes before walking over. “Is this our neighbor?”

“Mom, Mom, he’s Eraserhead, as in, the Eraserhead,” the boy, Midoriya, spoke up, his face still red from residual embarrassment. He hopped a little on the balls of his feet in excitement. Just watching him made Aizawa feel more tired. “Ah, but his name’s Aizawa-san! And he’s Eraserhead.”

He watched as the woman’s face brightened and she smiled at her son, nodding along like a parent does when they don’t completely understand what their child’s saying but they love them anyway, then turned her attention to him. “So, you’re a hero then! I’m Midoriya Inko. It’s so nice to meet you, and thank you for your service!” He felt her eyes trail along his body, probably inspecting him or something, and that bright expression shifted into mild concern. “Though...I hope you’ve been sleeping well enough…”

“...Mom?”

“You’re looking rather pale, too...how about eating? Have you been eating well?” Aizawa’s eyebrows raise as Midoriya-san put her hand on her cheek, her gaze now focused on every single one of his tired features at once. “I’m going to be making some katsudon if you’d like me to give you a bowl. It'll be no trouble on my part.”

“Moouuuuuuuoom, really? He’s a hero…” Beside the kid tugging lightly on his mother’s shirt in an effort to make her stop, Shimizu’s mouth twisted up in her effort to not laugh.

Well, this wasn’t how he imagined his afternoon would go. The sheets were still calling him, yet he couldn’t seem to find a good way to escape from the new woman’s concerned, motherly gaze. It was like he was trapped. He wondered if this was how some villains felt when he erased their quirks.

“No, it’s alright. Thank you for the offer, though.” He nodded in a bow to her, but she didn’t seem to accept his answer gladly. Still, she didn’t protest verbally, so he considered it a win. “As for you
all... You’re Midoriya, and you’re Shimizu…” His gaze fell on the boy. “You’re a Midoriya as well, but never said your name.”

The boy startled, realizing that he was right, and looked ready to give his apology and name, but then Shimizu’s tail patted him on the back, soft enough that he didn’t budge too much. The tall woman looked down at the boy with her arms crossed, smiling.

“You might as well tell him both names, don’t you think? It’s only fair since you know his.”

...Both names?

Apparently the boy knew what she meant because he flustered immediately. He wondered how stressful the kid’s life was, because he seemed to have some obvious anxiety problems.

“Ahh...n-no, it’s alright, I mean—”

“No, I think Shimizu-san’s right,” the older Midoriya chimed in, smiling kindly at both her son and at him. “It’s likely the two of you might end up working together some time, so an introduction now would be best.”

Hold up now, what?

Working together? With the kid?

When Shimizu, who’s not a hero and perhaps not a nurse in training either, didn’t deny the seemingly stay-at-home mother’s claim, his confusion must’ve showed somehow on his face because both women prompted the small boy further.

He blinked, looking at him, then off to the side, then at the ground. He fidgeted a little as he nodded and tried to get himself together.

“I-I’m...uhm…”

The boy swallowed, collected himself, then tried again. He looked at him with a bit more confidence the second time around before bowing with his eyes closed tightly.

“I am M-M-Midoriya Izuku, but m-more people know me by M-Minute Maid.”

...What.

Midoriya—Minute Maid—had yet to raise his head, face red as he kept going.

“I-It’s really nice to m-meet you!”

…Well, this might as well be a thing that happened, huh.

“Hhhhhhhnnnnn...Yamada-kuuuuuun.”

“Don’t whine, Kayama-chan, it’s for your own good!” Yamada called back, sitting outside of the dressing room stall, scrolling through the recent news on his phone. “You’re doing this for yourself, remember?”
There were no windows in their nearly all white section of the building, the dressing room empty save for the two of them. Yamada sat in a beige and brown lounge chair while the couch nearby was covered with attempt after attempt at a new costume for the R-18+ Only hero, Midnight. Behind the curtain of one of the stalls, heels clacked against the floor.

On any other occasion, Yamada wouldn’t have been allowed an inch inside where he currently sat, but since it was Kayama and she’d requested his input, there he was instead of grading English papers. Given, honestly, she was doing him a favor.

Kayama poked her head out of the curtain, her expression drawn into dramatic agony.

“I’m dying...my skin...I’m covering too much of my skin...”

He glanced up from his phone and snorted, placing his phone on his lap as his hand started moving. “I mean, if we want to be technical, you were covered completely in your old outfit. Even if it barely counted—and I mean barely—it technically did.”

“...Touché.”

He watched her shuffle behind the curtain again, and he nodded, satisfied. Returning to his screen, he clicked a like on a Twitter post of a fan dressed up as him at a comic convention.

“Why are you getting a new outfit if the old one works fine based on standards? Sure you’d have to thicken the tearable cloth so it doesn’t happen accidentally, but why else?”

He was genuinely curious, too. Despite his concerns over her health before, Kayama had insisted that she wasn’t going to change her outfit after the first time she considered it and tried. When she had, her popularity dropped by several points, and she even received less recognition for her heroics. The media and payment action surrounding his friend really made him mourn at the condition of women in heroics.

But this time, she was dead-set in changing it up, even if her popularity took a flop. Well, she was much more popular now since she’d made a name and brand of herself, so even if she altered her look, she wasn’t as likely to take a drastic hit to her popularity now. Though, there was the risk of her ‘look’ to have become too popular with her fans and the support dropping because of that. Hence why he couldn’t help but wonder why she insisted on changing despite that possibility.

“Aaah, you heard that rumor about Minute Maid right? That they got skewered through the chest with a pole.”

Yamada shuddered. Yeah, he’d heard about it. Dreamt about it, too. Hadn’t let himself leave his apartment without telling Shouta that he loved him at least three times for weeks after that came to his knowledge.

“Uhhh yeah, I did. But hey, that could’ve happened to anyone at any time. Bernkauser took a pole to the leg once. He still limps on that leg even now. And Lilimaker decided to retire after getting stabbed during a bank heist.”

“Yeah, but they don’t have my quirk.”

“Hmm?” He scrolled down further as he skipped over some critique on Blackjack made by Tazmine Gal.

“See, my chest has always been an open stab area, but most men never get close enough to try it. All I’d have to do is tear the tights and let my quirk do the rest. Works best on men, but women get
knocked out by me all the time. It works on anyone. Or, well, any human.”

“Aaaaah...I see where you’re going with this.” Yamada looked up and stared at the curtain Kayama was changing behind.

“Exactly. I’ve been able to trust my quirk to work with humans involved for the most part, but these Gray Men? Not only can’t you negotiate with them, but they’re outright violent, almost like they want to kill people. I’m pretty sure they really do, too, like it’s programmed into their genetic make-up. And if I’m going to be facing that, I need to be more prepared.”

She opened the curtain with her usual level of dramatics and strutted out on lower heels in her red-soled, leather over-the-knee boots, thicker at the knee. The sides of the leotard by her hips were lowered to the more common cut right at the start of her thighs, and the top of the reinforced corset covered her chest in a sweetheart neckline with the thicker bluish-black material she was known for. Three straps reached up to the studded collar from the corset at the front and the back. Her collarbone, shoulders, biceps, and thighs were covered with a whiter, thicker fabric meant to be torn, though her collar featured a new zipper in the middle strap to reveal her collarbone as an alternative.

Rather than show off the bright red of her painted nails, her hands were covered with bluish-black gloves with a pitch black ring around each middle finger. Her gloves had new claws though, bright red like her nails were underneath, to tear into the fabric with ease and defend herself in close combat. The cuffs around her wrists were removable, able to be applied on another person. At her side, her belt held a holster for her much longer, dark red whip—one that made Yamada shiver at a few high school memories. Her mask hadn’t changed a single bit, riding her face like it’s always been meant to be there.

She put her hands on her hips and pouted, eyes lidded. “Because unlike Minute Maid, I can’t heal from being made a shish kabob.”

Yamada dropped his phone into his lap and pointed at her, grinning excitedly.

“Now that’s the one! That look is saucy as ever!”

Kayama grinned then, with a flourish, posed. “You think? Out of all the others, I think this one has a good enough call-back to the old outfit while having a flair of its own.”

“It’s Perfect!” he cheered in English, quickly picking up his phone and scrolling through it. “Hold up, I need to get a picture.”

“Just wait for the debut shot!”

“C’mon, what’s the point of being friends if we can’t take pics of our best outfits?” Yamada whined. Yamada’s phone vibrated then, and he blinked, swiping to get to his messages.

“Oh hey, Shouta and I have a new neighbor!”

“Oooooh, let me see. Did he send a pic?” Kayama asked, scurrying over and sitting on the arm rest.

“No, but he says it’s a family of two and one of their friends in a different apartment room a floor down… Says I should meet them.”

“...He’s the one suggesting you be social?”

The two stared at each other. Then Kayama snorted and stood up, strutting away to clean up her
clothes as Yamada looked back down at his phone.

“It’s not him. Someone stole his phone.”

“Yeah, absolutely.”

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Omake

The Uraraka household was a quaint one. Living in an apartment complex in the Mie Prefecture that bordered the bigger cities with their smaller, more decrepit housing, the family was careful to never splurge on anything. Everything had the potential for more than one use and everything could be recycled.

If you were hungry, you could buy rice from the discount backroad shoppes run by tiny grandmothers watching vigilantly over their sea salt ice cream in the summer rather than the markets closer in. If you needed clothes, those same back roads held clothing stores stuffed with nearly ceiling-high aisles of shirts, skirts, dresses, and shoes, all well loved from previous owners, but also cared well-enough for. Arcades, karaoke, fast food, restaurants, cake shops...all of those were frivolous.

Not that that made Ochako want to partake of them any less, but she knew her limits. She learned the limits of a family living paycheck-to-paycheck from a young age, so the pain, though present, was dull, a mere slight throbbing at the bottom of her heart.

So as her mother served curry for the third time that week, she smiled. It was good curry after all! It didn’t matter if it was reheated. In fact, one could say that reheating curry made it even more delicious. Curry was like pizza in that sense, and if you tried hard enough, anything could have the reheatablility of pizza.

She opened her mouth to thank her mother for the meal when the front door clicked with the sound of a key turning, quickly followed by the door slamming shut and some hurried footsteps. Both she and her mother gave each other a confused look, unafraid of who it was since it was around the time for Ochako’s dad to come home. They both turned towards the hallway entrance.

And just as they thought, the Uraraka patriarch stumbled into the open entrance.

“Hiroki?” Ochako’s mother put down the spoon she was using.

The man blinked, then he looked up at the two of them at the table.

“I found a job.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic! But...well, why are you looking like that?”

The ‘that’ the Uraraka matriarch referred to was the wide-eyed, shocked look on her husband’s face. He held onto the door frame with both hands, one scrunching up a paper that was likely the deal he’d made for the job. His paled skin was at least a slight shade lower than what it usually was, enough that Ochako felt more than a little worried.

“Daddy, it’s okay.” Ochako began, standing from her seat at the same time her mother did. “If it’s something we can’t do then—”
“No, no, it’s fine, sweetie.” He smiled like he’d forgotten how to, like he was too shocked to do it right. “I mean, the distance is pretty far from here, but they’ve offered to help with that as well. Other than that, this is basically a done deal.”

Uraraka Atsuko walked over to her husband and put her hands on his shoulders. In turn, he places his hands on her arms.

“Hiroki...are you sure you’re okay?” Her eyes trailed over to the partially crumpled paper in his hand. “Let me see.”

He gave it to her without any hesitation, and she took care to straighten out some of the wrinkles in the paper. She glanced at him once more before he nodded, then she turned her face towards the paper and her eyes began to trail along the words.

Then it settled on one spot and stayed there.

Ochako watched as her mother took the same pale shade as her father, eyes going wide as the pink on her cheeks slowly stood out just a bit more than before. She blinked and held the paper back away from her face. Then she squinted and looked at it closer, her eyes flitting over the words once more to make sure she wasn’t mistaken.

Her gaze dropped down to the spot again, and her eyes eased back open all the way. Pale as her husband, she turned to him.

“...That’s real?”

“That’s real.”

The woman gazed down at the paper again, then slowly turned back to her husband.

“That’s the real amount?”

“Yeah...yeah, that’s real. That’s real, Atsuko.”

She turned back to the paper.

“Oh...you took the job already, right?”

“Yes.”

“Huh...okay...” Ochako watched as she turned back him and nodded. “...Yes. Yes, I approve.”

Ochako had never seen her parents look so shocked in her life. Usually, they were very excited in their own Uraraka-brand way, but at the moment, they were pale, disbelieving statues. It was making her increasingly nervous, her fingers fiddling with each other as to not touch something and accidentally make it float. With careful steps, she approached her frozen parents with a curious glint in her worried eyes.

“Mom? Mom, can I see?”

When the woman didn’t reply, she tapped the corner of the paper with one finger and turned it towards herself. Of course, there was a bunch of legal jargon that she’d seen time and time again—she glanced over that for the time being. Instead, she skimmed until she reached The Number. Not every number got the capitalization, only the ones that really deserved it. And this one... This one deserved it.
In fact, she was going to redact every previous Number and lowercase them because this number was officially The Number. Trademarked, copyrighted, billboarded. This Number was the Number to rule out all other Numbers. No, numbers. Lowercased. Those numbers didn’t deserve it nearly as much as this one did.

She almost felt ashamed, distantly, that she’d ever considered any of the previous numbers a Number. Given, back then, they really had fit the bill for a Number, but never before had she seen one that looked even close to this. She was going to have to look back over the rest of the legal stuff because whoever was willing to pay The Number needed to have a name she kept in the forefront of her mind for the rest of eternity.

She realized after a second that she had yet to say a single thing about The Number to her parents, who were waiting in anticipation in her silence. Quickly, she filtered through every single possible response she could give, like equations running through her mind, all ending at The Number. Only one response really fit, so she turned to her father and looked him dead in the eye to say it.

“Oh my God.”

“Oh wow, sweetie,” Atsuko put her hand on the girl’s head and patted her, the woman still pale and perhaps a little delirious. “That sounded very English, you’ve really improved in your studies! I’m so proud of you.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaah, to be honest, I’m an Eraserhead fan, too. He’s pretty respectable, you know? Unlike a few other heroes I can think of off the top of my head. Like...there’s one who people compare to Incineroar and...Incineroar, sweetie, you don’t deserve that.
Summer's End

Chapter Notes

Hello! It's nice to see you again! (*・∀・)☆

Here, have some art some groovy folks gave me.

Submission from eatthemallplease
another submission from eatthemallplease
and another!
Submission from balladofbignothing57
cosmic-nopedog
and one from shabadad00...don't know why my blog has formatted it that way.

I'm sure there's more I've forgotten to link, but here's quite a few of them! Thank you guys so much for your love and appreciation, and I hope you all enjoy this next fantastic chapter of magical boy! ☆°+(AndGet ﾝ二是 )°+.”

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Hoi, hoi, hoiiiii~!”

On television, a familiar young woman with now pastel green hair and several hero hairclips in her hair cheered at the camera, her big bat ears facing forward as her wings flapped behind her. Her sharp canines were visible from her smile between two pink lips.

“Gooooood morning, my blessed and wonderfully favored viewers! It’s time for your next shot of Hero! Daily! Shot!! Super Short Edition! with your lovable host, Totoko-kyuuuuun~!” She threw her hands into the air as animated stars burst from her palms. “Now then, we have a looooot of stuff to cover this morning in a really short period of time, so I’m gonna go down everything so fast that you guys can’t understand what I’m saying okay are you ready let’s start then!”

The camera slid to the side so that Totoko was in the bottom left as a square showed up in a flair of hearts with an image of Falcon in civilian clothes, wearing dark shades inside of a building alongside his coworkers in the agency he worked at. They all wore suits and held up glasses with what looked to be champagne. One of the people was a small man with short, dark brown hair and an arm in a sling, the other arm holding a grayed-out picture of a large, muscular woman. He stood at Falcon’s side with a tearful smile on his face.

“We’ve finally gotten some more updates on a few heroes who’d been involved in that very terrible accident late last month! For all you Falcon fans out there, just thought I’d let you know that he’s recovered and out the hospital and he’ll be aaaaaaal-mighty! That being said, he sustained some pretty bad injuries from a Gray Man within the jail cells, so he’ll be stepping down from the pro hero scene from here on out. Still, he plans on continuing his heroic career as a teacher at his alma mater, Shiketsu! C’mon, let’s all give Falcon a big round of applause and thanks for his service in the last
“six years!”

She clapped her hands with a lot of fanfare, clapping in a circle as a track cheered along with her.

“Later today, I’ll be giving a few highlights from his time growing in the hero scene from Shiketsu to today! But he’s not the only hero we have updates on!”

The hearts around the square screen grow big enough to cover it before getting smaller again, showing a different image. This time, Copper Devil stood proudly in a new hero outfit—a black catsuit with a big yellow stripe down each side and two criss-crossing rows of buttons attached around her waist. She had a yellow pack of supplies attached to her left thigh and was sporting a new short jacket and a black choker around her neck. She held up a V with both hands, smiling under the cut of her long bangs, coppery hair flowing around her shoulders. She wore what looked to be tennis shoes on her feet, mainly black with some white and yellow designs.

“It’s official! Copper Devil is back in action and better than ever! After her stint in the hospital, she’s discovered a few new things about her quirk that she explored during her down time, and now she’s up and ready to rumble! She’s admitted to still having a hard time after her friends’ deaths, so we’re still looking out for her! I really hope she has some more success as time goes on. Keep going, girl!”

The hearts grew big again as Totoko kept speaking.

“Now then, speaking of girls, we’ve been peeping one of our favorite femme fatales this past week, and boy, does she look different!”

As the hearts shrank again, it displayed a picture of Midnight’s new outfit, the woman standing with her heel on a captured villain, the man wrapped up in her new, long whip. She grinned down at the man gleefully, and the man, his face red from a bloodied nose and blushing cheeks, smiled back up at her.

“Super se-ku-shiiii~ The notorious R-18 Only Hero, Midnight, is looking a lot more covered up than we’re used to! That’s what you guys are thinking right? That she’s looking more covered up? Is that what I hear you saying? Are you disappointed? Well, you shouldn’t be! See, Midnight’s one of many heroes who have had to make some outfit redesigns in the wake of the still ongoing Gray Man infestation! It’s been determined that Gray Men are able to essentially steal quirks through their hands touching their victims, so the best way to defend against that? More clothes!”

The image shifted to show Midnight as well as Mt. Lady, who’s design barely changed at all save for what looked to be a thicker material for her super suit and much more obvious soles in her shoes, and Miruko, whose arms and full legs were now covered with the dark purple that had already been a part of her design. Her white gloves had new pads on the palms of her hands that pushed up what looked to be brass knuckles integrated into the fabric.

“Now, this doesn’t really come as a surprise, but not a lot of our favorite male heroes had to do any upgrades. Our super-ladies though have had to spend some extra money for more protective gear because their quirks would be just as bad getting stolen as anyone else, if not worse since they’ve trained with their quirks, too! And you folks out there complaining about them protecting themselves —”

The camera zoomed in on Totoko’s face as she suddenly got really serious, her eyes lidding and nose scrunching in disgust. Her pupils shrunk to slits, and her wings went still behind her back. The music cut out sharply.

“—should really stop acting like you’re hero fans at all. These ladies are risking their lives for ours,
getting injured day after day for the sake of our country in order to keep us safe, and the most you can do is complain about not having the thigh or boob shot that you wanted? Pathetic."

The camera backed up moments after that, showing Totoko and her desk with hero regalia. The music started back up from when it stopped and continued on just as cheery as always as her face held that disgusted look for a little while longer. Then, slowly, her face morphed back into happiness, though it was obviously strained.

“Anyway!” she sang, her head tilting to the side, “That’s not all I have just yet! Listen up, and listen well, guys! The International Special Forces Unit are becoming more permanently involved in the Japanese government and have already started making a few local Gray Man containment centers to make sure that those creatures can be locked up far, far away from any jail cells! The government’s making sure not to make that mistake again! Building these facilities are different construction groups as well as some help from heroes such as Cementoss, Build-A-Body, Shinee-C, and even Pixie-Bob from the Wild Wild Pussycats!”

With the mention of each hero, their photos showed up in action, helping set up the buildings or even just stabilize the ground. The pictures were surrounded by loud yellow and red explosion borders.

“And that’s not the only thing the ISFU’s bringing! See, I’ve heard a thing from a little fox who heard it from a birdie who heard it from a little night wolf that Minute Maid will be making a new debut really soon! That’s right, you heard me! Minute Maid is officially sponsored and no longer a vigilante!”

