In the Eye of the Storm

by CheshireButton

Summary

Izuku Midoriya is a scientific prodigy seeking a cure for a rapidly spreading neurodegenerative disease. A potential clue in his research points to a fabled island, guarded by an eternal storm from which no travelers have ever returned. He navigates through the hurricane and discovers an island that is anything but uninhabited. He must adapt to survive against the natives who place intruders in three categories: warriors, mates, or meat.

Notes

Hey, so theatricalplacenta drew some Naga!Katsuki fanart:

Here
And Here

And I liked it so much, I vomited a novel. Enjoy.

**Courtesy of the lovely ClaudiaCMT: This fic is now available in Spanish!**

Fanfiction
Wattpad
Amor-Yaoi
Izuku Midoriya remembers the exact moment he discovered he wasn’t alone. It started with an explosion in the dead of night. His time on the island was relaxing before then, almost like a vacation. He’d spent his time busying himself with the usual fieldwork; breeding different plant species in his makeshift greenhouse, collecting specimens, pressing the leaves in between pages of his book, and sketching wildlife.

He’d been awake in his cot by the light of his lantern, jotting down his thoughts in a worn leather notebook when the blast echoed across the valley. He stops, not daring to breathe. The island was uninhabited. Had he imagined it?

The answer is a second explosion, louder than the first.

Izuku is out of his sleeping bag and outside the tent in an instant. He stands wide eyed in the underbrush and under the stars, hoping and praying it isn’t someone in distress. He racks his brain of the wildlife he’s seen so far, and remembers the large boar species he’d observed.

A few nights ago, he had awoken to the inquisitive snorting of the wild pig family around the greenhouse. The adults were still covered in a coarse, thick fur. They were the largest creatures he’s seen so far, standing at the same height as his shoulders. Can he blame them for the noise?

Could the explosions be gunshots?

If the person setting off the explosions is in danger, he doubts he can make it in time. By the sound of it, they’re coming from the beach, and judging by the force it could very well be a ship.

After a third rumble he decides he has to do something. The young scientist dashes back inside the tent and swings his hiking pack over his shoulder. He pulls up the pair of shorts he wore earlier in the day and buckles the belt. He has no time for socks, and once his feet are stuffed in his hiking boots, and his flashlight is in hand, he’s out and running in the night.

Thankfully, the vegetation is thin here, and he can run without hacking through the jungle. One of his hands gropes along his belt to confirm the presence of his knife and revolver. They comfort him, but he hopes they won’t be needed. He can defend himself, but he’s no expert.

Doubt bubbles in his stomach as the beach comes into view. Although shrouded in night, whispers of the never-ending storm in the distance ripple across the sea. No ships can survive it. He knows this, but he scans the horizon for any sort of light.
Nothing. His own disappointment surprises him. Was he so desperate for a companion? He shakes his head and the thought is hastily dismissed. There are more important matters at hand.

*So someone on land, then?*

If it’s a hostile person with explosives, there’s little he can do to protect himself in the open. He shifts his weight as he gnaws the corner of his lip. If he’s very careful, the culprit won’t even know he’s there.

Izuku is grateful in that moment that he’d grown up in the country. Years of camping and hunting have provided him the skills to cover his own tracks and shadow wildlife without being detected. But would it be enough to outsmart a native of the island?

*It’s at least worth checking out,* he reminds himself. *Exploding anything is never a good sign.*

Izuku runs a hand through his gentle curls, recalling the sound when he first heard it. He closes his eyes and inhales the ocean’s breeze for smoke. He’s close, he’s sure of it. A wind from the south kicks up, and he catches a whiff of something singed.

He sprints after the trail and finds himself on a rocky formation before the crashing waves. There, he discovers a crater about the size of a small car. Freshly upturned rocks and debris are scattered around the area, but Izuku can find no trace of a weapon.

“What on earth,” he mutters as he crouches to his knees.

He casts his flashlight around the perimeter examining the mess left behind. This was not a natural phenomenon. This was an intentional assault. Someone was here; he’d bet his life on it. However, there are no remnants of a weapon. He also notes the disturbing lack of footprints in the sand. Izuku cautiously presses a finger against the rock. It's still warm. His skin prickles. It’s possible he’s being watched.

A cool breeze whips past, and the storm above rumbles. The wind strikes again with a vengeance across his body and Izuku is forced lean into it to keep from being blown over. He’s known the island is subject to unexpected weather, but this time Izuku’s been taken off guard. He smells the oncoming downpour and realizes with a sinking heart he won’t make it back to the valley in time.

He swears, and speeds towards the mainland, searching for any type of cover. The wind screams and raindrops the size of golf balls erase his surroundings in a white haze. He’s drenched in seconds and shivers in the cold. Any visibility he once had is gone, and he’s forced to move at a crawl, arms outstretched to navigate the jungle. Just when he thinks things can’t get any worse, sharp twinges of pain erupt on his body as hail joins the downpour.

*I could die here,* he thinks bitterly. *I could walk right off a cliff, break my bones, and die. All because I got distracted in my own head.*

When he spots the dark open mouth of the cave, he sprints for it without a second thought. Panting, he slows to a trot at the entrance and wipes the water from his face. He huffs, watching as the water rush by the jungle in front of him, splattering against the rock. His newfound sanctuary is cool and earthy. Although he’s grateful, he could be in for a chilly night. He can only hope he has at least a blanket in his bag.

Izuku slings the backpack off his shoulder, and turns to pull off his soaked shirt, when he catches movement in the side of his eye. Suddenly, he’s slammed back against the wall. The flashlight flies from his hand and shatters on the floor, leaving him in darkness.
“WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?” roars a rough, gravelly voice.

The force behind the blow is staggering and Izuku’s hands instinctively clamp around the arm pressing against his throat. He yelps as pain erupts behind his eyes. “I-Izuku! Izuku Midoriya! I’m a biochemist! I’m studying the plants of the island!”

The stranger pauses before leaning forward to take a cautious sniff. The grip tightens. “A human?”

“I-I don’t mean any harm, honest!” Izuku winces, but can’t push himself back any further.

“What the hell are you doing here? No humans are supposed to be on this island, and especially not in my jungle!”

“I-sorry! I didn’t know! I just heard some explosions and went out to find if someone needed help! That’s all!”

“Well, congratulations.”

He raises a palm near Izuku’s face, and series of small explosions bursts forth, filling the cave with light. With it, Izuku can make out a young man with a wicked grin and unnaturally long incisors. Izuku shrieks, and cowers under the stranger’s piercing red eyes.

“You just found the source,” he sneers. “So human, where’s the rest of your pack? How many are there?”

“N-none! It’s j-just me!”

The still smoldering hand grinds into the rock near Izuku’s face as claws scrape against the surface like knives. “You think I’m stupid?” His captor spits. “You expect me to believe one measly human made the trip through our great storm unscathed? Yeah, right! That’s the biggest load of shit I’ve heard all week.”

Izuku tries very hard not to hyperventilate as something that feels like a tail crawls over his feet and winds its way up around his legs. His mind nearly goes blank when the coils reach his stomach, but he manages to stammer, “I-It’s true! I used a sp-special kind of ship! I modded it with a friend specifically to handle the hurricane! I didn’t want to endanger anyone else on this trip, so I traveled here alone! I’m not lying, I swear!”

“For your sake, you better not be.” The stranger pauses and turns his attention to the rain. “This damn weather.” He growls and gives Izuku’s lower half a preemptive squeeze. “Listen up. When this clears, you’re taking me to your camp. After that, I’ll decide what to do with you. Got it?”

“Yes! That’s fine! U-um…”

“What?”

“What are you, exactly? I can’t tell in the dark, but this thing around me is your tail, right?”