Totoko showed an old picture of Minute Maid fighting a miscellaneous Gray Man, their face barely visible but their body distinguishable.

“They’ve been on hold ever since their injuries during the attack at Tatarus, so it’s really nice to hear some new news about them! Turns out they’ve been training for the past few weeks and we’ll see them interacting with some heroes coming soon! I’m looking forward to it!! Hmm? Oh? Why am I saying ‘they’? Because I realized that we never got confirmation if they were a girl or not, not even during the press conference. Actually, the lead inspector purposefully said ‘they’ even when reporters asked about the ‘girl’. So when in doubt, be gender neutral!”

A little bell rang, and Totoko’s ear twitched.

“Awwwww, looks like it’s that time! Did you get your daily hero medicine today?! If not, be sure to check back for my next time slot at 9am for a full injection, buddies! Until then, stay healthy, stay happy, and be your best self!”

She put both of her hands in the air and waved them around cheerfully, her wings flapping behind her.

“Bu-bye for nooooow~!”

August 31 fell on a Monday that year, so it ended up being the end of summer break for most schools, Orudera Middle being one of them.

The morning sun was already out and loud, heating the world below it. Students who just yesterday were in tank tops and shorts were back in black gakurans and sailor suits and obviously suffering for
Some morning travelers licked mochi balls with ice cream inside as a last relic of their summer days while others had fully given up their free lives, drinking from water bottles. They greeted each other as they walked into the dark school, feeling the heat from a malfunctioning air conditioner and simply accepting it for what it was.

Students slowly trickled into class 3-C, the first group taking their before-break seats back until they would possibly be rearranged. Then more entered, greeting each other good morning and settling into their old seats as well. A few of them glanced at one desk in particular, the wooden top still scarred up and slightly stained with marker from words half-cleaned off of it.

The desk remained empty.

About twenty minutes before the bell, like clockwork, Bakugou Katsuki entered the room with a scowl on his face. His two lackeys were chatting with each other behind him before one broke off to go to his classroom instead. Bakugou stomped over to his desk and settled in, putting his feet on it like he owned the furniture. No one objected to the action, turning away from him as they continued what they were doing.

The desk still remained empty.

More of the students filtered in, talking amongst their friends while others attempted to hurriedly copy each other’s homework. A few played around with their quirks a little, showing off the results of some small practice that they did. Sanada-san entered the class along with Uoka-kun and Arashi-kun, the three chatting amongst each other as they settled at their desks, Sanada-chan holding her history booklet away from Arashi-kun as he begged.

The desk still remained empty.

By that time, the class was starting to feel antsy, and the students who had been there the longest were starting to stare at the door or the desk on occasion. At one point, the door opened quickly, and a few students felt their shoulders go lax, feeling as though order was returning to the room. But instead of who they thought it was, Yaomasa-chan entered the room, huffing and puffing from having rushed to get there on time, and the tension rose further than it had before.

The desk…

It was moments before the bell would ring. They all knew it was. Midoriya Izuku never made it to class later than the bell, and if he did, then they later found out that he called in sick or something. But that was the kind of thing that happened in the middle of the year, not the first day of class at the start of a new semester. The room felt strangely off-kilter without the class punching bag. Some students glanced at Bakugou with intent, but they never acted on it, too afraid of an outburst from the currently cool and collected student.

The bell rang. The desk was still empty.

“...Aaah, I wonder where Deku is,” Sanada-chan sang, glancing at the empty desk beside her.

“Probably slept in or something stupid,” Uoka-kun replied, turning around in his chair to look at her again. He turned his head into the whistle and made a noise. “Maybe he’s drifting around trying to become a hero and his head got stuck in the clouds.”

“Or in the trash,” Arashi-kun finished, grinning.

The three giggled amongst themselves, and some of the tension in the room loosened.
“Maybe he got lost in a forest. His hair’s green enough,” Uoka-kun joked.

“What does his hair being green have to do with getting lost in a forest?” Sanada-chan laughed.

“You know what I mean.”

“No, I don’t!”

“You just don’t understand my genius then.”

Sanada-chan sputtered and giggled. “Yeah, right. Suuuuure, Mr. Genius.”

Arashi-kun laughed from his seat at her joke before supporting his head with his hand, elbow settled on the back of his chair.

“I don’t know. Maybe he finally killed himself.”

They barely heard the crackle before Katsuki’s hand popped loudly, startling the three out of their banter to look at him. He glared at them like they were scum, barely worth his time as it was.

“Shut the fuck up already,” he grumbled, digging his hands into his pockets as he leaned back in his chair. “Noisy shits. Who gives a damn where Deku is?”

The three waited for a moment before they loosened up with some careful giggling.

“Ah, hahaha, you’re right Bakugou-kun,” Sanada nodded, agreeing.

“Yeah...yeah, it’s not important,” Arashi said, turning back to his friends as they all decided to agree and talk about something else.

Even after they changed their topic, there was something...strained between them now.

It wasn’t just with them either. A few other students who regularly bullied Midoriya felt an uncomfortable tension under their skin, Arashi-kun’s words echoing in their heads. Last semester, the joke had been funny. Now, while they really didn’t have a need to worry at all, they were starting to. They’d been a bit more rough on him this year, after all.

Before their minds could continue to spiral down that train of thought, the teacher entered the room, slouching as he walked with several papers under his arm. The class president stood then, dark hair in low ponytails that went over her shoulders, her glasses gleaming in the light.

“Stand!”

The students scurried to their feet, though Bakugou took his time doing so, not caring if he was slow or not. Once the teacher was in front of them, the class president continued.

“Bow!”

Most of them did, though Bakugou didn’t even give him a nod. It was a common thing with him, so no one moved to rebuke him, not even Watanabe-sensei. The students all took their seats again as the man cleared his throat.

“Welcome back, you all. I hope you enjoyed your summer break...though not too much that you forgot to do your summer homework.” His gaze fell on Arashi-kun, who grinned back with a bit of sweat rolling down his temple. A few students giggled, and the mood lightened up. “Anyway, let’s get started with the roll.”
Watanabe began going down the list of names he had, starting from the front left, near where Yaomasa-chan sat, to the back right, where Kuromono-chan sat, absentmindedly floating little black circles around her finger. He called out each student’s name, waiting to hear their reply, eyes lidded lazily as he called them out, even as Bakugou gave him a mere click of his tongue as a reply.

“Tougaku Gorou-san.”

“Here!” He raised his hand at the same time he gnashed his suddenly sharp teeth together, laughing until the teacher gave him an unamused, exasperated look.

“Uoka Takayuki-san.”

“Heeere,” he whistled, using his normal mouth.

After that, for a mere moment, the teacher paused. He opened his mouth to say a name, but stopped short of doing so, his eyebrows raising. Then he closed his mouth again and read the next name.

“Miniku Minou-san.”

The brown-haired boy startled, his eyes still not visible from under his long bangs. “Uh, h-here!”

After that, the roll continued on, but the students had become much quieter. It wasn’t until the very end as the teacher marked his students as present that Sanada-chan rose her hand.

“Sensei, excuse me, sensei!”

The man groaned lowly, hard to hear at a distance, then looked up at the orange-haired girl.

“Yes, Sanda-san?”

At being put on the spot, she stiltedly lowered her arm. The other students looked at her, and she shrank a little in her seat.

“Sensei, uhm, you skipped over Deku’s name.”

The teacher stared at her for a moment, but the other students turned their attention away from her to watch him, equally as curious about the answer he had as she was. They all had been wondering, after all. Deku was a constant presence in most of their lives since kindergarten, so him not being there was rather strange.

Watanabe cleared his throat, and the students waited for his answer.

“Midoriya-san transferred out over the summer. We may be getting another student later in the semester, but for now, we’ll just be one student short.”

The air in the class fell immediately. For a bit, the teacher was joined with them in silence, accompanied only by the sounds of birds chirping outside. No one burst out in anger, no one made a snide remark about him possibly dying. No one said anything. Not even Bakugou, who stared at the teacher like he’d grown a dragon’s head that was snapping vaguely in his direction.

Then the teacher cleared his throat and tapped his papers against the desk.

“Now then, let’s get started with homeroom.”
Katsuki hadn’t thought he’d be back at the apartment complex again.

The last time he’d been there, he was a little kid. His mother brought him there so she could speak with Aunt Inko and so he and Deku could play at the park nearby. After the fifth time Deku came back from their playtime with a new burn mark somewhere on his body and Katsuki had been scolded yet again, Aunt Inko decided that they maybe shouldn’t play anymore, no matter how much Deku cried that it was okay and he wasn’t actually hurt.

Well, that wasn’t the most accurate. Occasionally, the hag who called herself his mother would have him do errands for her, never shutting her yap until he did them. Sometimes those errands would take him back to Aunt Inko’s faded apartment complex, usually going to pick up some food or exchange something the two of them were sharing, like a book or something. Those times, he’d smell her cooking from the kitchen, and Deku would peek from behind a wall like his hair couldn’t be seen. It always pissed him off.

Either way, it was because of those errands that he still knew where Deku lived. It was a curse, straight out, but it was one he knew accurately. He knew Deku’s address down to the building, floor, and door.

Which was why it was so confusing when he didn’t see the Midoriya nameplate there.

He glanced at the left nameplate. Hattori. Then at the right one. Kobashigawa. Yep. He was at the right door. He turned and stared at where the Midoriya nameplate should’ve been, waiting for it to appear before him.

When it didn’t he scowled and walked away, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

A part of him humored the idea of asking the old hag at home what the fuck was going on, but at the thought of her pestering him about his reason for being interested made him immediately want to gag on his own vomit and spew it in her face just for asking. That’d lead to another shouting match before she yelled at him to go to his room while he’s already there, and he wasn’t about to deal with that shit for any reason, especially not one involving Deku and his new secretive side.

See, the whole thing rubbed him the wrong way. Deku, fuck him and the high horse he rode in on, he always though what he did in his stupid quirkless life was important to him. While the asshole constantly looked down on him, he’d tell him everything he was doing, from some stupid training regime he would try to a stupid new drink formula he wanted to see would help him bulk up—not that the idiot could, he seemed to be an eternal string bean, which was why it always pissed him off so much that he thought he could ever save anyone with those stupid noodle arms.

The asshole told him everything...up until April.

Why April? He didn’t fucking know, but he got super stupid around that time. First, he got really weird about getting the vigil. It wasn’t the first time he’d gotten one, so why Deku acted so shaken by that one, he’d probably never know. Most likely for some dramatics or some shit. Then he stopped talking about heroes at all in class, and especially stopped talking about himself being one. Then he heard about that hooded figure and the equipment the figure was talking about with him, and Katsuki thought then and there that it was probably some weird, psycho, villain shit, especially from how those extras described the figure.

That’s when Katsuki knew—Deku had finally opened his eyes about becoming a hero, that it was impossible for someone like him. But in turn, he was looking towards being a villain, probably.
Of course he’s not, asshole, a voice in his head grumbled, You think his stupid crybaby, self-righteous, pompous ass would ever try to hurt a fly? He couldn’t even if he wanted to. Get your head outta your ass.

Whatever. Either way, Deku stopped talking to him about what he was doing.

Now he wasn’t talking at all. He was gone without a damn trace. Even worse, Aunt Inko was gone, too, carried off by that stupid useless son of hers. Who knew what the hell Deku had dragged her into.

Katsuki shrugged off the nagging feeling in his chest and stomped off to get home.

It didn’t matter. It really fucking didn’t. All it meant was that Katsuki would be the only one going to U.A. from Orudera Middle, and that’s what he wanted from the start. Fine. Good riddance. He’d have that useless green fuck out of his hair for the rest of the school year.

He’d likely see Deku again some time later on in his life. Whether it would be as a useless, weepy-faced civilian, a brain-dead, fumbling policeman, or a smarmy, weakling villain, he didn’t know.

And he didn’t care.

He really didn’t.

"Have you started your online classes yet?" Shimizu asked as she pushed lightly on Izuku’s upper back with one hand.

“Hhhhhnnnnnyeah…” His eyes were shut tight as he strained, trying hard to reach forward. His legs were open in a large V, and his fingers wiggled with the effort to try and stretch as far as he could. “I started cllllasses this morniiiiiiiiiiing…finished…some homework, toooooooo…”

The two were in Toyama again for the day, exercising together in the left wing of the main building alongside a few Inu Team members. Two were sparring in the boxing ring, using their quirks as one dodged faster than the normal eye could see while the other used his quirk to make his opponent lose their balance every once in a while. Others lifted weights, like Akita, who had her teal hair tied back into a ponytail as Borzoi spotted her, her hands loosely holding the bar Akita raised and lowered with little difficulty despite the heavy weights on it. Izuku peered at her abs and biceps with a mild jealousy.

“Okay yeah, we definitely need to work on your flexibility again,” Shimizu sighed, pushing just a bit more.

That bit more was enough for his back to crackle loudly, and Izuku squeaked before going lax on the ground with a loud, tired groan. Shimizu let up immediately eyes going wide in panic.

“Ooh, shi—shoot, Midoriya, are you alright?” She hovered over him with her hands unsure of where to land, trying to figure out what to do. “Your back just popped, yeah? Nothing else? Any pain?”

He shook his head against the floor mat before sitting up smoothly, sighing in relief as he patted the middle of his back. His eyes were shut as he rolled his neck, sighing again with a small smile on his face.
“N-No, I’m fine… I’ve just had a stiff spot there since I woke up in the hospital. It’s finally gone now.”

“...Midoriya, you’ve been out the hospital for two weeks, and you’re just now talking about it?”

Izuku opened his eyes and stared forward in regret.

Oooooooo, you played yourself. Like, I didn’t even have to do anything this time. You just straight up told on yourself. I can respect that.

Izuku’s face scrunched up further in even more regret.

“Maybe you should see a chiropractor or something…” Shimizu’s head tilted. “What happened to you anyway? They never told me everything.”

Izuku froze up and stared at her, juggling his options. The longer he took, the more her eyes narrowed, and he felt sweat start running down the side of his face.

“Let’s just...say...it was a...spinal injury.”

And a rib injury. And a heart and lung injury. Should we talk about the oxygen deprivation? I mean, you don’t need to breathe but… You were just generally screwed all the way up.

"Not helping,” he murmured under his breath.

Shimizu winced, having not heard what either I—ah—Handyman or Izuku said, then backed up as she stood to her feet.

“Spinal injury, and you’re up and moving around like this already, huh… Maybe we should wait a bit longer for you to recover more, or get you checked up again.”

“No, n-no! It’s okay!” He waved his hands around placatingly. “I’m as good as I’m gonna get! It’s better i-if I stretch out rather t-than get more stiff, right? Besides, it felt good! I needed to pop my back! So, s-so the stretching is helping! W-We can keep going!”

Shimizu squinted at him before turning her head away, sighing. Then she moved closer and held out her hand to help him up.

“Fine, but you’re still going for another scan after this.” Izuku pulled a face. “None of that, hospital boy. You’re getting checked.”

“Okaaaaay…”

“...But first, you can throw a few light kicks at the pads.”

Her eyes rolled as she watched him perk up, starting to bounce on the balls of his feet as she slipped the pads onto her hands.

As she promised, Shimizu immediately took him over to one of the many Tanezumis after they practiced a little longer, and now the two sat in a check-up room. It didn’t look any different than a check-up room at a doctor’s office, with a bendy table against one wall and some seats against the
wall near the door. Shimizu was reclined in one of them while her tail had slipped under the armrests to lay in the other. One of the completely blue-eyed women with a number 159 on her jacket worked on the computer across the room from the medical table, where the brown cabinets and the sink were. The other, labeled with a 242, moved a black scanner that looked like a metal detector behind his back.

“You don’t appear to have any injuries,” Tanezumi said, clicking a button on the scanner. “Your scans don’t indicate any differences between your last scan and your current one, other than a greater magic flow as a result of exercise. It seems your magic functions much like blood. Or rather, that your magic keeps your blood flowing.”

“What do you mean by that?” Shimizu rose an eyebrow, her arms crossed in the chair.

Tanezumi 242 turned to her and shook her head. “I’m afraid I’ve not been cleared to disclose that information.” At Shimizu’s resigned huff, she turned back to continue checking up on him, but not without what appeared to Izuku to be a glance directly into his eyes. Though he couldn’t quite tell what direction her arthropodic gaze was pointed in, he averted his own eyes to avoid her stare before she continued. “Anyway, you should be fine. The back pop was as you said—stiffness from a lack of exercise. You should be feeling better the more you stretch yourself out.”

Izuku nodded as she pulled away, handing the other Tanezumi the scanner before taking off her gloves and replacing them with new, personal ones that looked thinner. Both wore them. Izuku kicked his legs a little in the air, watching the woman move with a brewing curiosity.

“Uhm...Tanezumi-san?”

He startled when both women turned to him, the one at the computer turning to look as the other that had checked him paused from picking up her clipboard. Raising his hands, he waved them around nervously.

“T-Two Forty-Two, sorry. T-Tanezumi Two Forty-Two.”

Tanezumi 159 nodded and turned back around to the computer, uploading the information from the scanner. The other blinked at him, still holding the clipboard as she began marking down notes from his check-up.

“Yes?”

Izuku breathed in deeply, then tried his voice out, his gaze falling to her clipboard. “I hope t-this isn’t a rude question, but...uhm...h-how does your quirk work? I noticed that you and a-all the other Tanezumis l-look alike, so...I-I theorized w-what it is, but...if you don’t mind... O-Only if you don’t mind. I...I was just...wondering...”

When she stared at him, he looked further away, flushing with embarrassment.

“I-I’m sorry, that must’ve been inappropriate, I’m r-really—”

“Oh, no, don’t worry.” Tanezumi 159 never looked away from her computer as she spoke. “We aren’t upset that you asked. We’re just surprised. We don’t get the question often.”

“Yes, right,” Tanezumi 242 said. “I don’t mind answering your question.” She blinked, then looked down at the clipboard and wrote. “Our quirk is called Mitosis. It seems fairly self-explanatory. The other Tanezumis and I all come from an original Tanezumi. The first one.”

Izuku muttered a little “I knew it” under his breath, but kept listening intently as 242 came closer and
kept talking, checking over his body.

“The original Tanezumi was thought to only have one quirk—our eyes—which allows us to see light in ultraviolet spectrums, but her other quirk, or rather the main part of her quirk, started when she was 12. A villain attack in her city nearly killed her. It triggered the activation, causing her to split into two to dodge falling rubble. She has been multiplying ever since—raise your arms, please. Thank you... She multiplies at the rate of one Tanezumi every two weeks. When she were younger, her multiplication rate used to be shorter, but it has slowed down since then.”

“I’m guessing only the original multiplies.” Izuku lowered his arms at her nod.

“Correct. Had the quirk expanded to us, we would have long overpopulated Japan. Open your mouth and stick out your tongue, please. Thank you...hm. Your canines seem to be sharpening a little. Nothing drastic, but they are sharper compared to previous dental records. You can close your mouth.” She cleared her throat and wrote some more notes, Tanezumi 159 doing the same at her computer.

“Aaah, yeah. So, how do you guys share information? You all always seem to know what the last Tanezumi did.” His gaze flickered over to the other woman. “Or, what they’re doing.”

“We share a consciousness.”

Izuku’s eyes went wide.

“Huh?”

“Depending on the Level of the experience we’re facing, we all share it, or only some of us share it, or only one of us shares it. By sharing, I mean what we are feeling from the occurrence. We all share the same information regardless, but the experience is different. For example, while I’m having this conversation with you, every other Tanezumi is aware of this conversation. They are also aware that we are glad someone has taken such an interest in talking with us about our quirk.”

“Ah...” Izuku smiled sheepishly at her relatively blank expression. “W-Well...I’m glad you’re not mad or anything.”

“We don’t get to talk about ourselves often,” Tanezumi 159 interjected. “Most people are afraid to talk to us about our abilities. Something about our eyes apparently makes them scared.”

At that, Shimizu shifted in her seat. Both Izuku and Tanezumi 242 looked at her to see what was wrong.

It wasn’t as though she was creeped out. Rather, she was glancing over at Tanezumi 159. She opened her mouth a little, then slowly closed it, shaking her head.

Tanezumi 242 tilted her head. “You look as though you have a question, Shimizu-san.”

The shark woman startled a little, eyes opening wide. Then she slouched in her chair and waved her hand, pressing her lips together.

“Oh, no, don’t mind me. It’s stupid.”

“I assure you, there are very few stupid questions in the world. If you have one, I’d like to hear it.”

At this, averted her eyes and looked...dare Izuku say it...shamefaced.
“It’s…it’s really immature. I’m not even sure why I thought of it.”

Tanezumi 242 turned more towards her, her shoulders completely relaxed and her almost feline face blank of an expression as usual.

“As I said to Midoriya-san, we do appreciate questions about our quirk. So we don’t mind answering. That is...unless it really is a debased question.”

“Oh, gods, no. Nothing like that. It’s just...really childish…”

Tanezumi 242 stopped trying to convince her to ask it, but she looked in her direction with completely blue, soulful, arthropodic eyes, her expression utterly serene and requesting inquiries. Shimizu found she couldn’t resist in the end.

“This is a super immature question but...uh…” Shimizu pursed her lips and looked off to the side. “You guys can see things in the ultraviolet spectrum, right? So...what...do you guys think about hotels?”

For a moment, everyone else seemed confused, and Tanezumi 242 and Izuku blinked at each other as 159 paused at the computer. Then, it seemed to click to both of the scientists what her question meant. Immediately, both Tanezumis scrunched their faces up in disgust, their noses crinkling as their eyes squinted. The abrupt change startled Izuku a little, and Shimizu let out an abrupt snort. Izuku wasn’t afraid, instead turning between Shimizu and the Tanezumis over and over again. After a moment, 242’s expression smoothed out carefully. 159, though, remained pointedly disgusted as she stared at the computer and worked.

“...Depends on where it is. Most are pretty alright, but some are...deplorable.”

In her seat, Shimizu held a fist to her mouth, her shoulders hitching.

“I’m...I’m sorry. So...that’s why you...wear the gloves.”

“Yes.”

Shimizu couldn’t help snorting again, curling in on herself a bit as her body trembled with the effort to hold back her laughter. It became even harder to do when the realization dawned on Izuku and his face contorted in horror.

“Shimizu-senpaaaaaaai!”

“I’m sorry…” She snorted and curled in further. “But her face...her face… It’s not even funny, but her face…!”

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact: Tanezumi 132 actually doesn't work in the ISFU. She goes by Tamakawa Akemi, having decided to take her husband's surname instead of the usual custom. She is married to Tamakawa Hirofumi, and they have three children together. At the moment of the conversation between the two Tanezumis, Izuku, and Mako, she was sitting at her husband's side during a parent teacher conference for their eldest daughter, Torako. The teacher had a few less-flattering things to say about their daughter's supposed behavior in class. Let's just say that the teacher swiftly began backpedaling on what they said the
instant she made that almost involuntary, knee-jerk expression. Given, she’d resisted for a moment, but decided in the end that the expression was still relevant.
Initiation

because I don’t feel like trying to develop apartments, here’s a few pictures from Miss Kobayashi’s Dragon Maid that shows what the inside of the apartments look like.

i’ll post something here later, maybe go back through and fix any pronoun issues, but i need to go to sleep first |

please enjoy this first twenty-bi-teen posting.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was a Sunday afternoon at the cusp of time between drippy ice cream with loud cicada screams and the cool breeze with the scent of tea olives. The sun filtered in through the porch door into the living room, dining room and kitchen, giving the two occupants the possibility of looking outside. But, one of the doors was covered by the blinds, blocking the couch from the Sun’s gaze.

Shouta slept on the couch in his sleeping bag, knocked out completely cold as he usually was at that time, his face shadowed over by the blinds. Further back near the kitchen, Hizashi worked on grading papers with his hair tied back into a half ponytail-half bun and a red pen between his lips, covering the recent quiz with checks and circles, unfortunately more of the former than the latter. He sat on the side still open to the light, absorbing some much needed vitamin D.

He was just about to ruin another child’s life when the doorbell ringed. Shouta didn’t even shift, and Hizashi’s eyebrows scrunched up. They weren’t expecting any visitors or any packages, not that he knew of. He wasn’t being loud enough for the soundproofing to not work, so… A friendly neighbor? Nice!

He let the pen drop from his mouth at his grin and caught it to tuck it behind his ear before sliding out of his chair.

“Cooooming~”

He slipped out of his chair and padded over to the front door, peeking through the eyehole in the door to see who stood outside.

A young kid with dark green hair and wide eyes shifted from foot to foot with a small laptop held tightly to his chest. Hidden partway into the forest of green on his head was a bright pink headband with little yellow flowers on it, but it didn’t really do much with the mane all over his head, obviously there more for the sake of appearance than functionality. He was frowning at the door with a confused look on his face, likely because of his voice instead of Shouta’s.

Green hair, small build, looks perpetually lost, wearing at least one bright thing…

Yes, this had to be the young, nearly-next-door vigilante gone hero-in-training that Shouta mentioned
had moved in. Hizashi’s smile widened excitedly—he’d been looking forward to meeting the boy, but never seemed to have the time. Though, he did wonder what brought the boy over. Something about his laptop maybe.

Well, he was about to find out anyway.

Putting on his best smile—which was all of his smiles, really—he unlocked and opened the door, making the boy in front of him stop shifting on his feet.

“Hello there!”

“Uuuuhhh…” he replied, his voice a bit deeper than Hizashi was expecting.

“Haha, you were expecting Shouta, weren’t you? Surprised to see me? Well, that caterpillar’s inside if you need to speak with—”

Suddenly, the boy’s eyes widened a little more as clarity made them shine. The yellow of the lower half of his irides glowed even brighter and sparkled amongst the green.

“Present Mic.”

...Well, all things considered, it made sense that the boy who somehow identified Aizawa I hate publicity, please yeet me into obscurity Shouta could also identify who he was in mere moments of talking with him. Not to mention, Hizashi knew his voice was pretty echoic. He’d been recognized a few times in his civvies on the streets, even in his normal speaking voice.

“Ah, yes! But you can call me Yamada.”

Midoriya didn’t hear him at first, too busy murmuring something under his breath as his eyes flit over his face, cheeks warm and eyes sparkling with presumed happiness. Hizashi caught the butt ends of “vocal powerhouse of the hero world”, “last resort”, “took down the underground villain syndicate in Moraband with a single scream”, and “the JFD’s favorite advocate”, but that’s all he could determine from the flurry leaving from between the boy’s lips. He opened his mouth to say at least something in reply, but it seemed Midoriya realized he was mumbling, and he promptly clicked his teeth as his mouth shut, his face going much more red than it was before.

“...Uhm...s-sorry...I...d-do that sometimes.”

Hizashi laughed goodnaturedly and patted the boy’s shoulder, subtly noting his flinch.

“It’s all good, little listener! I’m actually pretty impressed. Anywaaaaay, considering the circumstances, you must be Minute Maid then. Right?”

The boy nodded bashfully, eyes still glittering from admiration. Or, at least, that’s what it seemed like.

“Cool! It’ll be really interesting if we ever get to work together some time! I think we’ll have fun.”

“R-Really?”

“Yeah, of course! I’d love to show you some of the ropes.” He leaned against the door frame and smiled.

Midoriya’s positively glowing at that point, like there’s lights shining off his skin.

“But before that, first thing’s in order. Little listener, why are you here today?”
Then just like that, the glow is gone, replaced by shifting feet, lowered eyes, and hunched shoulders.

“Ahh...-well, Y-Yamada-san, I just...uhm...i-if you o-or Aizawa-san aren’t too busy...uhm...c-could I...get help...w-ith...English...?”

His eyebrows rose a bit. “Hmm?”

For a moment, it looked like Midoriya wasn’t going to elaborate, the boy looking down at his shoes. Before Hizashi could ask again though, he finally did speak up.

“I-I’m taking classes o-online be-because I could b-be on call at a-a-any time if it’s s-serious, s-so I c-can’t ask a teacher, b-but you and A-Aizawa-san t-teach at U.A., right? A-And I would usually ask m-my trainer b-but she’s out t-today and I-I don’t w-w-ant to call her and b-bother her with this a-and I c-can’t seem to figure th-this out myself, so, uhm, I’m, ah, I’m sorry, I just don’t...know...”

Hizashi was smiling even before he was done. “Well, little listener, you’re in luck, cause English is exactly what I teach! Of course I can help you!”

“R...Really?”

“Yeah, yeah, no sweat! You can come in and—ah.” Right. There’s someone still napping on the couch. “Yeah, come in, but wait right here at the foyer, alright? I need to move something real quick.”

“O-Oh, okay. Excuse m-my intrusion.” Midoriya did as he was asked and only walked into the foyer, looking around at the differences between their apartments.

Meanwhile, Hizashi scurred back to the living room and closed the door separating the foyer and the other rooms from the living space. Shouta was still bundled up in his sleeping bag, eyes closed loosely in his deep sleep. Smiling lightly, Hizashi shifted over and slowly slipped the sleeping man into his arms, bag and all. It wasn’t until Shouta’s face got pressed into his chest that he made a low, mumbling noise.

“Mmmh?”

“Moooooomin. The little Midori boy you talked about is over for a visit. If you want to stay asleep, you need to go to bed. So, I’m taking you there.”

“...mmmhrh.”

Hizashi laughed under his breath, though it turned into a slight wheeze as he balanced Shouta in his arms while also pulling the door open. After some maneuvering, he managed to make it work out, and entered their windowless bedroom with a slight stumble. Making it over to Shouta’s designated side of the bed, he plopped the man down on it and prepared to open the sleeping bag, only for the scruffy man to turn onto his side, away from him.

“C’mon, you ridiculous caterpillar.”

He didn’t even make a sound that time around, simply snuggling deeper into his bag.

“There are sheets right below you, you know.”

Still, he made no attempt to get out of the bag.

Hizashi rolled his eyes again, but leaned over the bundled figure and kissed his cheek, much to the
scruffy man’s displeasure. He grumbled under his breath, his still-closed eyes scrunching into a frown.

“Mmh...stop...being gross.”

The blond leaned in towards his ear and grinned.

“Nnnnevaaaah.”

When the man didn’t respond, Hizashi figured that was all the action he was getting from him for the hour, so he turned around and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him. Then, he opened the curtain over the side of the couch that had been blocked and went back to greet his guest, peeking his head out from the living room door to peer into the foyer, where the boy still stood obediently.

“Oh kiddo, you can come in! I had to move some cargo real quick.”

The boy smiled, but there was just slightly of a knowing tilt to it. It was covered mostly by his outward nervous disposition, but he still caught it. Ah, was he being noisy enough the boy heard what was going on? He didn’t think he was...but Midoriya’s not a usual kid either.

As Kayama said, not everyone can pick themselves up two weeks later from being stabbed through the chest.

Those thoughts followed him into the living room. It wasn’t shabby, nicely cleaned up and earth toned. Hizashi had done all the decorating, so there were a few pictures up with him and Shouta and their friends, and a frame of his first CD from his radio show. The rest of the CDs and his old-style vinyl collection were in his and Shouta’s shared office.

The young Midoriya looked around the room with the same interest as he had the foyer, right up until his gaze landed on the stack of papers he still had on the little dining table. He flustered up quickly then.

“Oh! Y-You were busy! I’m s-sorry—”

“Don’t sweat it, lil listener! I’m almost done with these anyway. C’mon, cop a squat.” Hizashi patted one of the chairs as he passed it, going back to his own and plopping down behind his pile of papers. Midoriya hesitated, but he shuffled over and slipped into the chair directly across from him and opened his computer. The small, light thing beeped and whirred to life as the boy waited for it to boot up.

“Ah...t-thank you.”

“I haven’t helped you just yet. What’re you having a problem with?” Hizashi leaned his head past the computer to look at the boy.

“Uhm...I don’t understand what the difference between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ verbs are.” He paused, typing in something rather quickly, the boy’s fingers flying across the keyboard without him even looking at it. “And, uhm, the verbs are...where do they go?”

“Hmm, what grade are you in?”

“Oh...in...th-third year of middle school.”

Oh.
Oh yikes.

The pole incident sparked through his memory, and he cringed reflexively at the realization. He hadn’t intended to, it just happened.

“I-Is something wrong?”

“Nope!” His smile was a bit tight, but as long as it reassured the boy, he’d be fine. “Just had a quick thought is all. Anyway, Japanese is what’s called an SOV language. You know, we put the subject and object first before the verb. But English is an SVO language. You know what that means?”

Midoriya looked back at his screen and reached a hand up, tugging on his bottom lip a little. “Uhm...they put the verb...before the object.”

“Exactly! And you already know what active and passive are in Japanese, right? Rather, causative and passive.”

“Mmhmm.”

“So then, how about you tell me one of the sentences, and we can work it out together?”

Midoriya’s gaze stayed on the screen, but the way his eyes brightened up was telling. It couldn’t get rid of the twisting feeling he was getting in his chest, but it was good enough.

There was something about tutoring a kid in a personal setting that allowed a teacher to better understand the kid they’re dealing with. He couldn’t help analyzing the boy, really. He has been an educator since he was 26, and at 30, his instincts to peer into the soul of a student and evaluate them piece by piece to try and find the best way to help them learn was only improving.

The thing about Midoriya though was that he was pretty self sufficient, and talkative, once you got him on the right track.

“The hallways—...hallway was where...John stood. Connie train...trained to...use a sword. Which is active and which is passive?” Midoriya asked himself in a mumble, staring at the screen to do some mental equation with his lower lip pinched between his left pointer finger and thumb. It only took him a moment before he started typing out his answer.

He seemed to learn languages best auditorily, and think best overall if thinking aloud, hence his mumbling habit, Hizashi noted. He marked another checkmark on a student’s paper, whose work wasn’t too much more advanced than Midoriya’s own.

There was also one particular miraculous thing.

“John is passive because he’s existing, but he’s not acting. And Connie’s active because she’s doing something in her environment.”

The boy’s stutter was completely gone. Not even a lick of it was there. It made sense, though—if he wasn’t doing the thing that stressed him out the most, then he’d feel no nervousness with speaking. It just happened that what stressed him out most when speaking was speaking to others.

“Done.”

Midoriya clicked a few more things on his computer before closing it with an air of finality. He
looked rather pleased with himself, but then he looked up to his face. Immediately, his eyes fell to the table, and he started fidgeting again, all confidence flushed out of him.

“A-Ah...t-thank you for...helping me. I r-really, really appreciate it!”

Hizashi smiled and checked one more problem off on his unfortunate student’s paper. “No problem, little listener! You were working at it pretty hard though. Want a snack?”

“Oh, n-no, it’s okay, I don’t eat.”

Hizashi blinked. “Hah?”

“Hmm?”

Both of them went silent, looking at each other. Then Midoriya seemed to realize what he’d said, eyes widening before he rose his hands and waved them.

“Oh! No, no, t-that’s not what I meant! To say! I meant, uhm, I don’t eat, like, I don’t. Need to. Actually. Eat. You don’t h-have to umm...give me...anything…”

“...Huh. How does that even work?”

The younger Midoriya blinked at him again, seeming surprised by his question. Still, he didn’t dismiss it, instead starting to play with his fingers, pressing them against each other in a triangle shape. “W-Well, d-due to the m-magic in my system, I-I don’t function like a n-normal person. I-I don’t have to eat...o-or breathe...o-or sleep, not often anyway.”

“Ohhh...do you get tired? Like, ever?” Hizashi put his elbow on the table and held his head in his hand.

“W-Well, sometimes. I still go to sleep, so I guess i-it’s just normal to get tired.”

“How much do you sleep?”

“Eh? Uhm...m-maybe four…” He paused ominously, his mind obviously working to create either a reasonable lie or...nah, probably just a reasonable lie. “...hours...a night?”

“Yiiiiikes, you’re bad at lying.”

“I know.”

“You and Shouta would definitely get along on that front.” Hizashi rolled his eyes.

“With...lying?”

“No, no, with not sleeping.” He waved his hand around lazily. “He loves sleep, but never actually sleeps.”

He didn’t dare tell the boy he was short on sleep himself. Doing three jobs took a toll on a man just as much as doing a teaching gig and an overnight shift did.

The boy paused and thought a little. “He does seem tired... Plus, he’s normal, so he needs the same sleep as anyone else.” He turned and looked at the bedrooms behind him, though he looked at both, unsure of which door he was behind. “I know it’s more tough to work underground…”

Normal, huh…
“Yeah. I believe your ma was the one who pointed that out when you all first met.” He grinned at the shock and embarrassment on the boy’s face. “Speaking of which, could you thank her for the gyudon she sent over to us yesterday? I mean, I’ll try to do it myself as well, but just in case.”

“S-She sent over food?” His face said hello to his hands. “She always does this...every time...”

“Haha! Don’t sweat it, it was delicious. Even if Mr. Grump won’t say it himself.”

The boy sniffed into his hands, and Hizashi knew he got him.

Shouta woke up about an hour later, after the boy was gone. He stumbled out of his and Hizashi’s shared bedroom with his eyes still closed. Hizashi grinned at him from the table, placing his last paper on the other stack he’d looked over.

“Heya Sleeping Beauty,” he chimed, looking absolutely indiscreetly at the mop of black on the man’s head. “You have work tonight?”

“Mmmrgh...” The man staggered over to the kitchen with a strange yet functionable balance to his steps, pawing at the counter where his chilled fruit pack is already sitting, a little warmer from sitting out.

“Do you know what time you’ll be back?”

“Mnnnh.” He twisted the top off.

“Can I draw whiskers on your face?”

Shouta doesn’t make any sort of sound at that, simply popping the open end of the pack into his mouth and clearing it with two quick sucks. He clicked his tongue a little, eyes still closed.

“You’d do that with or without permission.”

“AAAAAAAAand he’s awake!” Hizashi raised his arms in mock victory, fingers splayed and hands wiggling. He laughed even louder when the man peeked an eye open to glare at him. “Mostly, anyway!”

Sighing, the man lumbered over to the fridge and pulled out something more sustainable to eat, taking the last of the older Midoriya’s gyudon and popping it into their microwave.

“So you met Midoriya.”

“Ye-p,” Hizashi supported his head with his hands, looking up at the man through the bar area into the kitchen. His head shifted from side to side at a tune only he knew. “He was a pretty nice kid. Pretty smart, too.”

“Hmm.”

“He came over to get some English help from you. Wasn’t expecting me, but he rolled with it! You know, you were right. He really does recognize people pretty quick! Did you know he knows about my donations to the Japanese Federation of the Deaf? And I keep those pretty hush! With how quick his fingers were on his computer, I wouldn’t be surprised if he got that from data mining.”

“Hmm.” Aizawa shifted and started up the kettle on the stove, then walked over to the pantry and picked up one of the many containers for tea, getting the peppermint and honey blend. He stuck it on
a mug and put a teaspoon over it.

“I can’t see a single bit of that vigilante spirit in him, not yet. It’s hard to imagine him doing that, you know? Small, quiet kid. But I asked if he was Minute Maid and he confirmed it. Plus, you confirmed it when I talked to you before, so, I mean. He is as he is. But can you believe a timid boy like that was running around, dodging heroes left and right while getting rid of those noisy static monsters?”

He shudders a bit. “Never liked the sound of those things, you know. So odd. Like they’re trying to say something. But he’s gotten rid of them just fine until...you know.”

“Hmm.”

“He’s got some pretty serious anxiety, too.”

“Mmh?”

“Yeah. You didn’t notice?” Hizashi stopped bobbing his head. He wasn’t looking at Shouta anymore either, eyes trained on his stack of graded papers.

The microwave beeped, and Shouta took his food out, the smell of beef and rice wafting through the air like a fine, well-made perfume. The man reached into the counter and pulled out some chopsticks.

“Hmm...yeah. Knew something was there. Hard not to notice.”

“Yeah. But see, what I’m trying to define right now is if it’s only social or if he has the general kind. I mean, social anxiety’s nothing to shake a stick at, that’s for sure. I’m just wondering for his sake, because you have to confront the issues differently depending on what kind it is. Who knows how long he’s had these issues before now, yeah? It’s only going to get worse if someone doesn’t—”

“Hizashi.”

The man paused talking and turned towards him, eyeing him from his seat on the chair.

Shouta stared at him under the light of the kitchen, his gaze full of judgement and old memories he’d rather forget.

“Tsukari Minko.”

Hizashi’s small eyebrows shot up in an instant.

“Oh, how dare you. I’m not in that deep.”

“No, but you’re about to be.” Shouta looked away from him, taking the kettle off the isle even though it wasn’t whistling yet. “You’re butting in without all the information yet.”

“I am not! Look, you said it too, he’s obviously anxious. He needs to be getting at least some help for that! The boy’s going to be working alongside heroes for the next few weeks, and you know what that means? The press. He’s gonna get a bunch of microphones shoved in his face, and from what I know, he won’t deal well with it.”

“That’s not all you’re worried about.”

“...No, but that’s the basics.”

“The basics.” Shouta picked up his plate and the mug of tea he’d poured while Hizashi ranted.

“Yep.”
“Tsukari-san.”