“Don’t even worry about it,” he sniggers, tilting Izuku’s head upwards until he’s staring right into the stranger’s now glowing red eyes. “For now, why don’t you take a little nap? I bet you’re tired from running around in the storm.”

Izuku is tired, but the suggestion baffles him and he tenses at the forcefulness of the touch. He opens his mouth for a snappy retort, but it dies in his throat. There’s something about those eyes that hook him like a fish. He blinks, trying to refocus. Even when shutting his own eyes, he can’t
erase those pleasant, beautiful rubies from his thoughts.

“No…I shouldn’t—"

“It’s okay though. You’re safe here,” the stranger murmurs, as he gently tucks a lock of hair behind Izuku’s ear. It’s a soothing gesture; one that reminds him of his mother. A thumb caresses his cheek and Izuku’s thoughts become fuzzy.

“B-but…”

“Shhh…shhh. Relax.”

The points of the claws trace against Izuku’s scalp and his fear and energy ebb away. The boy’s shoulders loosen and he supresses a yawn as exhaustion envelopes him like a cloud.

"There’s nothing to worry about," the stranger purrs. "I’ll take care of you."

**Am I being hypnotized?**

His realization dulls and dissolves under the crimson gaze, but Izuku forces himself to think and inhales with the intention to fight back. *The knife*, he recalls. *I…still have the knife*. Suddenly, the stranger draws closer and something soft and warm presses against his lips.

“I promise,” the stranger murmurs. “Just for tonight.”

Izuku’s heart skips and a blush creeps on his face. The breath he’d taken escapes and melds with the warmth from the mouth brushing his own. He’s still weak from the first kiss when he feels the second one press and linger. After the third, he stops counting.

**So…nice.**

Izuku wilts. He leans into them, reciprocating their touch. He feels like he’s floating and the boy wants nothing more than to drink in the glow of those beautiful crimson suns forever. He struggles to keep his gaze, but his eyelids are heavy and the orbs begin to set and disappear.

“That’s it. Close your eyes.”

The command is a relief and Izuku submits with a sigh, letting his heavy head slump against his shoulder. He feels a gentle smile pull at his lips as he falls into the soft blankness.

“**Good boy.**”
Judgement

Chapter Summary

"So save your face and save your pride
Save those tears you'll try to cry
And maybe you'll think twice before you go try
To even mess with a demon like me"

When his consciousness returns, Izuku cannot remember the last time he’s felt so rested. He takes a deep breath, treasuring the sensation of being tucked in an actual bed. How long had it been since he’s been home? Weeks? Months? The sun is warm and pleasant against his lids and he sighs. His eyes flutter open to greet the day, but what he sees isn’t the sun.

A sandy blonde with angular features is dozing next to him, head tucked in his muscular arms. Izuku jerks and tries to push off the bed, but only manages a frantic wiggle. His arms and legs are completely bound. He freezes. He isn’t home at all.

Besides the blonde stranger next to him is the long body of an enormous serpent. The "blankets" wrapped around him are coils as thick as his thighs, and he’s been resting on an entire bed of them. The pattern is a deep orange and black with an iridescent glow that bounces off the scales in the sunlight. In any other situation, Izuku would have marveled at their beauty, but the colors are that of a poisonous snake and terror hits him like a truck.

He twists for his knife and comes to another realization. The cocoon of scales is resting directly against his own skin. He’s nearly naked underneath. Izuku chances another wiggle, less urgently, testing their grip. It’s like being held in place by a fist, he thinks.

The stranger stirs, and a fresh wave of panic washes over him. The blonde yawns, openly displaying his fangs. When he rises, strings of necklaces made of assorted claws and beads that rest against his chest gently clink together. He stretches his torso and the coils flex. Izuku realizes with horror that the coils are a part of his captor.

"Naga." He’d read about them and other monsters of mythology as a child, but never did he think it possible to encounter one. When the two lock eyes, the blonde’s face slides into a predatory grin.

"Morning, sunshine. Comfortable?"