“I said it’s not like that!”

See, back when he was a newbie in the field, he was, as one would say, a busybody. A nosy person. He stuck his attention anywhere he saw fit. And the case of one girl he rescued, Tsukari Minko, left him feeling rather embarrassed for weeks. She was in her twenties, just as he had been, but he’d been the one rescuing her from a building during a villain fight. During the rescue, he saw marks on the woman that he saw fit to privately investigate beyond what the police officials and medical professionals said.

What he’d thought would end up being the blowout of a domestic violence case ended up being a woman’s avid infatuation and participation in the hardcore BDSM community. Quite simply, he had fundamentally misunderstood what submission level 7 was, and now, he still couldn’t think of her name without imagining things. Nemuri and Tensei laughed at him for weeks.

“For one, that was a consenting adult who hadn’t healed completely from her sex marks, this is a young kid who took a pole to the chest. Like, all the way through it. If you put a piece of meat on a stick, that’s actually a reenactment. I’d be surprised if he doesn’t have PTSD out the ass.”

Shouta put the mug of tea down in front of Hizashi before sitting on the other side, right where the boy had been an hour before.

“Oh, thank you.” Tanned hands curled around the warm cup and brought it to his lips. He blew on the liquid before sipping, honey and peppermint soothing his soul. “Ahhh...and for two! Now that I’ve said number one, I’m certain he has PTSD out the ass. And there’s no way he’s getting help with it if he’s still that bad.”

“How do you know they aren’t helping?”

Hizashi’s eyebrows scrunched together. “Hmm?”

“The ISFU. He’s technically their employee or something of the sort. How do you know they aren’t helping?”

The blond’s hands went up in the air, gesturing around. “Well! I’ll tell you how! It’s...it’s the way he —” He splayed his fingers and pulled downward in front of his face. “And the way he—” His fingers splay again, only this time his hands shake with his body. “You know, right? And how he—”

Shouta picked up a piece of beef from his bowl. “...When you started getting help, how long did it take before it started actually working?”

That gave the man pause.

“That’s what I mean.” The scruffy man sighed. “It’s not wanting to help part that’s the problem. It’s the going beyond the professionals in the field to do your own thing without all the facts, then botching it.”

“But you do it all the time, Shouta.”

“Wrong. I’m good at doing it and not getting caught. You, on the other hand, find deviant sex rings then get caught while doing it. Then you get a tabloid page put out about you and get harassed until the woman clears your name anonymously.”

“...That was one time.”
“Yasuoka Daisuke.”
“...Twice.”
“Nagamine Juro.”
“...Th...three—”
“Tokuda Tohaku.”

Hizashi took a long sip of his tea then. There were only two more on that list, but those were the worst ones.

“You don’t really know what’s going on with him yet. So just slow down. Don’t jump in too quickly. And for god’s sake, don’t scare him off.”

“You really think I could do that?”

“Hmm?”

“Scare him off.”

Shouta picked up another piece of beef from the bowl the boy’s mother had forced upon them. Then he thought about the boy himself, who immediately upon knowing who he was, unknowingly blurted out unknown facts about his career.

“Hm. Probably not. ...Stop looking so smug.”

“Alright.” Inspector Yayoi claps her hands together. “I want to thank you three for being the first group Minute Maid will be working with this following week.”

The woman and heroes in question were sitting in a meeting room in downtown Musutafu, each party sitting on opposite sides of a small coffee table. The inspector sat on one couch with a cup of tea and a file, a masked Inu Team member standing behind her. That day, her hair was pulled up into a puffy ponytail, her black dress shirt pressed to the seams. On the other side, the ragtag group of Mt. Lady, Desutegoro, and Kamui Woods had arranged themselves in that order, Desutegoro squeezing himself small as to not knock his elbows into his comrades. Despite this, Mt. Lady had pushed herself against one of the arm rests and scowled poutily at him while Kamui Woods seemed to simply accept his circumstances.

The two males of the group also had an outfit change, with Desutegoro’s previous partial jacket becoming a full shirt that covered his torso, and Kamui Woods had a new poncho to help cover his arms, but as his quirk relied so much on his physicality, he couldn’t do much more, just barely meeting the requirements for the team.

“No, the pleasure is ours, Inspector.” Desutegoro bowed stiffly. “As soon as we heard about it, we decided it would be a good opportunity.”

“Says the guy who applied us on impulse,” Mt. Lady muttered lowly, almost unable to be heard, but afterwards she straightened up as much as she could, still being leaned against the arm rest.

“I’ll admit, it will be a bit tougher for you all to work with this system. Your group will be the guinea pig so to speak, so afterwards we’ll be giving you guys a survey to fill out to tell us what worked,
what didn’t, and what you think could be done to improve this system. It’s basically the same as you have been doing as far as your mandatory buddy system patrols.” The inspector opened up one of her files and handed them each a manila envelope. “The survey’s inside of these. We’ll send one of our people to come pick these up as soon as you let us know you’ve finished it. We’d prefer that it’s done within three days of the last day of your session with Minute Maid.”

They each take one of the folders and look vaguely at it. Since it was sealed, they couldn’t see any of the questions or what was inside of it. Either way, they straightened up once they were ready to continue.

“If you don’t mind me asking, inspector,” Kamui Woods began, “how will Minute Maid work into our schedules? Should we expect them during our group patrol times only? What about our solo patrols?”

“Oh, no. See, Minute Maid will be working with you all as if you had taken on a high school intern. But since there’s three of you and you don’t yet work at the same agency, I can understand it being complicated to work that out…” Yayoi put a hand to her chin. “If you each want an equivalent impact, you could say that Minute Maid spends two days with each of you individually as well as altogether with you during the patrols, or you can work it out the ways you see best. Don’t be afraid to take them on your solo patrols as well.”

“With the current way we’re set up, the two-days-each method sounds best. But, I have to say, I don’t know exactly how much I can teach them with just two days.” Desutegoro moved slightly, the two fingers that would usually have a cigarette between them shifting.

“That’s understandable. Though, I do hope you all give it your best effort. And I can’t stress enough —while this is essentially the same as a hero high school internship, I would appreciate it if you all would stress the importance of a few key factors: preliminary hero training and preliminary rescue. You see, Minute Maid is used to dealing with inhuman Gray Men, but they’re still learning how to deal with humans. If you come up to a situation during patrols that involve villains rather than Gray Men, I would recommend that, for the time being, you have them focus on the rescue factors of that event. As everyone gets more used to the buddy system, then we can have them focus on villain takedowns, but of course, they’re a beginner. We at the ISFU would like them to learn how to save others for the time being.”

“And, if a Gray Man appears?” Kamui Woods asks.

“Well, Minute Maid knows how to deal with those.” The smile she gave them was a little tight. “Though, if you could debrief them earlier on how to deal with combat in crowded settings and how to decrease property damage, that would be beneficial.”

Mt. Lady leaned forward a little. “In case it doesn’t work out as we’d like, we can apply again to be Minute Maid’s internship partner group, correct?”

“Correct! Though, you will be lower on the consideration list because you’ve already worked with them once.” She waited until the woman nodded before she looked at all three of them. “Do any of you have other questions?”

When the three shook their heads or confirmed they didn’t, she clapped her hands together with a smile.

“Alright! So then, just for the sake of our records, how do the three of you plan on splitting up your time with Minute Maid outside of patrols?”
“Hmm...I think you had a good idea. With the three of us each having two days,” Desutegoro said.

“Yeah, but she means which one will they be staying with first.” Mt. Lady grinned, then rose her hand high. “I call Monday and Tuesday!”

Both men looked like they wanted to say something in protest, but they both decided against it.

“Then, I’ll take Friday and Saturday,” Desutegoro replied, his eyes narrowed in exasperation.

“...Wednesday and Thursday, then,” Kamui Woods finished weakly.

“So, that’s Mt. Office, Desutegoro Hero Office, and Morime Agency? Perfect.”

The woman scribbled the names on a paper in her lap quickly before turning it towards the three. On it was a list of rules as she’d previously stated as well as a place for their names to sign off on it. After carefully reading over the contract, they each left a signature. Yayoi perused the paper then nodded, putting it away and holding her hand out.

“Well then, it’ll be a pleasure working with you all! If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to send us an email.”

Inspector Yayoi gave them her million dollar smile as they shook her hand in return.

Mt. Lady laid on her couch on her stomach, blinking as she watched the kid work about the room. They were still pouting and a bit embarrassed for being on punishment for their mumbling, told to clean up her office with a broom and dustpan in hand, but if the heroine was honest, it kind of suited the former vigilante. The maid dress really had become much more maid-looking since their last public appearance. She glanced down to the kid’s feet, where low red heels glowed dimly.

She dug her hand into her chip bag. “Hey, Minute Maid.”

The kid blinked, startled out of their own thoughts. Then they turned to look at her with worried, guilty eyes.

“Y-Yes ma’am?”

“Oh, God, no, don’t say that.” She waved her hand dismissively, her face scrunched in a scowl. “I’m not old enough for that yet.”

“Oh, sorry. Uhm, yes?”

She sat up then and hooked her elbow over the back of the couch to support herself and watch the kid.

“Tell me. Just between you and me. Are you, like, what’s your gender? A boy, a girl, nonbinary...ah, sorry if that’s rude.”

“N-No, it’s okay. I’m a boy.”

For real? Well, honestly, now that she’d been listening to his voice for the past hour or so, she realized that it was deeper than a girl’s usually would be. How old was he again? Fourteen...five...fifteen. Yeah. That was about the time kids voices start deepening, wasn’t it?

She nodded, more to herself than to Minute Maid. “Ah, so, he/him, right?”
“Oh...well.” Minute Maid turned around to look at her directly, his attention taken from his cleaning task. “I’m...I’m okay with they/them, too...”

Mt. Lady pointed a finger at him. “Then, just as a tip, I’d stick with that.”

“Oh...well.” Minute Maid turned around to look at her directly, his attention taken from his cleaning task. “I’m...I’m okay with they/them, too...”

Mt. Lady pointed a finger at him. “Then, just as a tip, I’d stick with that.”

“Hmm?”

“Hmm?”

“If I were you, I’d just kind of stick with the gender neutrality when people ask. Because, believe me, people will ask. Don’t get me wrong, more heroes nowadays kinda change around what they wear as they wish, but some people are sticklers for old rules. If you’re not really willing to deal with the backlash for being a boy in a skirt, then I’d suggest just saying you’re neutral. Though that has its own repercussions in a sense...”

She shrugged, then sat up further, crossing her legs on the couch, splaying her hands. “The press is an amazing tool for popularity, and as budding heroes I definitely recommend using it, but it can be pretty double-edged. It’s two-faced! But, the best way to negate the poison is to put out more good stuff about yourself. Give them something good to look at! Save some kittens, help a few old ladies cross the crosswalk, carry some groceries. But as it stands, you also have to deal with the hot topics, and yours is firmly set in what your sex is. So combatting that’s likely your first big media obstacle.”

“Oh, yeah...uhm, I was thinking about doing that, but...I wasn’t sure.”

“Why were you thinking about it?”

The boy fidgeted for a moment.

“W-Well...I pay attention to a lot of...uhm...hero stuff.” Minute Maid held the shaft of the broom in the bend of his elbow while he laced his fingers together. “P-Podcasts, news reports, forums, articles...things l-like that. So, I’ve heard s-some of the things people have said a-about...me, and...who or what they think I am.”

Mt. Lady cringed visibly. “You might want to cut back on those.”

The boy laughed wryly, a little chuckle of a thing.

“I mean...i-it turned out to be k-kind of useful sometimes. I got to see w-what some people were th-thinking, and...I saw how some people t-thought about my g-gender whether it’d be one way or the other. And w-well...i-if I’m a girl then I’m an icon and r-representation of g-girl power, and if I’m a boy, th-then I’m proof that b-boys are better than anyone else, e-even in a skirt.”

“A-And maybe i-it’s a cop-out move of me, but...I don’t think I-I’m a girl. I just really l-like cute things. B-But if I say I’m a b-boy, then people will u-use me for...some s-sexist agenda. A-And I’m okay with th-they/them anyway, so...” Minute Maid swallowed thickly, then looked up at Mt. Lady, his eyes begging for a secondary opinion. “So...I think it’s best...if I don’t...specify. I-I know I’m a boy, but...n-no one else r-really has to know, right?”

Mt. Lady stared at the boy for a moment, then she put her chip bag down on the table by the couch and stood up. She walked over to the boy—who, with the heels, was a little taller than her—and put her hands on his shoulders with a smile.

“Absolutely! Evaluating the best course of action when it comes to the press is yet another thing that heroes do. And if you find that public gender neutrality is the best course of action, go for it and don’t look back.”

Just as the boy’s expression brightened, her’s turned a tad wry.
“But seriously, I’d suggest reading all those forum posts and things less. They can really get into your head and mess you up. Especially since you’re so young.”

Even though the boy nodded at her, she could somehow tell, by the look in his eyes, that her advice went in one ear and out the other. Well, she couldn’t teach him everything. Besides, he had that...data habit of his, it was probably die-hard. Oh well, she tried.

“Now then! Where were you? Ah, right over there.” She pointed to a part of the room he hadn’t swept yet. “But while you do that, let me tell you all about the magic words: No Comment.”

Just as Mt. Lady had predicted on her own time, bringing Minute Maid along with the pro hero group was going lead to a big boost in the group's overall publicity, and almost immediately they all started getting flocked with reporters and civilians after a villain take-down. Minute Maid had been sanctioned to help keep the crowd back with Kamui Woods while Mt. Lady and Desutegoro fought the villain, but it wasn’t too hard for the glowing kid to do that—the kid’s presence alone attracted more attention than the villain did.

She heard Minute Maid using the magic “no comment” more than twice in a row before they started blustering and became unable to answer, and quickly helped them out once the villain was secured by police. And if she happened to pose with them a few times, well, that was because it was the perfect time for a group shot. Though, the next day, articles came out with that picture and the proud pink title “Girls of Action: Minute Maid assists Pro Heroes”. Minute Maid themself read through the article vigilantly, but after what the boy told her, Mt. Lady squinted at it with a level of displeasure.

By Tuesday, the whole troupe was having more trouble with the press and civilians than they were any actual villains. With the people swarming the heroes, it became harder for them to deal with the villains they encountered, and more than one escaped their grasp by the time they could corral the people correctly. Not to mention, it seemed that Minute Maid didn’t do well with crowds, at all. The blunder from the day before wasn’t just about trying to confront the press, it seemed. Minute Maid had a bit of a problem with closely knit crowds in general, something like claustrophobia starting to take a hold of them.

It was a night of frustration, that was for certain.

Late Tuesday night, Minute Maid returned home as they had Monday night. This night, though, the three heroes were gathered together, exhausted after a long day’s work, drinking water and smoking together.

“That was...a disaster. I want to actually drink…” Mt. Lady groaned.

“The press was much more rowdy than they usually are… I wonder if I should send a formal complaint to The Factoid over their interview method of directly avoiding hero orders to get their ‘scoop’…” Kamui Woods turned away and lifted his mask to drink some of his water. Neither of the other two heroes bothered trying to catch a peek. Once done, he turned and looked at their female member curiously. “So, working with Minute Maid through the whole day. How is it?”

“Huh? Why’ar you askin’?” Mt. Lady drawled, her eyes closed tiredly, waving Desutegoro’s cigarette smoke away.

“Well, I’ll be starting my time with Minute Maid tomorrow, and I’d like a point of reference as far as their behavior. You know, kids act differently around people when they’re alone rather than in a group.”
“Hmmn...well, as far as kids go, they’re pretty tame.”

“‘Tame’,” Desutegoro snorted. “Are you describing an animal?”

“Kids are animals. Minute Maid’s on the tolerable side, though. Listens well, pays attention. Wants your opinion like any other kid would. Eager as ever to do stuff for you if you ask.”

“That doesn’t sound like a vigilante,” the wood-skinned hero rubbed at the chin of his mask. “But they sound easy to get along with.”

“Well...I did have to punish them once.”

Desutegoro blew out another puff of smoke that Mt. Lady ended up fanning away. “Punishment? What for?”

Her eyes opened, both to glare in his direction and to cringe. “Immediately upon meeting me, they started cheering about me, which was nice. Super nice. So nice I asked them to say what else they knew. But then they also started spitting out all my stats and asking me a bunch of questions about my quirk, which was a lil creepy. Like, I don’t remember telling anyone that my top high’s increased as I practiced, but they knew that. So I had them clean up one of the rooms at the office.” She took a swig from her water bottle. “They didn’t complain at all about it, though. Hell, I almost felt bad for making them clean.”

Both men paused, staring at the woman. They glanced at each other, then back at her. In the end, Desutegoro was the one who decided to ask the obvious question.

“...You can get taller now than you could before? I thought you’ve always been able to get that big.”

Mt. Lady took another swig of water from her bottle. Once she was done drinking, she looked dead at Desutegoro and pointed at him with the same hand holding the bottle.

“Exactly. They’re a sneaky lil bugger, a bonafide teenager.”

“Now then, Minute Maid, what do you know about common evacuation procedures?”

Said magician sat in a singular rolling chair before a display board, the lights low to let the proctor display Kamui Wood’s powerpoint display. The walls were plain as any office, save for the plants set up on some of the desks and in the corners of the room. Minute Maid rose their hand despite being the only ‘student’ present, a Campos notebook dutifully open in their lap.

“K-Keep calm! Speak calmly yet firmly! H-Have clear directions! A-And make sure that people are a-at least 15 meters away f-from the event at hand!”

Kamui Woods nodded. “Good! Now then, I will tell you several scenarios, and you guess which options on the board would be best. Or, if you have your own idea, tell me by selecting option D!”

The man clicked the button on his remote, and the slide changed to display a heavy crowd, pushing against each other in a panic. It appeared to be in a restaurant or some kind of meeting. Below the scene, three different options showed up, A through C.

“A villain breaks into a formal event and wreaks havoc. The patrons, in a panic, begin to stampede. What do you do?”
“Uhm...buh-B! Alert the crowd to the n-nearest, most accessible exit! But I have to use something that will e-ensure they’ll hear me. A-And if possible, find a w-way to ease access to the exit, like tape or c-cones.”

“Precisely!” Kamui Woods smacked his hand onto the whiteboard as he pressed the button with his other hand, the image changing to a crowd being directed. “When a crowd crush happens, it’s terribly dangerous for the people in the crowd, therefore it’s best to bring order to the panic as soon as possible! Now then, pop quiz. What are the dangers of a crowd crush?”

“Mmh, it’s, it’s, uhm, it’s a t-trampling hazard! And some people c-can be hurt from the pressure of t-too many bodies pushed together.”

“Exactly!” The man put his fists on his hips. “You know, I thought I would be teaching you new things here, but you seem to know quite a bit as it is.”

The magician flushed pink and looked at the ground. Their fingers curled in the skirt of their maid dress. “Oh, uhm, i-it’s just...I-I’ve been i-interested in heroes forever, a-and while it’s mostly in their q-quirks, I p-picked up a lot about p-potential hazards and emergency procedures.”

“Well, that’s a very good thing to pay attention to. I’m glad you did! We’ll go through the rest of this powerpoint as a refresher, alright?”

“Y-Yes sir!”

On the field for the next two days, Minute Maid stayed closer to the ninja-like hero, who used his branches to help get him from building to building. They hopped alongside him, using their magic to strengthen their legs and lighten their body.

Despite being trailed by the group, having to stay closer to the main roads in case anything happened, Kamui was the kind of hero to stumble upon hidden, backroads crime. Something like a pickpocket checking their haul or a druggie shooting up in broad daylight. They never encountered any crowds or any of the circumstances that Kamui reviewed Minute Maid on, and so a lot of the man’s efforts were for naught. For the moment anyway.

All the while during their slow periods, shifting through the streets until the late night began, Minute Maid hopped at his side, muttering emergency procedures under their breath.

Desutegoro’s office was different from the other two, not only in appearance but also in workload. That wasn’t to say that the other two pro heroes didn’t have their own kind of business, but Mt. Lady’s quirk was less beneficial in city settings, so she had a tad of a harder time finding work outside of media appearances, and Minute Maid wasn’t allowed to do that just yet. Kamui Woods also had work outside of the group patrol, but his were mostly coasting the city for troublesome people and apprehending them.

Desutegoro, from his longer work experience, tended to have more concrete jobs.

“My office often assists with hostage situations. We get police calls, then we show up to take down the villain and help with evacuation.” Desutegoro explained this to the magician, who stood in line with his sidekicks, sticking out like a sore thumb. The hero then turned to address all of them. “We’ve got one right now, so we’re going in to assist with the take-down. The police called from
downtown Musutafu. A villain has taken several market employees and customers hostage with the demands for escape clearance. Of course, we can’t allow that to actually happen if we can help it, but we can make it look like we’re letting them escape.”

The hero turned to a board behind him and clicks a button, showing a picture of the building in question. There was an open area where the town market likely was, and several entrances and exits to the building as well as a picture of the villain in question.

“Right now, the police have confirmed that he’s sticking close to the back exit, closer to the backroads so he can escape as smoothly as possible. We plan on getting him separated from the hostages inside, after which we’ll corner him in and take him down. In the meantime, we’ll guard all exits and entrances. Keep injuries to an absolute minimum, understood?”

“Yes sir!” the sidekicks said collectively, Minute Maid following up just a moment later.

“Minute Maid, you’ll be on Team E. Make sure you help them get the people out of that building safely. Do you know basic crowd control protocol?”

The magician straightened up and nodded firmly.

“Y-Yes sir!”

“Have you been trained in it?”

The light in their eyes swirled with a lack of confidence. “N-Not formally, sir!”

Desutegoro nodded nevertheless, his fists on his hips. “That’s alright. Sumusumu will be sure to direct you. As long as you have basic knowledge, you’ll be a great help.”

Minute Maid’s face brightened, and they nodded firmly once more.

“Y-Yes sir!”

“Hey, Desu,” Mt. Lady glanced back at the boy trailing behind them as they did their final group rounds together Saturday evening. The golden light was just then starting to fade, but it was barely noticeable. A few business signs were starting to turn on, but in aborted flickers of light, not yet steady. Multicolored cars passed by on the streets, and people bustled about on the sidewalks on each side, each with their own agenda, oblivious to anything but themselves or their friends.

“Don’t call me that...what is it?”

“How hard did you work that kid?”

When the man glanced back as well, he could see what the woman meant.

Though Minute Maid followed them closely, they were looking at the ground as they walked, their eyes lidded as their pupils flitted along the concrete. Their hands were closely closed around their backpack straps, and their feet dragged a little as they walked. After a second, they looked up to notice the two, and immediately perked up, but even then, they could tell there was a bone tiredness there.

“Hmm, not too hard, I don’t think.” The large, burly man nodded at the kid before turning forward. “But I suppose he’s not used to this kind of workload. It’ll take getting used to.”
“Mmm, yeah… Hey, Minute Maid!” Mt. Lady smiled back at the magician. “Remember to keep your head up! Look out for danger and greet people who greet you! You want to make a positive image of yourself!” Just as she said that, a small group of men, just three of them, called her name from further down the street behind the magician. As an example, she waved and winked at them, much to their vocalized pleasure. “See what I mean?”

“Y-Yes! S-Sorry.” They sighed right afterwards, though it wasn’t exasperated. Just...tired.

Desutegoro frowned, then stopped walking. Mt. Lady walked a few steps more before she realized that the tall man had stopped, and up at the tops of buildings, Kamui Woods also slowed. The burly man turned around to face the magician with his hands on his hips.

“Minute Maid, is this too much for you?”

The boy startled before shaking their head much like a dog drying off its fur. They turned their bright eyes onto the man.

“N-No sir! Not at all!”

“Are you sure? You have been working really hard these past few days. We can understand if it’s tired you out.”

The man’s eyes, just for a moment, very discreetly, travel to the boy’s chest. He didn’t see it, nor did he know about it, but that was where a pale scar ripped through the tan Minute Maid had developed over the summer, new skin unable to have the same color as the rest. As far as Desutegoro was concerned, was just a rumor, heard from the word of mouth of other heroes. But all things considered, it was a trustworthy rumor.

The magician raised his hands off his backpack, his fingers splayed placatingly. “N-No, really, I-I’m fine! I’m okay.” Their right eye twitched then, and they shot a quick glance to their dark black watch. “I mean...uhm…” Their shoulders drooped. “I-I’m a bit...tired, b-but it’s nothing I can’t handle! I-It’s just one more day before I have tomorrow off, anyway! I’ll be...I’ll be okay.”

“Minute Maid.” Kamui Wood’s voice sounded through their earpieces, crackling from his position higher up. “One of the things we went over was the importance of awareness, correct? Not only the awareness of our surroundings, but also of our bodies. If you know you can’t continue, we can have you return for the night.”

“N-No, really...I’m really okay.” The magician’s face started to flush, embarrassment coloring their features pink. “T-Thank you. But I’ll really be okay for the night. I-I promise to rest a lot tomorrow. B-Besides...I’m...listening.”

Mt. Lady turned from where she was distracting the questioning eyes of passing citizens, blinking curiously at the kid. “Listening?”

“Mnhmm. F-For Gray Men. I tend to hear them before I see them, but I’m just...I’m just tr-trying to listen c-closely right now b-ecause…”

The kid cut themselves off, looking to the left and right, waving at one passing citizen who smiled at him. Then, Minute Maid shuffled closer to the two adults, his mic still active for Kamui Woods to hear his words as well.

“Uhm...I think one is nearby.”

The two heros in front of the magician looked at them sharply.
“A Gray Man?” Desutegoro asked, Mt. Lady turning away to look around.

“Ah, mmh. But...I don’t really know where it is. I’m usually able to tell really easily, but...maybe this one has something like a cloaking ability? I-I’m not sure...”

The burly man clicked his tongue, frustration coloring his tone.

“Why didn’t you say so earlier?”

“B-B-Because, I’m n-not...I’m not completely sure. I-I don’t want to cause a panic if it’s nothing and if I can’t find it.”

Right, they’d been training him on crisis and crowd control. The last thing he’d want to do is cause a panic.

Their earpieces crackled with the sound of Kamui Woods’ voice. “That’s fine if you don’t want to tell a crowd of people, but Minute Maid, you should always warn your teammates, even if it turns out to be a false alarm.”

The magician bowed their head in shame, pursing their lips. “I-I’m sorry. I w-wasn’t thinking...sorry.”

Desutegoro glanced at the boy, then sighed, putting a hand on their head and scruffing up their hair.

“It’s alright, that’s what you’re training for. Keep an ear out.”

“Y-...Yes sir.”

The group waited a moment, then they all started walking forward down the street again. They kept their eyes and ears peeled for anything strange. All the while, the adult heroes smiled and kept up the facade like nothing was wrong. Minute Maid though, who hadn’t gotten used to such training just yet, couldn’t always keep up their lackadaisical demeanor. Their star-shaped pupils scanned across the crowds of people as they passed, looking for some clue, any clue, that something was amiss. The magician glanced up to look at Kamui Woods as he hopped from building to building, but saw nothing unusual up there either.

The longer they walked, the more tense Minute Maid became, and soon, they had arrived near a major crosswalk. It was a big one where a lot of different ways for people to cross, much like the large one in Shibuya, only on the smaller side. The lights were still red, but the hero trio prepared to cross over to the other side with everyone else.

There, more civilians started taking pictures of them, moving in closer to get a good shot of the heroes—especially the magician—with smiles on their faces. They started to call the kid’s name and ask them to look their way, but Desutegoro pulled Minute Maid in between the two older heroes, the magician feeling and looking afraid at the large crowd closing in closer on them.

“Don’t mind them,” Desutegoro said, the two watching as Mt. Lady did little poses for the crowd, kindly reminding them of her quirk and her necessity for space. “Let us handle the crowds. You just focus on finding that Gray Man.”

Minute Maid, wide-eyed and scared, nodded up at the man, noticeably calming down.

“Y-Yes, yes sir.”

Then they looked forward and tried to focus.
The light was still red. No one could cross yet.

The crowd was getting noisier, but any time someone pushed too close, the heroes would kindly ask them to back up or get in the person’s way. Distantly, the magician wished they were up on the building tops with Kamui Woods, who avoided the limelight for the time being, though other civilians were starting to look for him, too.

No. They had to focus. They felt more like the Gray Man was somewhere there than they’d felt anything else.

His star-shaped pupils scanned over the crowd just as the light turned blue. Then the masses began to move, and the hero group with it. Minute Maid gasped at feeling pushed, but the heroes were around him. They were keeping them safe. They’d...they’d be okay.

Just as they thought so, their eyes scanned over the crowd ahead of them, coming from the other direction. So many more people coming from the front to smash into their already condensed group.

Two teenage girls at the front of that group took a notice of the magician and began smiling and cheering. The one the two companion’s left had two ponytails low on the back of her head and purple sclera. The other girl looked quirkless, likely having a hidden quirk, but had her hair in a pale blue bob styled like Lady Mercury’s. The girls, in their excitement, took out their phones to get a front-face picture of him.

But Minute Maid wasn’t paying attention to their pictures. They were paying attention to the strange gap behind the girls.

They were paying attention to the strange gap behind the girls.

No one seemed to be paying attention to the fact they’d given the two a wide berth behind them. Even people who were rushing up from behind them didn’t dare go anywhere near the strange gap in the crowd to get past them faster.

Minute Maid couldn’t imagine why that side of the crowd would do such a thing when, even on the magician's side, with heroes asking them to back away, people were squeezing in on each other just to get pictures of them, so why avoid those girls...

Like they were unconsciously giving something a wide berth.

Minute Maid’s pupils shrank, the fear they had over the watching eyes of the crowd of people around them giving way to a burst of uncontrolled desperation.

“There! It's right there!”

Before anyone could react, Minute Maid ran out from the protection of the heroes, running straight forward towards the oncoming crowd of people. Quite a few of them stopped, surprised to see someone running their way.

“You two! You there! Get down!”

The two high schoolers blinked, startled.

“Please, Get down, now!”

As they said that, they reached back towards their bright yellow backpack. The bunny pin snapped open and the bag opened in a flurry of sparks and yellow ribbons. Quickly, in a moment’s notice, they had a glowing pink and yellow bow in their left hand and a sparking yellow arrow in their right.
Before they even aimed, the girls quickly ducked down, moving out of the way of the magician’s shot.

“Wait, Minute Maid!” Izuku heard called behind him. But there was no time to wait.

Instead, as quickly as they could, they brought his arrow to their bow and pulled the string back, letting the string and arrow release and fly at the two girls, too close to their bodies to really be safe.

Some people quickly backed away, crying out, and a large gasp echoed from behind where the people who’d crowded Minute Maid were. But that didn’t last long.

Suddenly, the blank area they’d fired at lit up with sparks, and a thick, stubby hand with large fingers trembled, outlined with striking yellow lichtenberg figures.

Everyone near it froze, including the two girls over whom a strange shadow started to shift into brief existence.

A static-filled groan rumbled from above the girls, and a large, translucent body with stubby legs, long, bendy arms, and a round face appeared. It shuddered and became just vaguely visible, like a mirage swimming in their vision. Its round face was covered with a screen full of chaotic white noise, but it had an actual mouth under the screen with rounded teeth clenching together. All in all, it was taller than even Desutegoro, its hand still frozen where it was about to grab onto the girl on the right of the duo.

When the teeth parted, the Gray Man bellowed out a loud, static cry that made all the people near it cower with fear as they all joined it in screaming.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaah, golly, the writer is sleepy. But anyway, let us know if referring to Minute Maid as "they/them" and Izuku as "he/him" is too confusing or not.

Ah, to specify, since singular and plural they can occasionally get mixed up, please let us know if that’s happening in this chapter.
Hey yoooooo
This is late, but Happy Valentine's Day! /ay \_\_ (´apist)

Around this time last year, I posted Chapter 21 :3c
I'm glad I was able to keep posting at least a chapter a month since then <:<3

Usually I'd put fanart up here, but I'll let you guys go to my blog for that this time. Maybe I'll put it up for the next chapter.
Anyway, I hope you guys enjoy! (ophilia)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Most gyms smelled like sweat. After months of several people gathering in one place to exercise and work themselves out, the sweat smell always became a constant staple in a gym, combined with the scent of the wall and floor materials. Musty, plastic, and yet, not bothersome enough to refrain from working out. Most gyms smelled like that.

Except the gym at the ISFU didn’t.

Unlike White Tiger Official, the ISFU building was newer, and so was the large gym room, procured for training. It wasn’t as though there weren’t an abundance of people using it—Shimizu and Midoriya shared the gym with the Inu Team, Hana Team, and the occasional, brave Tanezumi member, forgoing her studies to try to grow just a little more muscle. So there were a lot of people using it, even more than there had been at White Tiger. And yet, it didn’t ever smell heavily of sweat. The room seemed covered with the scent of something fresher and right-out-the-box. Something trying to be natural while not being natural at all.

It made Shimizu a little uncomfortable all things considered. But, well, she was getting paid more and had a contract.

That didn’t mean she had to deal with just anyone, though.

Left, left, right.

“Hey Sharkie, mind sparring with me?” Akita asked, vaguely to the woman’s right side.

Shimizu didn’t even turn away from the punching bag. There was no point in doing so when she already knew who it was, the woman having become a more constant pest whenever Midoriya was absence.

Right, left, right.

“Yes, I mind.”
“Aww, c’mon, why not?” The turquoise haired woman moved vaguely into her line of sight, still keeping to the side so she wouldn’t get hit by the bag if it strayed.

Low right, left, left.

“Because I said no.”

“Hmmm, you’re no fun.” Akita pouted, puffing her cheeks out. But it wasn’t any true disappointment, her pout quickly shifting into a smile moments later. “Can I hold your bag, then?”

“No.”

Left, low right, low right.

“Sheesh, what’s the big deal with you, anyway? Do you think I’m weak or something?” Akita angled her hands at herself and moved them up and down in personal display. At the moment, she was wearing a sports top and shorts, her hands wrapped in boxing tape and her hair tied low in a short ponytail behind her head. Her biceps shifted with her movements, and her abs glistened a little with sweat. “I’m clearly not. Believe me. I may not have handled guys bigger than you, but I’ve handled several at once, so you can let me try. It’s just a lil spar sesh!”

Shimizu didn’t respond, and didn’t pause her sets either. When it got quiet around her, she thought maybe the woman went away, and felt a part of her unfurl in relief.

Left, left—…

Standing up straighter, the shark-quirked woman glared at the bag.

“I said I didn’t want you to hold it.”

Grinning, Akita peeked at her from behind the bag.

“Yeah, but you’re not my mom.”

Shimizu’s snout curled in a low, half-hearted snarl that gave even more glimpses of her sharp, gleaming teeth than when her mouth was closed. Before she could say anything else, Akita held her hand up.

“You know, I’ve heard about your dissatisfaction with your current job. About training Midori- wan.”

Eyes narrowing, Shimizu stared at her.

“How is that relevant right now.”

“Oh dang, not even denying it, huh?” She chuckled and shrugged, holding onto the bag. “Well, all I knew about it was that you were super dissatisfied with training him because he’s young. But honestly, I don’t understand what your issue with it is.” She waved her hand around absently. “When kids are young with all that extra brain squish, they learn things faster and keep it in mind. So when you’re training him, you’re teaching him how to get hurt less, yeah? Rather than later, don’t you think it’s the best time to do it?”

“No,” Shimizu grumbled.

“Why not, though?”
“You already know why. Why are you bothering me?” Her fists clenched. “Leave me alone. Go bother someone else.”

“Oooooh, feisty.” Eyebrows raising, Akita’s nose twitched. Then she tilted her head. “It’s faint but...is that a grudge I smell?”

Shimizu blinked. “What?”

“Oh, right, you don’t know my quirk.” The woman pointed to her nose. “My quirk’s called Bloodhound. Using the smell of someone’s body fluids, I can trail them for a few hundred meters. Ah, that’s if I smell their sweat, anyway. Saliva’s a shorter distance and blood’s a much longer distance. Using the smell, I can also tell some of their emotions and what they’re thinking.” She grinned then, lighthearted and curious in a way that shouldn’t have been sinister. “And from what little I’m getting from you, you have a super deep, very old grudge against someone...or something? But what does Midori-wan have to do with it, I wonder...”

Her voice trailed off at the look on Shimizu’s face.

Her hair shadowed over her eyes, making the vibrant, toxic green of her irides stand out like beacons in the darkness. Despite her teeth being clenched, she wasn’t baring them at her. Still, there was a strain in her jaw and in her strong, thick arms. She wasn’t shaking, but she looked like she would be if Akita kept going.

The shorter woman rose her hands placatingly. “Alright, alright. I know how to stop while I’m ahead.” Then she shrugged. “But about Midori-wan, think of it this way. He’s getting a lot less smacked around because of you—ack!”

She let out a choked cry of pain, feeling a fist bop her on the top of her head. With an unimpressed look on her face, Borzoi walked past her over to Shimizu, stopping short of being too close to her. Then she bowed in apology, platinum blond hair shifting with her head.

Her voice dripped with a slavic accent even as she spoke Japanese, a low bass tone from her throat. “I’m sorry for Akita’s behavior. She’s rather excitable and immature and doesn’t know when to stop talking.”

“Heeeey, I’m right here, you know…”

“Precisely why I’m making sure to say that what you did was stupid. Press buttons another time. Come. Apologize.”

Akita pursed her lips and glared at the taller woman, but cool blue eyes stared fridgedly back. Eventually, the former cracked and groaned, leaning her head back dramatically. Then she walked closer and bowed quickly, fast enough to give someone else whiplash.

“Sorry, sorry. Didn’t mean to upset you...too much.”

“This is likely part of the reason why she won’t spar with you, you know. You’re capricious.” Borzoi gave Shimizu an exasperated look of mild exhaustion. “Again, apologies.”

By then, Shimizu was no longer angry, just staring back at the woman with her eyebrows scrunched in mild irritation. “Uh huh.”

“I’ll take this one and leave you alone,” Borzoi said, grabbing Akita’s ponytail and walking away with her. Akita sputtered and reached back, smacking her other hand against Borzoi’s arm as she tried and failed to get her to let go.
Shimizu watched them go away, then closed her eyes. Breathing.

Fighting to think over the phantom sound of cicadas that had started up since the teal-haired woman mentioned a grudge.

She was fine.

Akita didn’t find out. Her quirk wasn’t extensive enough for that.

Honestly, it wouldn’t matter either way, but…

Still. She wasn’t about to talk about that. Not yet.

She would be fine.

Shimizu shook her head until the phantom cicadas stopped screaming. Stood still, waited for the tension to leave her enough to move. Then she posted up again, fists protecting her face, and prepared to start another set.

Left.

Left, right.

Left, right, le—

The Gray Man’s wide, meaty left hand moved to smack down onto the two girls below it, the two screaming. But before any of its fingers could touch them, Minute Maid rushed forward. As swiftly as they could, they reached back and replaced their bow with their umbrella and opened it. Its canopy opened in a flourish of starlike sparkles, and Minute Maid braced their body under it, shielding the two girls along with themself.

The hand slammed down onto the canopy, and the magician grunted, but they held their ground. At the same time, magical sparks began dancing off the top of the umbrella, causing lichtenberg figures to start climbing up the monster’s hand as it screeched static noise. The two girls screamed and cowered, covering their ears.

“It’ll be okay!” Minute Maid yelled loudly, as if in retaliation to the strange creature above them all, startling the girls into opening their eyes. “I’m sorry I scared you two, but it’ll be okay! I promise!”

The girls looked over to the magician, fear bringing tears to their eyes. But Minute Maid was smiling. It was wobbly at the corners, clearly nervous, but it was genuine and bright, shining along with the magician’s skin. Their starlit eyes glanced at both of them before focusing back on the underside of the umbrella.

“It’ll be okay! Please head over to Mt. Lady! She’ll protect you and tell you where to go! Behind me!”

The girl with the purple scleras stared at them with wide eyes, some sense of awe starting to crack through the fear. Before she could say or do anything else though, her friend with the blue bob stumbled to her feet and grabbed her wrist.
“Minami-chan, c’mon!” she screamed, dragging the purple-eyed girl to her feet and running away with her, following the crowd heading towards Desutegoro’s and Mt. Lady’s waving hands.

“Everyone! Get away from the battle!” Mt. Lady called out. She gritted her teeth in frustration, unable to get large with all of the people crowded close to her. “Be careful not to hurt each other! Head down this street to be safe! Watch where you’re stepping!”

A man clenching his briefcase to his chest tripped on the curb from the street to the sidewalk, squawking as he fell towards the ground. Before he could, one of Desutegoro’s large, rough hands caught him and helped him to his feet.

“Careful! Follow the crowd and watch where you’re walking, alright?!”

The man nodded quickly, then scurried after the others, people running further off to crowd developing several meters away from the battle.

Many others had started tripping, some making their knees bleed. Kamui Woods was quickly able to help them to their feet and save them from being trampled. The three pro heroes took care to control the crowd as they directed them further away, starting to block off the roads as they all echoed the same demands.