Izuku tries not to let panic get the best of him, but the questions are out before he can think. “Who are you? H-How did I get here? Did you strip me while I was out? Where are my clothes? A-Are you going to eat me? Am I breakfast?”

His captor scowls and jerks his head to the back of the cave. “Drying. With your bag and the rest of your stuff.” He yawns and stretches once more. “Give me five more minutes, okay?”

“U-UM.”

The blonde ignores him and settles back into his arms. A ghost of a smirk is on his lips and Izuku is certain his captor can feel his every breath and panicked heartbeat. Is he teasing me? For the
first time in his life, Izuku has no idea what to do.

*Think. THINK.*

He wills his mind to work and the events of the previous night slowly float to the surface. *We had an agreement*, he remembers. *He wants to make sure I’m not alone. But once that’s confirmed, what’s next? None of the answers to that question are particularly pleasant and Izuku nibbles his lip, gathering his courage.

*If I’m going to die anyway, I might as well get some information.*

“Why are you doing this? I haven’t done anything.”

The naga snorts. “Doesn’t matter. You’re an intruder, and I have a clan to protect. That’s all.”

“Well, clearly I don’t pose much of a threat to you. Nor was I actively searching you or your kind out. My work is focused on plants of the island only. I bet you know them better than I do. Maybe if we worked together I could leave so-auuughh!”

The coils suddenly tighten to steel and the air is squashed from Izuku’s lungs. They relax to where they were moments before, but the message is concise and clear.

The naga groans, “You’re never going to shut up, are you, human?” The blonde tilts his head and cracks his neck. “Fine. Let’s get this over with.”

Izuku takes a shaking breath. “My name is Izuku Midorya.”

The naga rolls his eyes and continues stretching his arms. “I don’t care.”

He scratches the side of his head absentmindedly observing his catch. He squints suddenly and points to a spot right under Izuku’s eyes. “What are those things on your face? Did you fall in the dirt?”

“Huh?”

The blonde reaches out and rubs his thumb on Izuku’s cheek. His eyebrows knit together in frustration and rubs with more vigor. “It’s not coming off…”

“H-hey! Quit it!” Izuku yelps as he squirms away from his thumb. ”Those are my freckles! They’re a part of my skin!”

“Really?” the blonde’s face is incredulous. “As in permanently? Are they on the rest of you?”

The coils around Izuku shift and unravel exposing his bare neck and shoulders. Izuku flushes a deep red and squeaks, ducking deeper into the cocoon to hide himself. The naga bursts into raucous laughter that echoes in the cave. He resettles the coils where they were as Izuku clenches his teeth and feels the blush reach his ears.

“You know, most prey will do anything they can to get out of my coils, but you’re welcome to wear them longer if you want to.”

“J-Just let me get dressed and I’ll go wherever you want,” he mumbles, not willing to meet the other’s eyes.

The blonde snickers and nods. “Good.” The coils around Izuku loosen, and slide off his body to the floor. The naga snatches up the backpack and slings it over his own shoulder. “I’m holding onto
“Fine.” Izuku stumbles out of the remnants of the cocoon, minding each step. He’s relieved to see he’s still wearing his boxers. “Can you give me some privacy?”

“Not happening. In fact, make sure I can see everything you do with your hands.”

Izuku feels a twinge of despair as he heads to the rock his clothes are hanging from. The knife, revolver, and flashlight are no longer clipped to the belt. Well, that’s to be expected, he thinks. Begrudgingly, he holds each piece of clothing up in the air like a TV Salesman before pulling each one over his body. It’s beyond embarrassing but the exaggerated spectacle seems to satisfy the naga. When he’s done, the blonde gives his next order.

“What were you doing near the beach anyway?” he asks. “I found the crater.”

“Hunting.”

“Hunting, what? Rocks?”

The blonde roughly shoves him forward. “Fish, smartass,” he snaps. “Had to stun them once they were caught.”

“Seems a bit overkill,” Izuku mutters.

“No one asked you.”