Careful steps. No trampling. This way. Get further away.

Meanwhile, Minute Maid held up their umbrella under the creature’s weight.

It gnashed, then balled its right hand into a fist and swung a punch at the magician’s side. But they noticed it before it could hit. They closed the umbrella, and swiftly jumped back, the monster swinging at nothing. With it still distracted, Minute Maid reached back and the backpack opened, the umbrella being replaced with Muay Thai gloves in a flourish of yellow ribbons.

The hulking creature went still and stared in the magician’s direction. Then, much to Minute Maid’s surprise, the thing...grinned. It put all its big, crushing teeth on display in what looked to be a large, taunting smirk. Then, its skin rippled, like the surface of water when something dropped into it, and it began to go invisible.

But Minute Maid wasn’t going to lose it. Not this time.

They rushed forward, fists angled to protect their face, and they threw a punch right where they remembered its torso to be. Just barely, they felt their glove press slightly against something, but there was a thumping noise just a little further ahead of them. It had moved back quickly. Despite its weight, it still had some speed to it.

Minute Maid was going to move forward again to punch at it again, but then their eyes shifted to their left. Instead, they put their fists up to protect their face, and sure enough, a large, pale fist slammed into their forearms. The magician gritted their teeth as they flew backwards, their shoes catching on the ground as they slid to a stop. Magic danced in sparks on their forearms, trying to heal the bruise before it could appear.

“A...A heavy hitter, huh?” Izuku muttered, watching as the hand disappeared into nothingness with a ripple of its body.

Very heavy. Be careful, I’m sure this one’s had a few snacks.

“I can’t see it anymore. Can’t hear it over the screaming either…” His breath stuttered, tipping higher in horror. “…I caused a crowd rush didn’t I?”
The heroes have them handled, don’t worry. Just listen for the residue, like you just did.

Izuku frowned, regret stabbing him in the back, eyes searching the area. “No, you told me it was coming.”

Precisely. You listened to me, and I told you where it was. I count that as listening for it.

“...Why did you tell me? You usually tell me to—”

Now’s not the time, buddy! You have a whole crowd around, and this residue’s hungry. Jump left.

Izuku didn’t waste any time and obeyed, jumping off to the left as Handyman had told him to.

A moment later, two fists slammed down into the ground, becoming briefly visible before rippling and fading into obscurity. A few people screamed at the brief but sudden appearance, and Izuku faced where the monster had just been.

Look alive, starlight!

Minute Maid nodded and waited, eyes trailing the area in the road that had been opened for them to fight. On either side of them, cars had been turned off and abandoned, the people having gotten out to run away and avoid getting hurt. No one was daring to cross the crosswalk with the two of them in the middle of it, Mt. Lady, Desutegoro, and Kamui Woods almost done blocking the area off.

Right in the middle of commuting time...this Gray Man was exhibiting a thought process just like Kronos had.

Before they could think further on it, they twitched, then twisted their hips and kicked up high. Their foot smacked hard against the Gray Man’s outstretched hand, that one sparking up with golden lichtenberg figures, part of its body visible from the hit. It screeched loudly and sounded like it backed away, but Minute Maid didn’t want to let it hide again.

Quickly, the ran forward and kicked at where they thought a leg would be. Their right foot connected with the thing’s knee, the spot rippling into view with new figures digging into its skin. But before they could back up, its meaty right hand curled around their calf and dragged them off balance. They fell to the ground with a cry, then found themselves hanging upside down in front of the Gray Man’s face. Without a thought, they punched it as hard as they could, its head turning to the side with how hard they hit it.

It cried out and reached for its face, but it wasn’t done with them yet. With its hold on them, it swung them in the air by the leg, slamming them down onto the pavement. Minute Maid’s head bounced off of it with a painful crack, their vision swimming from the hit. Before they could get their bearings, it swung them again. The magician’s face smacked nose first into the pavement the second time, then the side of their body the third time. Finally, with a loud screech, it threw them at one of the rows of cars, much to the crowd’s horror.

“Ghhnn!”

Their back smashed into a bus’ windshield, the glass cracking under the force of their body in a glitter of wayward shards. A second later, they fell off and landed face first onto the pavement, going still.

The once rowdy crowd went still and obedient at the pain dealt to the magician. With them calming in terror, Desutegoro gritted his teeth, turning sharply to Mt. Lady.
“Keep the crowd back! That thing’s mine!”

Without waiting for her reply, he ran off from keeping the crowd back, bumping his gloved fists together. Finally, without the people distracting him, he could help. He rushed forward with heavy steps to where the Gray Man was beginning to ripple and disappear, their wide-toothed grin on full display towards the seemingly unconscious magician.

Before it could fully disappear, Desutegoro threw a punch, a low yell bellowing out his mouth.

The punch impacted with its shoulder, making it grunt, but the next punch was caught in its hand. Growling, Desutegoro tried punching with his other hand, but it caught that one as well. The Gray Man grinned down at the man, then flexed its hands.

Whatever it was expecting to happen didn’t happen, much to its surprise.

“Huh...must be the gloves throwing you off, ey?” Desutegoro grinned. Then, he rose a foot at the risk of his balance, kicking the thing in the chest.

The creature groaned and stumbled, but didn’t let go, so he did it again, and again, and again. Finally, it released him, its hands having loosened from on the other man’s fists. Desutegoro didn’t bother bumping his fists again, going in for an uppercut that had the creature’s head thrusting upwards.

In the crowd, while many cheered for the strong hero, another few kept their gazes trained on the magician. They gasped and began calling their name as Desutegoro kicked the creature, seeing Minute Maid start to get up. The glowing child struggled onto their hands and knees, arms trembling. Still, they managed to stagger onto their feet, focusing their eyes on the enemy and the hero fighting it.

Minute Maid shook their head clear of any fogginess, much to their regret if their twitching eye was any indication. Even so, they then ran towards the two, swerving around to attack the creature from the back.

Desutegoro dealt another frontal attack on the Gray Man, punches making the thing’s head jut left and right. But before he could do another, the Gray Man’s left fist pulled back. The man shifted his body to the right, thinking he could avoid a hit, but found himself bent over the creature’s right fist instead.

Immediately, the man was hit with a wave of pain, and he coughed out bile before he could stop himself. The next moment, the man flew back, his back skidding on the ground before he came to a stop, groaning with his hand over his stomach.

The Gray Man grinned, pleased by the other’s agony, but ended up screeching again when dealt a magical kick to their back. Minute Maid gritted their teeth—even with a kick, it didn’t go all the way through its body. Layers upon layers of polluted magic were in its system, and it showed.

Minute Maid backed up before the creature could grab them again. It growled in static tones, and just when the magician thought it would attack them, its body started rippling, going invisible, starting with its fists. Gaping, they then brought their fists up and ran at the creature, ready to punch it before it could go invisible.

Suddenly, they heard something metallic and glass crunch, and over the sound of the crowds, they could distinctly hear the two high school girls scream at them to watch out.

Minute Maid’s gaze slid to the left, then widened.
Someone’s red car was coming at them, the Gray Man’s invisible fist curled around the cracked frame of the car’s windshield. They barely put their arms up in time, unable to dodge out of the way. One moment they were still running forward. The next, their feet were swiped clean off the ground, the full force of the creature’s metallic club hitting them in the side.

They felt something crack under the force of the hit, but gritted their teeth to keep from screaming in pain. Body flying, Minute Maid smacked into the ground and rolled near the row of cars on the other side of the crosswalk. Before their body could settle, their left arm suddenly began getting covered with white wraps that moved on their own, coming from under their gloves.

That time, they were faster to stagger to their feet, but they couldn’t move in time to stop the Gray Man from throwing another car. Instead of aiming at them, the thing aimed at the crowd they were closest to, a blue car sailing through the air at the group. The people began to flee in a panic, but suddenly, a large purple-clad hand grabbed the car before it could hit anyone.

“Hey! None of that!” Mt. Lady bellowed, putting her enlarged body in front of the people, sideways and on her knees so that the right side of her body faced the line of fire. It was much to the crowd’s relief, cheering for the woman.

It screeched at her before picking up another one and throwing it to the other side, but instead of a purple hand catching it, tree roots broke through the glass windows and quickly stabilized the metallic death trap. Kamui Woods set the car down in front of himself, using it as a precarious shield to protect the large crowd behind him, glaring furiously at the creature.

But it, instead of screeching at her, tilted its head at him, eyeless face trained on his body. Then, a grin split its face, looking incredibly happy.

“Shit,” Kamui muttered under his breath, twining his branches into the car.

If the creature touched his branches...it would likely be game over for him.

With its interest sufficiently taken, it got onto all fours and prepared to run at the hero, only for Mt. Lady to change her angle. Crouched as she was, she held onto one of the buildings close to her, then raised her right leg, bringing her heel down on top of its body. It noticed and put its hands up to catch her, but it still ended up a few inches embedded into the ground, immobilized.

Desutegoro groaned, but he still stumbled onto his feet, putting his fists up and slamming them together, sparks coming off of his gloves. He glanced to the side where Minute Maid was, the magician starting to run at the monster with their own fists still covered in their Muay Thai gloves. Emboldened, he let out a battle cry and started running at the monster despite the pain in his stomach and chest.

The Gray Man gritted its teeth at them, then screeched again, throwing its hands up with a large amount of force, enough to get Mt. Lady’s heel off of them. The crowd behind her screamed as her body teetered a little, but she dropped the car she was holding to quickly stabilize herself on the buildings instead. The Gray Man reached back at an unnatural angle and quickly grabbed two cars, flinging one at Mt. Lady and another at Minute Maid.

With her hands on the buildings, she couldn’t catch it in time, and the car smacked against her forehead with a loud crunch. She gasped in pain, blood drawn from the furled metal and broken glass, but her body stayed in front of the much smaller people behind her. Minute Maid jumped and rolled off to the side to avoid the car thrown at them, and at the same time, Desutegoro made it close to the still embedded creature.
He threw a punch at its torso, hitting with enough force for its body to ripple. It screeched furiously and forced one of its legs out of the ground to kick at him, but he dodged just in time, punching it in the torso again. The punch hit, but the creature didn’t even bother to react beyond another screech. It then leaned to the side with its free leg, hands near the ground. With a tug of its body and a kick off with its free leg, it forced itself into a cartwheel that pulled its other leg out of the ground. Then, its body rippled and it went invisible too fast for any of the heroes to trace it.

Desutegoro cursed, but Minute Maid didn’t bother, starlit eyes tracing a path from where the monster had been over to the hero it had been eyeing earlier, reaching back to replace their gloves with their bow and arrow. Kamui Woods knew it was heading for him, too, eyes narrowing under his mask as he tried to determine where it would be. With a slight look of regret, he reached out with his left arm, the appendage bursting into branches. He curled them around and into a previously undamaged but empty car.

“Whoever’s car this is, I’ll personally pay you back for it!” he yelled out, dragging the car over in front of himself, not strong enough with only one arm to have it in the air.

Just as he was dragging it, something told him in his senses that the creature was near, like a panic button had been pressed under his skin. He glared at the empty space in front of him and tugged on the car with all his might, swinging the thing at the space.

Surely enough, much closer than it had been before, the Gray Man reappeared when the car smashed into its body, its big, meaty hands outstretched and reaching for him with a hungry, drooly grin on its face. While the now damaged car had driven it off its initial path, it was still much too close, Kamui grunting as he rose the other car he already had in his left roots. He rose it just in time, his feet dragging back against the ground as its weight landed on the metal.

“Ghhrrrmnn!!”

His face strained behind his mask, the weight already too much for him to handle, but he stayed strong, glaring at the hungry creature on the other side of the car. It hissed static at him and started clambering over the car, its big hands digging into the metal to try and reach his arm, just to touch his bare skin and leech from him.

But then, a bright light flew from behind it, striking the thing in the back of the neck.

It screeched loudly in pain and slipped off the car, falling to the ground on its back as it reached at the arrow sticking out of it. Behind it, Minute Maid ran up, reaching back again to put their arrow away, summoning nothing else.

Kamui Woods gritted out a yell as he forced himself to raise the car he’d entangled with his right arm and slam it down onto the creature. The thing rolled over backwards, avoiding the attack and getting further away from him, but closer to the magician running up behind it.

It hissed at him, getting ready to attack him again.

“Hey, you!”

The creature paused, then turned around and screeched static at them.

Before it could complete its cry, it was cut off.

Minute Maid had ran full force at the Gray Man, jumping off the ground, screaming at the top of their lungs. Using their arms and hips, they twisted midair. When the creature had turned around, a full-force shin kick smacked it in the face with enough pressure that the first row in the crowd behind
Kamui Woods covered their faces from the dust it kicked up.

Magic sparked in starlit sparkles that struck through the creatures face in full lichtenberg figures, cutting through its static screen all the way from one side to the other.

Minute Maid slipped on the landing and fell to their side with a gasp, but quickly scrambled back onto their feet, facing the monster with the intent to continue. But it staggered onto its hands and knees, the yellow magic still digging through its body. Erratic static hisses uttered from its throat, its mouth twisted into an agonized snarl.

But it wasn’t dissipating. Not enough magic had pierced its layers. But it was certainly struggling. Despite everything, Minute Maid hated seeing that. For some reason, seeing it scrabble against the ground brought them no pleasure. It would be better to just get things over with.

They reached back and summoned a left glove, limping up to the creature to get rid of it once and for all. Behind them, the crowd had already started cheering even though they hadn’t killed it off yet.

“Get rid of it, Minute Maid!”

“One punch that asshole!”

“Kill it!”

The magician felt emboldened by them, listening to them, their limp turning into a more steady stride until they were right in front of the suffering creature. The thing had since gone quiet. But it hadn’t started breaking down. It was still alive in the only sense that it could be.

This was what Izuku had magic for. What he was supposed to do. And he had no regrets for it.

So they rose their left fist, hand balled and ready, and prepared to punch the other side of its face, completing the connection and knocking it out for good. They waited for a moment, their arm starting to spark with more magic, and wound their arm back to give it a good whack.

Minute Maid couldn’t pause the punch, but they didn’t have to. Instead, for some reason, time seemed to slow down. The heroes seemed to almost go in slow motion as Desutegoro had started trudging towards them. Mt. Lady was moving her hand from her bleeding forehead, but the movement was sluggish. The voices of the people behind them went quiet and there were no other noises save for the strange, warbled, childish voice of the creature in front of them. A low tone of white noise was increasing in the background like a whisper turning louder.

It faced the ground, but in a smooth, quick movement that barely displaced the dust around them, it looked up at the magician. Much faster than anything around them, like the slowed time didn’t affect them.

And grinned its wide-toothed grin, teeth parting just the slightest to let its voice through.

The magician didn’t answer verbally.

Instead, their fist smacked into the other side of the creature’s face. Magic struck through it, connecting the two different impacts as the static screen on the Gray Man’s face went a bright yellow
color. The static from its voice cut out abruptly, as its face swung to the other side. The screen on its face clicked off, turning black.

It grayed out.

Then started to crumble.

And then, the crowd really started cheering, chanting the names of the heroes around them and the magician themself.

But instead of feeling joy, or even the boldness they’d leech from the crowd’s prompting before, now.

Now they…

...Ah.

Now he was just confused.

As soon as the Gray Man started to break down, the crowd went loose. They started trying to move in like before and get good pictures, or touch and meet their favorite heroes, and especially quite a few were interested in the little magician.

While many wanted pictures, others were just concerned over the beating they took, calling out to them with concern in their voices.

Minute Maid, surprised by the turn of events, blinked at them, then smiled, putting their hands up placatingly.

“I-I’m fine! It’s okay! I-Is anyone over there hurt?”

As they spoke with the crowd, the watch’s face turned dark and small hands quickly snatched up the crystals the Gray Man left behind, too quickly for any camera to see. The crystals were there, and then, they were simply gone.

The effect they had on Minute Maid was just beginning, though.

One minute they were talking and smiling, checking over Kamui Woods, waving for pictures that some of the people wanted to take. They posed with the older hero, too, awkward as they were, as the police, news crews, and medics finally started breaking through the crowds from the back. With the people finally being moved away, the two began to relax, Desutegoro and Mt. Lady handling things on the other side of the crosswalk.

Kamui Woods put a hand on their shoulder

“That was some great work there, Minute Maid,” the up and coming hero praised. “But, we spent my part of the week on crowd control lessons, and yet…”

The wobbly smile on their face slipped off immediately, replaced by shame.
“I-I know, I know and...I really...I just...uhm...i-it was going to touch them, so I…”

The man sighed. “No, no, it’s alright for now. Desutegoro, Mt. Lady, and I were able to keep too much from happening it seems. Just remember it for the next week you’re working, alright?”

Sufficiently cowed, the magician looked at the ground and nodded.

“Well...enough of that. You were hit really hard...several times. Are you okay? Any pain?”

They looked up then, blinking. “Oh, n-no, I’m not hu—” Their right eye winced. “—okay. Okay. I mean...uh...yeah, I’m...I’m a bit beat up.” They winced again. “A lot beat up. But I swear I’m fine! I- It’s not, uhm, not the worst I’ve had, so I can take a lot of hits! I-I’m more worried about—ah, about Mt. Lady c-cause she got hit in the face with a car a-and Desutegoro c-cause he, uhm. He threw up from one of the punches, so, uh, so compared to them, I’m f—”

Suddenly, their eyes lidded as the glow around them dimmed. They started to sag, arms dropping from where they’d been moving while they spoke. Kamui, shocked by the sudden change, quickly put both hands on their shoulders to keep them up.

“—iiiiinnneeee…”

“Hey, hey, now. Geez, what happened? C’mon, stay with me,” Kamui directed, helping Minute Maid get lowered to the ground.

Members of the crowd closest to them let out noises of alarm, some calling the magician’s name while others called for medical help. Further off, Mt. Lady turned away from two cameras trained on her to see the scene, quickly excusing herself to head over while a medic tended to Desutegoro.

“Minute Maid, what is—”

“Mmmhh…” Their head lolled in the man’s hold, sitting on the ground with their legs outstretched. Kamui steaded it, watching the child blink slowly. “Ghhh—aaai’m fine… Juss…really sleeby…”

“‘Sleeby’...sleepy? Are you falling asleep right now?” Kamui Woods asked, his voice clearly incredulous. “No, I’m pretty sure you have a concussion. Stay awake, alright? I’ll get you some help.”

“Hey!” Mt. Lady called out, jogging over. She had a bandage on her head from where the car hit it, the injury smaller in her smaller form. “Hey, are they alright? What happened?”

Minute Maid smiled dozily, eyes lidded and the corners of their mouth wobbly as ever. “Issh fine. Mm’kay.”

Kamui Woods narrowed his eyes. “They’re very clearly not fine. I think they’re concussed. They’re starting to fall asleep and—”

“Shit. We need to get them to the medic now—”

“Noooh, isss...fine.” Minute Maid rose a hand, waving it as dismissively as they could. They smacked the ninja-like hero on the arm. “S’rry. Handyman’sssss makin’ me t’red…”

The two heroes blinked at him.

“‘Handyman’?” Mt. Lady asked.

The kid blinked slowly, their eyes staying closed longer than necessary. “Heal fassster when
The heroes didn’t quite understand what was happening, but they understood that at least.

“So then, when you sleep, you get better? No matter what? Even with a concussion?” Mt. Lady asked, eyes firmly on the kid.

They gave her a thumbs up. “Yaah.”

Kamui Woods sighed, Mt. Lady hiding a laugh behind her hand, then began to pick the kid up. Surprised, Minute Maid squirmed.

“Whha—”

“Hey, none of that. While it would’ve been better for this to happen later, your body apparently needs the rest now. Go ahead and sleep,” Kamui Woods said, holding the kid in his arms. Some ladies in the crowd screamed and cheered at how cool he looked.

“Buuh...’lice report. And...and...media and...” They reached their hands up and held their head, eyes barely open yet panicked under the haze of an apparently forced sleep. “Property damage.”

“Nope. Not the time to worry about that.” Mt. Lady patted their head, smiling, though she had winced at the last word Minute Maid said. “We’ll handle the rest. You go ahead and knock out, okay kiddo?”

The magician looked skeptical, but eventually, after about half a minute, they calmed and closed their eyes.

“Mmmkay…”

After that, Izuku didn’t bother opening his eyes again. All too quickly he felt himself starting to fade into unconsciousness, beckoned by the voice in his watch and in his head to go to sleep and let the magic do its work. Without anyone to tell him otherwise, he agreed.

Soon, he couldn't even feel Kamui Wood's arms holding him up, his head resting against his shoulder, dead to the world only in metaphor.

Chapter End Notes

He had a concussion, a broken arm, bruised bones in several places, several cracked ribs from kissing the asphalt and his back saying hello to a daggom bus, and partially torn muscles in his right leg from when the Gray Man decided he was a ragdoll. The clothes can only do so much, you know? But anyway, he wanted to ignore the pain so he could stay awake and give his report to the police. Hah.

I had no choice but to knock him out cold.

And don’t get me wrong, Shimizu’s doing the best with what she can, I mean, all things considered he did better than he could’ve without training at all. Like, that punch that bruised his forearms could’ve broken his collarbone and sternum. So yeah, she’s doing great.
It’s just.

The others. The heroes, I mean. Adults.

They’re...

Weaker than I had expected.
Shifts in the System

Chapter Summary

Warning: Unintentional misgendering in social media

Chapter Notes

Shout out to kabukichou (ameliafromafairytale), author of U.A. Unsolved, because I sure as heck used the way they made social media posts in their fic as a reference for how to do it in mine qwq

Ah, also, happy 4/13.

all these years later and i’m still a homestuck, yikes

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I guess people like you are just really desperate for attention.” Sanada sighed, her right hand supporting her head as she faced left and smiled wryly.

“You’re still eating that, huh? Isn’t that gross? Eating it like that.” Arashi laughed, standing in front of a desk the class was all too familiar with, pointing down at the bell pepper in the student’s covered hand. “Don’t tell me you’re going to eat the top of it, too.” To his right, Uoka laughed, a whistling noise escaping his mouth as he stood with his friend, towering over the person as well.

A young girl sat at Midoriya’s old desk. She had long black hair that went down her back and pooled in her seat. The red and black of her uniform clashed starkly with her nearly white skin, the black pools of her larger than normal irides just as loud against the white of her sclera. And, at the moment, she was in the process of eating a whole bell pepper with nothing additional to it.

When she’d been introduced to the class only two weeks ago, quite a few of the classmates had been interested in her. She had a cute face, if doll-like to the point of being uncanny, and she very clearly had a Quirk of some sort, they just didn’t know what it was. And for some reason, from the beginning of her time there, she refused to say what it was.

Then her actions came off as strange. Sometimes they would find her standing in the middle of the hallway, facing a blank wall. Whenever she ate, she wouldn’t do it normally—she once brought a lemon to school and began eating it with the rind still on it. And the way she spoke was unnerving; her voice had a flat yet soft tone to it, and she included quotes and references in almost anything she said.

The interest in her began to turn sour very, very quickly, but she never once commented on it. Nor did she try to change it. No one from any other class would really try to approach her, casually or not. It wasn’t easy to speak to someone when it felt like they were always looking at you no matter where their eyes were facing.
But the three in the class certainly were trying. It just happened to be in the usual way they did for ‘strange students’.

Sanada huffed and covered her ears. “Gosh, Iwakage-san, your lunch is so noisy. Why can’t you eat the same food as everyone else?” She looked pointedly at her plate: chicken, curry, naan bread, and a salad with a milk carton to the side. It was the same as everyone else’s.

The girl paused, swallowing her current bite.

“Because, Sanada-chan, you made me drop it.”

It was still there, too. Iwakage’s spilled lunch was laid out on the floor, the tray used to hold it barely covering the splatter. The dark girl’s socks had some curry stains near the bottom. The only thing saved from the mess was the milk carton, currently sitting in front of the dark-haired girl as she ate her pepper.

“Made you drop it? Are you serious?” Sanada scoffed.

“Hey, don’t blame her for your clumsiness, Doll Face,” Arashi hissed, slamming his fist on her desk, only to snort and start laughing with Uoka a moment later.

“The class prez is going to tell you to clean it up, Iwakage-san. Shouldn’t you get started on that?” Sanada stuck her foot out at the mess on the ground. “It’s a hazard. You should get on your hands and knees and get that cleaned up right away.”

A few snickers sounded off from the groups closest to them, several uninvolved gazes glancing their way. Little whispers floated in the air and a slight ease seemed to settle in their shoulders, like a weight was picked up off of them. The class president herself sat at the front of the class and ate silently, saying nothing. Bakugou, too, sat in his own seat, not even accompanied by his long-fingered friend, both boys quietly eating their food as well.

In lieu of answering, Iwakage bit into the bell pepper again and chewed, sounding like crisp grass being crunched underfoot. She waited to swallow before speaking again, the three students around her grinning in wait for her response.

“Ahah, so I guess this is just a thing you guys in this class do, huh…”

The three paused their laughter, and the whispers lowered, some stopping.

“I was thinking maybe it would be different, but I suppose old habits die hard.” She then took another bite. Chewed. Swallowed. “I heard the rumors, you know. People don’t talk to me much and that is fine, but I can still hear them.”

Sanada lowered her hands from her ears. “What are you talking about.”

Iwakage didn’t bother facing the girl when she answered, staying faced forward towards the blackboard.

“The boy who sat in my seat committed suicide over the summer, right?”

The three around her stared at her, their eyes growing wider. Chopsticks scraped against the trays. All of the whispers and eating stopped.

Iwakage ate the rest of her pepper, top and all. Then, she bent over to her right, opening her bookbag. Her hand dug in for a moment before pulling out another, shiny, green bell pepper. She bit
into it with the same lack of hesitation as she did the first one.

“S...suicide?” Uoka asked, his voice hissing out from his throat.

“Since...since when did they say it was suicide?” Arashi turned to his male friend, eyes wide with worry.

“Stop with that.”

Many of the class, Iwakage included, turned to the class president. Her back was still to the commotion, but she looked and sounded like a tall cliffside, firm and calm. Her chopsticks were still in her fingers.

“The teacher told us. He just transferred out. Why are you stirring up lies?”

The girl’s head tilted towards the class president, her eyes squinting so that the black of her irides looked even larger. Her mouth remained hidden behind the bell pepper she’d chewed into.

“That’s not what I heard. Apparently, Midoriya’s mother had come to the school. She was in a dark suit and looked solemn. She told the staff that Midoriya wouldn’t be returning, but instead of crying, she looked upset and angry. The teachers didn’t see Midoriya-kun himself though.” She paused to bite her bell pepper. Crunch. Crackle, like breaking bones. Swallow. “They say she never said where Midoriya would be transferring, either. Just that he wouldn’t be here anymore. And it isn’t unheard of a teacher protecting their students from the results of their own actions. Can you say that hasn’t happened here?”

When the president didn’t reply immediately, the temperature in the class began to drop.


The school chair creaked and slid against the floor with how quickly Sanada stood.

“W-we didn’t. We didn’t kill him. He’s...he’s not even dead.”

The dark haired girl didn’t even turn her head from the class president’s back.

“Oh? How do you know? Spoke to him lately?”

“Ah...I—I—”

“What about his mother?”

“I-I don’t even know his mom, so—”

“How about his friends? I heard Bakugou-kun was a childhood friend of his. Asked him?” Her shoulders lifted a little. “Ah, actually, I heard something else, too.”


“Bakugou-kun, you went by his house didn’t you?”

The mood dropped further, everyone’s muscles going tense, including Bakugou’s. The boy with the Quirk for long fingers looked up and over at his friend quickly, eyes wide in shock. The explosion boy in question didn’t turn his head, but his teeth clenched in his mouth visibly.
“You didn’t find anyone there, didn’t you? I heard that the nameplate was empty. The boy’s mother left without a trace, just as quickly as her son had.” Crunch!...crik...chcc...chh...gulp. “I heard she moved after her son died. Did you go to his funeral, Bakugou-kun?”

Bakugou growled lowly and began turning in his seat to face her.

“Or maybe, you just weren’t invited.”

He stopped half-way, his left hand flexed for an explosion that never happened.

“Do you know what the other classes call you guys?"

No one replied. They simply waited, hands clenching and shoulders shaking. And for the first time since she started the topic, she smiled. It was thin, barely visible, partially hidden behind what remained of her pepper. Her gaze turned upwards towards the two boys still standing in front of her desk, eyes squinting.

“Murderers.”

It was like a cold bucket of water was splashed on them. Several students looked away from her, down at their own plates, over to the doors to their classroom, at each other. Sanada fell back into her seat, her voice choking with the very beginnings of sentences she couldn’t manages to push out.

The smile grew a little wider, and her eyes crinkled further. The two boys staring at her found themselves unable to look away, not even when she turned her smile to Sanada instead.

With her smile pushing her cheeks upwards and her eyelids narrowed, her eyes looked completely black.

“And now I sit at his seat. And now you all are trying to kill me, too.”

Sanada’s mouth clicked shut.

After a few moments, the smile slid off of the girl’s face until she was nearly neutral again. Her sclera was still white, and her irides were still black. She still stuck out like a sore thumb in the classroom, but not even Bakugou could say anything about her at the moment. Nobody moved.

Then, Iwakage bit into the last of her bell pepper. She chewed the whole thing until nothing was left, then began opening the carton of milk she’d saved from her spilled lunch.

“You all should eat. Lunch will be over before you know it.”

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**spooobboy** reblogged **billcithedemonguy**

**martianphlegm:**

[6 second clip video of Minute Maid falling asleep with the audio from the “He need some milk!” vine overlayed on it]

3,266 notes
#minute maid #someone help this child iM SCREAMIN #im going to hell for laughin lmao #what is
the audio from lmaoooo #boo! it’s queue!

*

**birddyflu** reblogged **thelastthingineed**

**kisskissfalliny33t:**

[Photo: a blurry image of Minute Maid fighting a Gray Man in a back alley in their old dress. ]

[Photo: a finger pressing a blue upgrade button. ]

[Photo: a blurry image of Minute Maid fighting the grinning Gray Man in the crosswalk. ]

[Photo: a finger pressing a blue upgrade button again. ]

[Photo: Minute Maid standing beside a posing Mt. Lady with a peace sign up, their wobbly smile still visible through the veneer of magic covering the magician’s major facial identifiers. Other visible indicators are their eye size and green irides with star-shaped yellow pupils. ]

[Photo: an elderly white male possibly having a heart attack. ]

7,492 notes

#mm #nothing but the best for my queen #sweet baby #why do you get hurt so much im cryin #Hard Stan #their new dress is super cute!!! #who designs those i wonder… #also #minute maid would be a great juice name

---

**MM Sighting 12.9.24**

87K views

**HeroMinuteMaidUnofficial**

152K subscribers

1,592 comments

**crescentboba**

oh daaaaaamn, i didn’t know they got hit that hard

7 hours ago * 44

**Focused Fiction**

what, so you just saw the ground break under their body and thought ‘that’s some cool cgi’?

7 hours ago * 129
Did anyone else notice how those wraps formed around her arm? What kind of Quirk does Minute Maid even have?

3 hours ago * 262

**VacancyInc.**
Inspector Yayoi Gin already stated that Minute Maid’s abilities are actually magic, not a Quirk. The powers are related, but not the exact same. Still, magic does have Quirk-like behaviors. Actually, I have a theory on that. But, to answer your question:

1. **Pocket Dimension:** They can pull equipment out of their backpack, but it seems there’s a limited amount of equipment they can pull.
2. **Healing:** When they take hard hits, they can heal from them using their magic. The medical wraps are new, but I’m guessing those are used for more severe injuries.
3. **Lightning?:** Uses powers similar to electric shocks to get rid of Gray Men. It’s unknown if it works against humans because Minute Maid never attacks people, not even villains.
4. **The lightning appears to destabilize (or stabilize?) the magic that makes the Gray Men up. Can Minute Maid destabilize/stabilize a human?**
5. **I can’t think of the word I mean, but basically resilience. They’re a tough cookie, able to take harder hits than most other heroes would. Considering what they’re fighting, it’s a must.**
6. **Super Strength: This one’s self-explanatory. I’d say they’re weaker than Desutegoro, but the healing factor and resilience make up for it.**

I think that’s all I’ve really noticed powers-wise. They also have some quick-thinking, but that just may be their personal abilities rather than magic.

Let me know if I missed anything :D

-Vacancy Inc.

1 hour ago * 327

**UltraScrungo**
minute maid’s so OP. i mean, they technically got hit by a car. what do they do? get back up like it’s nothing. they’ve got steel bones or something.

8 hours ago * 221

**vehicularMeanslaughter**
I dunno, she stumbled quiet a bit

6 hours ago * 7

**Sebastial Pierre**
@UltraScrungo OP? LMAO She’s weak af. She doesn’t have experience and she endangered the whole crowd.
3 hours ago * 153

UltraScrungo
Sebastial Pierre You can say that the next time you take a car to the face

2 hours ago * 179

Sebastial Pierre
@UltraScrungo It’s the truth. Just cause you like her doesn’t mean you have any actual defense for her actions. You MM stans are so fucking annoying.

2 hours ago * 173

0p101dp1nk
@Sebastial Pierre Minute Maid hasn’t said they’re a girl! Please remember to use they/them pronouns! :D

2 hours ago * 85

Sebastial Pierre
@0p101dp1nk Who are you? No one? K.

2 hours ago * 45

UltraScrungo
Sebastial Pierre I don’t have to defend MM because they work ten times harder than most heroes out here today. They weren’t even getting paid commission or anything when they first started, and we still don’t know if they’re getting paid now. We’d be straight screwed if they weren’t getting rid of Gray Men.

1 hour ago * 184

Sebastial Pierre
@UltraScrungo Spoken like a true stan. Your angel’s committed crime, you know. Destruction of public property, reckless endangerment, vigilantism. And yet, MM’s gotten so many accolades and has been excused by our literal sham of a government. The next thing you know, the ISFU’s going to try to claim vigilantism isn’t a crime in the first place. Who is the ISFU anyway? What power do they have in Japan? We don’t have enough answers, but just because MM’s doing a public service and prances around in a little dress, all of you go gaga over her. It’s disgusting. Stop jacking off to her and use your brain for once.

1 hour ago * 142

UltraScrungo
Sebastial Pierre Oh, yeah, of course. We didn’t excuse Minute Maid because the last time we tried to handle Gray Men ourselves, like, 70 trained professionals and heroes died. We didn’t excuse them because they got severely injured cleaning up our mess because they’re the only one who can. Minute Maid isn’t an exemption to the rule based on actual nationwide safety precautions. I’m just a pedophile apparently.

45 minutes ago * 159
Two things had become more common over the past few days.

One thing, Shimizu was insisting that he stay off of social media. This one, he sort of understood but didn’t like. Without his usual forums, he couldn’t do his hero studies the same way he always did. After all, despite everything else he was now involved with, he still took the time out of his day to update his journals. No matter how busy he was, he insisted on accuracy and bouncing his ideas off of the opinions of others. But for the time being, even his mom was telling him to spend less time on the forums and videos.

He could understand why. The social media could be...callous. He knew that straight off from Tazmine Gal and her continued dissatisfaction with anything to do with him. But he’d faced worse insults from classmates. It always hurt more in person. That’s what he thought. Even though he’d felt more than a little sick to his stomach and like he’d melt into a puddle of regret after seeing someone call him— her, because people just seem to ignore what he says sometimes —a nuance and a threat to society as a whole. Now, Handyman was on the same No Internet Juice as they were, too.

Any argument he’d tried to rise to Handyman, Shimizu, or his mom, like looking at the comments was good for keeping him in check and not raising his ego, or that no one could protect him from commenters forever, had been met with a squint. He quickly folded after that.

So he decided to go with the flow. Especially when he could feel Handyman squinting at him whenever his finger hovered over his Twitter app. At least they were more help though, telling him which forum posts lacked any Minute Maid commentary.

The other thing that had become more common was Izuku’s sparring sessions being with people other than Shimizu.

Something about ‘not getting too used to one body size or form’ and ‘not practicing in stagnation’, which also made sense to him. Shimizu was creative with her sparring, but she could only go so far. She always held back because of her weight class—though, he wasn’t sure what that was yet—and her hits, while rough, were also on the light side. Someone with lower weight classes, like the Gray Men, threw every bit of themselves into each hit, and he needed to practice with people who could do the same.
Hence why he was currently staring up at the pale ceiling after being flipped for the fifth time.

His back had met the ground so many times, he was sure he was going to leave a perfectly Izuku-shaped imprint in the blue padding. He blinked slowly, trying to catch his breath, and he heard a light cackle that he was honestly getting very, very tired of hearing.

A moment later, Akita came into view. Her teal hair swished a little in the small ponytail she’d pulled it into, wearing a white sports bra and black spats. Her dark brown eyes squinted as she grinned down at him.

“Hehehe, you’re really good for a piñata!” Akita teased, holding out a hand to help him up.

“Aaah…” Izuku took the hand, tugged up onto his feet moments later. “Thank you?”

“No prob!” She patted his back hard enough that he almost stumbled forward. “Now then, ready to get beat up a little more or do you need a break?”

“Ah, b-break please.”

“Eeeeh, but I’m having fun.”

“Sh...should you r-really admit that?”

Akita wrapped her arm around his neck and pulled him close. “Admitting your sins is the first step to recovery.”

“Then creating ways to, uhm, to try to change is n-next, yeah?”

“Nope. Indulging is next. So c’moooooon...lemme flip you, like, five more times.”

Before he could reply, a heavy, scaled hand landed on top of her head and pulled her off of the boy. The teal-haired woman let out a reedy, false cry. Shimizu gave her a baleful, exasperated glare before turning her attention to the boy. “Short break first. Izuku, go get some water.”

“Uh, yes! Okay.” He walked off the padded floor to the side bench, where his water bottle and towel sat right beside Shimizu’s things.

“Nooooo, lemme goooollll!” Akita cried, playfully batting at the hand on her head and falsely struggling, though honestly her head couldn’t move.

“Learn some restraint,” she huffed, flicking her hand with the woman’s head, shoving her away.

Akita ducked into a roll, her body tumbling once before she rolled back onto her feet with the ease of a cat. She put her hands behind her head and clicked her tongue at the shark.

“Tch, you’re no fun. Lemme know when he’s ready again.”

She turned around and skipped off over to Borzoi, who was lifting some heavy-looking weights on a barbell. Her short, pale blond hair laid out on the bench press, wearing the same sports bra and spats as Akita. Her arm muscles bulged with each heft, her expression neutral with each lift.

Izuku eyed both the weights, Borzoi’s arms, and Akita’s muscled back with a healthy amount of jealousy.

“Don’t worry, you’ll get there if you’re meant to.”
Izuku blinked, startled out of his thoughts. Shimizu was beside him, digging in her bag to find her own bottle.

“I...I know that’s what you say, but it feels like it’s far away.” Izuku looked back over to the other two women, Akita poking Borzoi’s forehead as she lifted her barbell, much to the Russian’s apparent annoyance. “I’ve been training with you for months now...I feel like I should be somewhere close to having bigger arms by now.”

Shimizu shrugged, twisting off the top of her bottle. “People grow muscle differently. Some folks just don’t have the genetics to get all big and muscled. You just happen to have a leaner build, I think.” Her eyes narrowed knowingly. “All Might and Endeavor are examples of one body type, not status quos.”

Izuku pursed his lips, cheeks puffing out, turning pink with embarrassment. “And what does that make you?”

Shimizu stared at him as he stared back. The long, protective sleeves of her shirt and the dark material, nor the dark material of her pants could hide the thick muscle of her arms and legs. Her abs pressed against the front of her shirt in little rolls of muscle. Her tail, mostly covered with a protective sleeve, swished behind her, a huge chunk of weight and muscle all on its own. She rose an eyebrow at him.

“Also just an example.”

Izuku hummed, then dried off some of the sweat on his face. He paused when he felt a hand on his shoulder, looking up to the young woman again, her gaze soft.

“Hey, seriously, don’t worry about it. You’re a kid. And you shouldn’t have to be so worried about building up all that muscle anyway. Just exercise as you need and your body will adjust as it should. And if your body says that you come lean, then you come lean.”

His eyes searched hers for a moment before dropping to the ground, a little smile on his face.

“Oh...okay.”

“Besides,” she grinned, “You seem to come pretty compact anyway.”

Izuku huffed, his cheeks puffing out again as he moved her hand from his shoulder. Shimizu chuckled, then took another swig from her water bottle.

“Uhm, actually, as far as exercise, I was wondering if...ahh...maybe I could learn another one?”

Shimizu hummed. “What made you think about that?”

“Mmm, mostly just cause I want to learn a bit more. Besides, I think if I know and practice something new, I can integrate it. N-Not that I think Muay Thai is stagnant, but I want to do more.”

“Hmm...yeah, no, I see what you mean. You want to try MMA instead of just specializing in Muay Thai.”

“Yeah! That’s exactly it! A-And, you know a lot of different martial arts and combat sports so, uhm, I was hoping you could teach me another one.”