Once they return to the jungle, Izuku notes how different it looks during the day. One of the island’s intriguing mysteries is the uneven stones that jut out of the forest floor in unnatural blocks. Izuku believes they were some sort of ancient structure, slowly eroded by time. A temple perhaps? The land also seems to bear some scarring in the landscape; as if enormous claws raked through the earth. The scientist decides this must have been a more recent incident as the plants are slowly reclaiming the wounds in the dirt. He’s dying to know the story, but he doubts his captor will tell him anything. Besides, once they reach the camp, he has a sinking feeling that his time left in this world will be cut short.

The camp is a simple set up with a tent, a greenhouse, and a firepit with a fallen tree that he’s been using as a bench. The livable tent serves the combined purpose acting a lab, work station, and sleeping space. The makeshift greenhouse is still standing from the storm, and despite his dire situation, Izuku feels a sense of relief.

“Call out for the rest of your clan,” the naga orders.
“It’s just me.”

The naga yanks Izuku back into his chest and dances his claws along his throat. “Do it.”

With no choice, Izuku inhales and yells as convincingly as he can, “Hey, everyone! I’m back! Sorry, I got a little lost last night!”

They wait but no one shows. Izuku sighs. “Happy?”

“Move.”

He nudges Izuku forward to the tent and pushes him inside. The naga examines the interior. The walls are lined with tables, diagrams, books, microscopes, and shelving.

“What the hell is all this crap?”

“My work. And that,” he says a bit defiantly, motioning to the cot with this head, “Is where I sleep. Where one single human sleeps.”

Izuku doesn’t care at this point. He’s just started working at the ropes around his wrists, but they’re tightly fastened and won’t budge. The young scientist doubts his captor will let him stand with his back hidden for long. He’s a dead man walking.

Just tell him everything and get it over with, he thinks.

The naga’s head swivels to the greenhouse. “You’re growing plants. Is that it?”

“Yeah. There’s an epidemic spreading, known as the Zaba Virus. We found an unidentified seed in the ocean that seemed like a promising cure, but it died once it was planted in our soil. I traced its origin to this location.”

“So you found this land with one of your tools.”

“No,” Izuku replies. “I had a pretty good guess. Not many people were convinced this island even existed.”

“But you knew.”

Izuku shakes his head. “I didn’t. This was a gamble. People are dying, and the disease just mutated to spreading to newborns. This habitat is isolated and different from anywhere else on the planet. If there was a cure, or even a chance the plant could grow, it had to be here.”

The naga considers him with narrowed red eyes. He says nothing, but Izuku can tell he believes him.

“And when you don’t come back, they’ll go back to thinking this place is a death trap.”

WHEN. You don’t come back. The words clatter in his head as he answers. “Correct.”

The naga takes off Izuku’s backpack and unceremoniously turns it upside down to empty it. Izuku’s things spill across the ground, and the naga goes through each of the tools, with great interest, separating metals from plastics.

“Is there anything in here that would send out a call for help?”

“Nothing functional. The storm jams any signals. Nothing gets through.”
The sinking feeling returns to Izuku’s gut. Mentally, he goes over the questions his captor has asked and the information he now has. Alone, check. No way to communicate back home, check. No one to come looking for him, check.

*He’ll kill me soon.*

After a moment’s deliberation, the naga picks up a cylindrical object from the collection.

“What’s this thing?” he asks.

“Flashlight. If you hold the button on the bottom, it’ll produce a light. Or it would, if I hadn’t dropped it.”

“Why? Do you have trouble with darkness?”

“Yeah, actually,” Izuku huffs. “We can’t see in it.”

This earns a scoff. “Weak.” The naga holds up the binoculars, next. “And this?”

“Binoculars. For seeing things in the distance.”

The naga puzzles over this one, turning it over a few times before holding them to his face, narrow end facing out.

“No, other way,” Izuku explains. “They’re backwards. You can also sharpen the view with the knob on top.”

“Oh…” murmurs the blonde as he examines his surroundings. “This one is actually useful. You humans have so many tools for your shitty eyes.”

Izuku sighs. *Is this how it ends? I just describe every tool until we run out, and then he rips me apart?*

All things considered, this probably is probably one of the better final moments he could have. Arguably, it’s even an educational experience. The question is, how will the naga send him off to the afterlife? *Claws, teeth, coils, or explosions?* Being blown up seems the most humane. He just hopes he dies quickly.

Izuku snaps out of his reverie when he sees the naga holding the barrel end of the revolver to his face.

“NO!”

The outburst startles them both, and the naga flinches back, hackles rising. “What?”

“Put it down!”

“Why? Is it important?” the gun is lowered slightly, aimed at the naga’s collarbone. One of his fingers is curled dangerously near the trigger.

“Just do it!” Izuku pleads. "*Please!*"

“I don’t think so. You’re not the one in charge here.”

“It’s a gun! You’re holding it backwards!”
“What’s gotten you so-” the naga’s finger hooks on the trigger and the gun explodes.

Izuku throws himself face-down in the dirt. He waits, counting the seconds, waiting for the sound of a limp body to hit the earth. When it doesn’t come, he raises his head to see the naga, eyes wild and white, in a state of shock. The gun is pointed straight in the air, inches from his face. When their eyes meet, the realization hits.

Izuku winces, letting his head fall back in the earth. He berates himself silently as he listens to his last chance of survival echo across the valley.

Stupid. Stupid. STUPID.

The blonde hurls the gun and roars. A surge of explosions burst through the air. If his hands were free, Izuku would be covering his ears. Instead he presses himself harder into the earth, wishing he could phase through. His ears are ringing when the naga hoists him to his feet.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Why did you say something? WHY?” his teeth are gnashing, and some sort of slimy fluid is dripping from his fangs. Izuku flinches, but can’t bring himself to respond. He doesn’t know. When the naga shows no signs of backing down, Izuku tearfully meets his eyes.

“I-I just couldn’t….you know?” He swallows. “I had to. You don’t deserve to have that kind of death. No one does.”

Both of them struggle to catch their breaths. The blonde seems to absorb this information in horror. His jaw is locked so tightly that the muscles pop in his neck. Izuku thinks he might vomit.

“Let’s go,” the blonde spits. “Take me to the boat.”

Izuku’s legs are like jelly, but he manages to stumble to the cove.

The boat has been covered by plants as a disguise. The naga knocks off the branches to reveal its shining metallic coat. Truthfully, it looks nothing like a boat. It’s more of a cross between a bullet and a spaceship. Izuku dimly wonders if the naga will blow up the vessel before or after he’s killed. It doesn’t matter really, but at least Mei doesn’t have to see it die.

The cheery engineer’s smile infamous smile flashes in his memory. She had been so happy when the ship was finished. She’d nearly pulled his arm out of its socket while dragging him halfway across campus to show it off. She had whipped off the sheet and presented it in a dramatic fashion, simultaneously playing the roles of a TV announcer, the gushing inventor, and the amazed audience. He remembers how she later collapsed against his shoulder in sleep deprived giggles. He wonders if she was the closest he’d ever been to finding love.

When the naga turns to face him once more, the claws in his right hand are fully extended.

Looks like it’s going to be claws, Izuku thinks grimly. He holds his breath and squeezes his eyes. Ultimately, not how I thought I’d go, but interesting nonetheless.

The naga goes behind Izuku’s back and delivers a single slice. The ropes around his writs loosen and disappear. Izuku has a brief moment of confusion before the naga practically punches him into the boat.

“Get the hell out of here.”

Izuku stumbles around and stares at the naga, completely dumbfounded. He flexes his arms and
massages the blood back to his wrists with his fingers. They’re sore and half asleep, but otherwise in good shape. They should be back to normal in a couple hours.

“Go, before I change my mind.”

Free. He’s free. He’ll live another day. Izuku's chest tightens in defiance and he can’t believe he’s about to say it. The word is already forming in his mouth.