One of the corners of her mouth pulled tight. “Depends on which one it is.”
Izuku gazed up at her brightly. “W-Well, I was researching more things and I found one that uses weight really well! I, I, uhm, couldn’t decide between capoeira or sambo at first, but I think either one would be good.”

“Can’t.”

The boy blinked at her, processing what she said. Then he began to deflate, shoulders dropping.

“Ahh...well, yeah, I guess you wouldn’t know every martial art so—”

“No, I know them. Both sambo and capoeira.”

“You do?”

Shimizu sighed, then rubbed at the back of her head. “Yeah. It’s been a few years, but I still know how to do them. I just can’t teach it to you.”

Izuku tilted his head, confusion scrunching his brow. “Oh...okay.”

He wanted to know why. After all, she’d been able to teach him how to do Muay Thai. Still, he wasn’t one to pry too much, and he didn’t want to make her upset.

The boy tried to hide his disappointment, looking off to the other two, where Borzoi had Akita in a headlock. But he apparently failed. The shark woman sighed, sitting down on the bench and lacing her hands together.

“The Weight Restriction Act of 2093,” she began, her gaze trailing off to the side. “Quirks made some people heavier. If you’re over a certain weight class and you aren’t in one of the qualified fields of work, you’re not legally allowed to practice certain martial arts or sports due to your body being in-part classified as a potentially deadly weapon. That’s because usually, people at a certain weight would barely be able to move, but certain Quirks cause a person’s body to build more muscle and have sturdier bones to support their weight. So then, we can move just as well, if not better, than people in smaller weight classes. And that’s a ‘danger to society’ so to speak.”

Izuku’s shoulders lifted at the explanation. “Hmm...qualified fields of work being...ah, like a firefighter? Or police?”

“Yep. Or government security.” Then, her eyes narrowed. Izuku knew what she would say next, because in his heart he already knew it, too. “Pro hero, too. So if a person reaches a certain weight class, they have to be in one of those select fields to continue doing whatever sport or martial art they’re doing. And the pro hero field is the only one that allows entry for teenagers under 18.”

Izuku frowned a little. “...Not even police training?”

“Nope. If you’re not going to be a pro hero at a certain weight, you can’t do things like wrestling, football, aikido, capoeira, or sambo until you’re 18 or 19. Because sambo and capoeira specifically use the person’s whole body weight in most of its serious moves, I can’t legally practice or teach them because of my weight class.”

“Oh...so if I wanted to learn them...”

“You’d have to speak with someone else besides me.”

Izuku’s frown grew, his mouth tightening as he gazed down at the floor.
“I’ve...never thought about it like that. Didn’t know you had so much trouble…”

Shimizu stared at him for a moment before huffing. She then grabbed a corner of his towel and shoved it in his face, much to his surprise. His squawk ended up muffled in the cotton.

“Hey, none of that worrying, got it? It is what it is.”

She rubbed his face off for a few moments as he complained. Meanwhile, Borzoi and Akita came near, stopping by the bench their things sat on. Akita snorted at their antics before digging in her bag for her water. Borzoi stood beside her, sighing as she sat down and wiped off her own sweat.

When Shimizu was done teasing him, she released the towel and waited for him to pull his face out from the cotton. He reached up and pulled at it, but only enough to uncover his eyes. A few of the golden sparkles in the lower side of his irides began glowing, Izuku staring at her in obvious excitement.

“How much do you weigh?” he asked.

“About 276 kilograms,” she replied without hesitation.

Izuku’s eyes widened, while off to the side, Akita spittook in Borzoi’s face.

“Y-You really weigh that much? That’s amazing!” Izuku sidled up closer to her, awestruck. “That’s a whole lot! But you move so quickly! Usually if someone weighs more, their movements are slower! Is it because you swim a lot? I mean, it makes sense, since there’s more of a gravity push in water than air. Ah, no, I’m thinking of that wrong. It’s not gravity, it’s friction. Air has less friction than water on certain people and objects depending on surface area, mass, volume, and other things, and heavier things are more likely to sink, so if you swim fast, then you can move even faster on land...ah, but you have fins and a tail too, so maybe you actually experience less friction in the water than you do on land. Do you?”

Shimizu blinked. “...Ah, you’ll need to repeat the question.”

“Do you experience more resistance in the water or on land?”

“On land, actually.”

“Ah! So the fins do help you swim faster! I’ve never actually seen you swim but...ah, sorry if that’s a little quirkist but I assumed—”

“No, it’s a good observation. The fins on my tail and the webbing between my fingers help.” She spread one of her hands, showing the finger webbing there, too thick to be mistaken like fish fins or frog webbing. They weren’t very noticeable until then since the webbing was so small, not even reaching her first knuckle.

After a moment of inspection and low muttering, Izuku hit his fist against his palm. “That’s probably there because you don’t have a back fin.”

Shimizu blinked, then looked closely at her hand.

“...Huh. Never thought of that…”

While she initially sounded interested, her voice trailed off when her eyes caught onto something past her hand, her eyelids lowering and her brows starting to crinkle inwards. Izuku startled a tad and opened his mouth to apologize, but then he realized he wasn’t looking at him. Rather, she was
looking past him. Interested, he turned around to see what she saw.

Akita was no longer near her things anymore. Instead, she was creeping up closer with an eager glint in her eyes, her head wet from the rest of her water bottle.

“Hey...you said...276, yeah? So...like...you’re stupid strong, yeah? Like a human wrecking ball.”

“...One could say that.”

“Fight me.”

“No.”

Akita came closer. “Fight me, please.”

Shimizu stood up. “No.”

Akita started walking even closer, and Shimizu shifted away.

“I’m asking nicely.”

“And I don’t care.”

“Pleeeeeesease!” She gasped, offended when Shimizu turned away without a word. Still, she followed right after her, waving her hands in the air. “Please! I want you to try breaking me in half! Fight meeeeee!!”

Izuku watched them walk away, a wobbly smile on his face because he wasn’t sure what other expression to have. He heard someone coming up beside him and turned to see Borzoi, drying her hair off with her own sweat towel.

“Don’t mind Akita. She’s selfish like that sometimes.” The Russian woman glared after the other Inu Team member with resigned exhaustion. Then she turned her gaze down to the boy. “But, if I recall, you want to learn sambo?”

Izuku clammed up, his hands clenching tight on his rag, but nodded.

“I know the combat type. I’ll help you learn some basics while your friend fends off mine. You are done drying off?”

“Uhm! Y-Yes! I’m done!” He chucked his sweat towel at his other things, then straightened and looked at the woman and bowed. “P-Please teach me!”

“I already said I would, tiny.” She smiled a little, throwing her towel back at her things as well before walking onto the pad. “Come on, before Akita stops being distracted.”

“I...I’m not that tiny.”

“Yes you are. But make no mistake.” She started stretching, pulling one arm to the side with her other one. “That’s a good thing. Means you can be more sneaky than a big guy. Being big isn’t everything.”

Izuku wasn’t very convinced, not yet, but he didn’t say anything against her.

He still wasn’t convinced by the end of the practice.
Shimizu and Izuku walked along one of the trails outside of the ISFU training facility. It was lined with white cylinders that gave off a dim lighting for the time being. It wasn’t late enough yet, a few minutes before the 5 pm chime would go off, but the rain clouds made it darker outside. The clouds covered everything in a haze of greyish blue, but it couldn’t snuff out the bright colors of the trees. Autumn was turning their leaves pretty shades of yellow and orange.

The rain pattered against the top of Shimizu’s and Izuku’s umbrellas as they walked the path, relaxing after all the exercise they’d done. Shimizu’s tail though was left uncovered by anything, and her tail wasn’t bent over her shoulder. Instead, it swayed behind her in the rain, the water running down the scales as quickly as they dropped. Izuku glanced back to see droplets splash and slide off with interest every once in a while.

“You really like Quirks, huh?”

Izuku startled, then looked up at Shimizu, the corners of her mouth tilted up, but a slight frown to her brow.

“A-Ahh, s-sorry, i-i just, uhm…” He scratched at his head, hands subtly avoiding the yellow headband in his hair. “I’m sorry, I’m sure it’s annoying.”

“Hm...honestly, kind of. But you’re genuinely interested in how my Quirk works as a functioning part of my body, not as a spectacle, so it’s much less so than it would be with other people. Still, it’s a bad habit to stare.”

“Mmmh.” His face flushed red and his chin dipped to his chest as he watched his feet. They fell into a silence for a little while, just listening to the rain and the sound of their shoes as they walked on the brick path.

“...I’m pretty sure you like Quirks more than I like martial arts.”

It was obviously an attempt to lighten the mood. Izuku latched onto the attempt immediately.

“I-I don’t know. I mean, you know a lot about sports and martial arts and stuff. I-I’m pretty sure we’re equal.”

She rose her eyebrows at him. “Yeah, no. I don’t have 13 notebooks and several more notepads and random papers covered in martial arts theories in my bedroom.”

“A-And I don’t have a bunch of cool awards for Quirk analysis!” Izuku said, puffing up. “But you have a lot of cool ones. Being an MMA specialist, you chose which arts worked best for you and your body even though you were restricted to only a few types because of how big and tall you are, and I think that’s really, uhm...really cool.”

The shark woman smiled and shrugged. “Hmmm, sure bud.”

“No, really! It takes a lot of care to figure out what works and what doesn’t. And with your constraints and all—” He paused before his tirade could start. Then a frown began at his brow.
“...Actually...Shimizu-senpai, why can you do Muay Thai? My kicks and punches use up a lot of my weight. And it’s directly labeled a combat sport.”

Shimizu’s face went very carefully blank. Her gaze trailed off to the side again, the corners of her mouth straightening tightly. It took Izuku only a moment to realize why.

“...Oh. Oooooooh.”

Shimizu cringed. “There’s a reason I would only go to one gym. The only reason I’m still doing it now is because I have approval from a government entity. Me training you counts as a government job.”

Izuku nodded, understanding. But then his nodding stopped, and he began sweating, eyes wide. “...I told the police about you. I ratted you out.”

The woman huffed out a laugh, but smiled. “Yeeeeeah, kinda did. But it doesn’t matter.”

“W-What do you mean it doesn’t matter? That could’ve been r-really bad, right? You could’ve...you could’ve gotten arrested or—”

“Oh, nah, nope. It doesn’t really get that bad at first. At worst, they would’ve given me a fine and slap on the wrist for a first-time offence. The risk for taking you on was an afterthought, honestly.” She shrugged. “I forgot it wasn’t legal, but I made a promise to you and I wasn’t about to break it. It worked out in the end, so no harm’s done... God, please tell me you’re not about to cry.”

Izuku sniffled dangerously, his eyes very watery as a single tear began running down his cheek.

“No.”

Shimizu gave him a tired look, eyes lidded. She grabbed his hat and pulled it down over his eyes, and he whined a little.

“Those were tears in your eyes.”

“No they weren’t! I’m just...sweating!”

“Mmmhhmm. Sweating from the eyes then.”

“Exactly,” he mumbled, pouting. “...First time offense?”

“They didn’t catch me any of the other times.”

“Breaking the law’s bad, Shimizu-senpai.”

Shimizu gave him a wide-eyed look in mock offense, scoffing. “Excuse me? Says the former vigilante.”

Izuku snorted loudly, then covered his mouth as he giggled.

“Hmm...if all of this stuff didn’t happen, like if the ISFU wasn’t here, would you still be doing it? Being a vigilante, I mean.”

Izuku looked up at her, eyes bright. “Hmm? Yeah.”

The shark woman blinked at the lack of hesitation. “Oh.”
“I...I mean, Gray Men aren’t going to kill themselves off...is what I...yeah. I’m the only one who can do that.”

“Yeah, I still think that’s bull—sh—baloney. Not that I think you’re lying, but I’m pretty sure there’s more out here than just you.”

Izuku shakes his head. “Handyman told me that I’m the only magical girl or magician right now.”

“Handyman?”

The boy stiffened up and paused walking. Shimizu stopped as well, turning around to look back at him. His mouth was hanging a little open, like he was caught on a word and unable to push it out, eyes wide as he realized his mistake.

It had just...slipped out so easily. He hadn’t thought a single thing about mentioning the voice in his head around her. All of his usual precautions were gone until then, and now they were back a little too late.

“Who’s Handyman?” she asked again.

“Ah...uhm...” He closed his mouth and swallowed thickly. “I...I, uhm...Handyman is...”

If he mentioned Handyman, he’d probably end up explaining how Handyman helps. If he did that, he’d have to explain how he got his magic in the first place, probably. And if he did that, he’d have to explain that he’s very technically undead. And that still was a hard conversation to have.

His mother still wasn’t the same after he’d told her. Her gaze would linger on him longer, and she would sigh listlessly when she thought he wasn’t listening. Something about her light had dimmed the day that he told her he had died, was dead, was not dead, was being carried through consciousness and activity by the spirit who granted him his powers. She’d become muted, a less excited, more worried, more tired.

Shimizu already felt guilty about training him. He didn’t want to make her feel worse.

“Midoriya?” Shimizu frowned. “Are you okay?”

“...Y-Yeah. Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Okay... Do you want to tell me who Handyman is?”

“...N..o. I mean, uhm. That would, uh...be a lot. To explain. But! I will say that, uhm, they are...a helper. And essential. To, uh...to me.”

Shimizu didn’t reply immediately, her frown still on her face. Then her tail flicked and she turned back around.

“Are they dangerous?”

“N-No. No, they aren’t.”

“...Fine. Tell me later.” She jerked her head in a ‘follow me’ motion afterwards and started walking again.

Izuku breathed a quick sigh of relief, then jogged up to catch up with her before going back to walking.
“Y-Yeah...I’m sorry, it’s just...uhm...”

“It’s fine.”

Izuku’s mouth shut after that, and the two walked in silence for a while. The rain pattered a little lighter against the umbrellas, but that didn’t mean their hearts felt the same way.

You should tell her about me. About what happened.

‘I...I know. I know I should but...’

The longer you wait, the more it’s going to hurt her. The more it’s going to hurt you.

‘I get that...I do, but...but if I make her feel bad, then—’

She’s going to feel bad that you had died regardless. Anyone who cares about you would. Her feeling bad means she cares.

‘But I don’t want to only bring people I care about pain.’

...

‘And...and I feel like that’s all I’ve been doing lately. So I just...I just want to wait.’

...Alrighty then.

‘...I’m sorry. Thank you for...uhm...dealing with me on this. I told Mom like you said I should but...’

I’m telling you that for your own good. Still, wait till you’re ready.

‘I know.’

Just don’t wait till it’s too late.

‘...I know.’

He zoned back into the world around him, the silence between him and Shimizu stretching longer than he’d like. But he wasn’t sure what else to say. What to do. What to make the situation better than it was.

His gaze fell to the road and followed his own steps. Then they trailed along the brick pathway. He watched where the path branched off to different places up ahead, one path leading to another building, another path leading to one that was currently under construction.

Then, he got an idea, brightening up a little.

“Uhm...th-this path looks...nice. Like a good...a good, uhm, j-jogging path.”
Shimizu glanced to the side at him, then looked along the path just as he had done. Then she hummed.

“Hm. Maybe.”

Izuku latched again onto the line he was given, balling one of his fists and looking up at her excitedly. “Th-There’s not a lot of hills at th-this, uhm, particular place but, but, uhm, it’s still...good enough, I think! F-Flat ground is still pretty good to jog on.”

“True.”

“I-I know the transport trucks use this too, but, uhm, if, uh, if they stay to the, the side, then joggers could, you know, they could just…”

“Hmm.”

“A-And maybe...I...ah…”

Izuku trailed off, losing focus on what to say next. He really couldn’t think of anything.

His slowly beating heart clenched in his chest. See, he was doing it. He was making her feel bad without even having told her anything yet. That was just something—

Nope, none of that.

He sighed tiredly, not looking forward to another pep talk when he just wanted to wallow in his self-depreciation in peace.

Just give Mako-chan a second, she’s thinking of a talk piece.

Blinking, the boy wondered how Handyman knew such a thing when he realized that, right, as a Narrator, they just know these things. He very well remembered the void he had been to, the one he’d seen in his dreams with the whispers of many, many voices behind the sound of Handyman’s own voice.

A part of him wondered if he’d see that place again.

Another part wondered why Handyman would tell them what someone else was thinking in the first place. They’d been doing that more often nowadays.

Before he could think to ask, just as Handyman said she would, the shark woman spoke up, breaking the awkward silence.

“Who are you training with next, actually?”

Izuku focused back on her, forgetting the voice in his head for the moment.

“Ah, t-this coming week?” Izuku’s eyes sparkled, though his excitement was muted from the past mood. “It’s with Endeavor, the No #2 hero.”

It wasn’t surprising to him that Shimizu had a negative reaction. He knew by then to simply accept that she really wasn’t a fan of pro heroes, the weight act being even more of an explanation why. But he hadn’t expected the pure sourness in the expression on her face. Her snout had scrunched with the force of her scowl, like she’d smelled something gross or saw something covered with mold.

“...Why him?”
“Uhh? Uhm...b-because he was on the list. He applied to, uhm, have me at his office.”

“Is it with a team like the other ones?”

“Oh, no, not this time—” Izuku’s voice tilted upward at the increase in Shimizu’s scowl. “I-I mean, he—uhm, he’s a strong h-hero by himself, a-and th-though the ISFU lays out the ground rules, s-some heroes can apply to be, uhm, exempt. T-They have to do it with, uhm, with the prefecture head though. A-All Might’s exempt from the group rule, too.”

“Hmm...does that guy have sidekicks?”

“Yes, he has, uhm, he has a few. L-Like Mrs. Wick and F-FlavorBlaze—”

“Then stick around them if you can.”

Izuku blinked up at the woman. “Uhm...why?”

Shimizu stopped walking, and so did the boy. Scrubbing a hand over her face, she groaned under her breath, but then turned to Izuku to look him head on.

“Endeavor just...gives off this air like he’s a prime, grade A+ ass—ho—shoot. Uh. He’s just. Not good. I don’t like heroes on a good day, and I don’t like him ever.”

“I mean...he, uh, he’s pretty rough around the edges—”

“Then his whole body is made of edges.”

Ah.

Well.

Izuku couldn’t help it. He barely contained a snort, straightening his face out immediately after.

Shimizu paused. Then her eyebrows scrunched. “I’m serious, kid. He’s more bad news than the Bad News Bears.”

His mouth barely twitched.

“Barely a soul can stand his burning passion.”

His mouth pursed.

“I’ve heard he has a red personality.”

“Huh?”

Shimizu blinked. “You don’t know about personality squares? Like, red, yellow, blue, green...that stuff?”

Izuku shakes his head.

“Oh. Well then. Hm.” She cleared her throat. “Ignore that last one. But seriously, Midoriya. Endeavor comes off to me as a special kind of bad. From what I know about him, which admittedly isn’t much...anyway, he seems like the type with no real cares beyond his own personal gain. And maybe I’m wrong, but I don’t know if I am. So, if you can, just avoid being alone with him for too long.”
The boy exchanged Shimizu’s gaze for the ground, thinking deeply about what she was saying.

He could understand to an extent. Endeavor was rough, even to the general public. As a public celebrity, he was not very charismatic in a kind way. But people liked him because of his dedication to his work and his steadfast beliefs, not for his personality.

Izuku wasn’t really sure what she meant. But he’d try to understand. And he’d listen to her.

“I…I kind of get what you mean. Okay. I’ll try.”

Shimizu smiled a little, then patted his head, the boy’s heart lightening along with it. The rain was still falling all around them, not letting up any time soon, but the washed out sky around them didn’t stop him from feeling happier.

“Good.”

Suddenly, the beginning for the 5 pm chime began to ring out in its usual tune, loud enough to sound even in the forest they were in. It was different than the one Izuku was used to, since the ISFU buildings were set in a different city than his own. The two looked up at the rolling, cloudy sky as though they would see the speaker the music was coming from.

“Oh, it’s getting later. Let’s go back and go home.”

Izuku nodded. “Okay.”

The two of them turned back the way they came and, through the rain and the painted leaves and the song around them, headed the main building to get their things.

Chapter End Notes

Fun fact, did you know that the heaviest NFL quarterback in history was 129.27kg? That’s 285lbs in those ridiculous Imperial units.

That means Mako’s the equivalent of two very heavy, very muscular men with a small toddler swinging on their joined hands.

A wrecking ball isn’t too far off, Chiek—ah, I mean, Akita-chan.

Ah...also...Mako-chan, Izuku-chan...hehehe...you guys aren’t in elementary school anymore, you can stay out after 5.
Talk to me at my blog studiostatic for cool chats and mildly inaccurate fic update alerts.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!