“NO.”

“Excuse me?”

What am I doing? He wonders. But that’s the only part of him that digs in its heels. The rest of him has already committed to his answer. Izuku straightens and clenches his fists. He speaks again like he’s never been more sure of anything in his life.

“I’m not leaving!”

The blonde’s scrunches his face in disbelief. “I just spared your life.”

“I can’t leave without the cure,” Izuku states as he fights the tremor in his voice. "My work isn’t done yet.”

“I don’t give a rat’s ass if it’s done,” the naga growls. "This is my fucking land, and I want you gone.”

Izuku throws up his hands. “Then do it! Get rid of me! If you want me gone, that’s your only option! Kill me right now if you want!”

“Do not. Tempt me.”

“What’s the matter, scared to take on one human?”

The naga opens his hands with a snarl, claws extending on all ten fingers. He circles Izuku, palms beginning to smoke. “You are insanely lucky I ate last night. Otherwise, you would have died in that cave the moment I pounced.”

Izuku’s heart pounds, but he stands tall, spreading his legs into a fighting stance. He thinks he can feel his knees trembling, but he wills them to stop. “But here I am. And I’m not going down without a fight, so you better get serious.”

Real anger flashes in the blonde’s eyes, and he charges forward without warning. Izuku stumbles out of the way, but he’s too slow. The naga has him pinned on his back in seconds. Daggerlike claws threaten to dig into his veins as the monster bares his fangs.

"Pathetic! You’re not even good enough to challenge my name, let alone my kind. Get out of my sight!”

This should have been enough. The final warning. The difference between their physical prowess is painfully clear. He should have recognized his defeat then and there, but something inside Izuku snaps and his fear turns to fury.

“I’m not fucking leaving, asshole! How many times do I need to spell it out to you? Children will die if I don’t finish my work!”

The sound the naga makes next reminds Izuku of a tiger. One of his claws slips on soft flesh, and a
trickle of blood runs down Izuku’s arm. The naga watches it with fascination and licks his lips with a forked tongue. When he meets Izuku’s eyes, they’re slitted and reptilian.

“Fine,” he says smugly. “Let’s make a deal. We’ll skirmish for 2 minutes a day for two weeks. If you can land three hits on me during any of those matches, you’re free to stay and I’ll never bother you again.”

“Deal,” Izuku growls. “What happens if I don’t?”

He digs into Izuku’s wrists harder and opens his mouth to display a wide, lecherous grin. His hot breath smells like freshly sliced meat. “If you’re not able to land 3 hits on me, you’re going to look me in the eye like a good little rabbit, and I’ll swallow you whole.”

His eyes flash that irresistible red glow for a second, and the hair on the back of Izuku’s neck prickles. It’s now that he feels the cold sweat soaking through his shirt.

“Think of it as a redo of last night but with a more final ending.” The naga chuckles and leans in. “I’ve never eaten a live human before. I bet fear really adds to the flavor. And right now, you reek of it.”

Izuku’s brain is screaming, but he can’t bring himself to act. *Run. Fight. Do SOMETHING.* Instead, he lies paralyzed until the naga finally pushes off.

“Oh. Also, you might want to beat me sooner than later. I’ll be busy digesting during those weeks, and I only fight better when I’m hungry.”

Izuku sees spots in his vision, and only when the naga turns away and only then does he realize he’s stopped breathing. He relaxes and collapses on the sand, sucking in the ocean air with uneven ragged breaths.

“Fucking Christ…”
Defiance

Chapter Summary

"I got in a fight, I was indisposed
I was in, despite all the wicked prose
But I'm only a man, and I do what I can"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Izuku doesn’t feel like getting up. He doesn’t feel like existing. His breath has finally steadied and the naga is gone, but the inevitability of death looms over his spine like a specter. He has a hunch that returning to his smoking war-zone of a campsite will fail to brighten his mood, so instead, he sits and watches the waves crash against the shore. He remembers the naga’s smile and his teeth, his claws and his beguiling pupils. Izuku grits his teeth, but with considerable effort, pushes the memory aside.

I’m alive, he reminds himself. A couple minutes ago, I could have been dying. I’m still here. He matches his breathing to the ocean’s tide and repeats it as a mantra, until it sinks in.

He thinks of Yagi.

Izuku remembers his mentor’s chronic cough and the bloodied handkerchiefs that piled in the school’s trashcans. It was no secret. Everyone was aware of his decline. Despite this, Yagi, was unstoppable. He would guide his skeletal form to the university with a smile, preach his wisdom, and encourage his students to do their best. Izuku remembers how nervous he was on the day he presented his thesis. Back then, it was the most frightening moment of his academic career. He remembers how his professor’s hollow eyes twinkled as he ruffled his hair encouragingly.

“You’ll be alright as long as you keep your head up. Even when you’re feeling worried or scared, remember to smile! Especially then. Even if you have to fake it!”

Yagi faced his death on a regular basis. That was his battle. Izuku’s greatest battle had just begun. He takes a breath to focus his intention and recalls the words Yagi spoke after the speech; the words that will stick with him for the rest of his life.

“Keep walking forward, no matter how tattered you become.”

Izuku bites his lip and the epiphany hits him.

I won.

He puts a hand to his wounded arm and tenses his form. He revels in the truth of it and the terror ebbs away.

He almost got me, but I won. Every second I spend being afraid is surrender and I’m not letting him win.
Izuku’s on his feet, and striding to Mei’s ship. It’s now he remembers the knowing wink and nudge the engineer gave him before he set off on his journey. She’d left him a surprise on board the ship. A surprise he wasn’t allowed to open until he reached the island.

Hope rises in his chest as he opens the trunk. “C’mon Mei. What do you have for me?”

Inside he finds a duffle bag. It’s heavier than it looks, and after testing its weight Izuku decides it can rest where it is while he examines its contents.

The first thing to greet him in the bag is a small note with “CHAMP” written in giant letters, taped on top of the equipment. He opens it to read, “For boredom/when shit hits the fan.” Izuku snorts and sticks the note to his shirt. Directly under it is a small flask. If he had to guess, it’s either rum or whiskey.

Why the hell not?

He unscrews the cork and takes a swig. He expects fire, but it goes down like juice. He nods appreciatively. Ahh. The good stuff. The warmth spreads in his body and remembers that he hasn’t had anything to eat or drink all day. The canned beans and instant rice he had the night before would have been his final meal.

Well. That’ll be the first thing he does when he gets back. He takes another gulp and tosses the flask back to where it was. The machines in the bag gleam back at him, almost expectantly.

Among the assorted metal “babies” Mei has tucked away, he finds a pair of steampunk inspired goggles, a jetpack, knee and calf boosters, and steel anti-gravity shoes that allow him to move faster while airborne.

This is it. This is how I’ll win. Izuku looks both ways before taking the bag with him.

He’s pleasantly buzzed when he gets back to camp. A quarter of the green house crops have been demolished. Izuku does his best to ignore the damage as he fetches his first aide kit and a can of soup from the tent.

Once his arm is bandaged and he’s started a small fire, Izuku separates his broken things from his less broken things. Most of the items originally from his backpack are destroyed, singed, or melted. The greatest disappointment by far the gun, which has been completely ruined. He should have expected it, but having a functional weapon at his side would have eased his nerves considerably.

His knife is in a similar state. By some miracle however, the binoculars are perfectly intact.

While he shovels the soup to his mouth, Izuku feverishly scribbles down notes of the confrontation he had with the naga. So far he has the rules of their deal, what’s at stake, and the knowledge that his blonde adversary can move faster than he can blink.

I’ll never learn anything if we fight for less than a minute at a time. I need to find a way to drag it out.

Izuku remembers the gloating words the naga left him with. The fights would be skewed more in the monster’s favor as the days ticked past.

Bluff or not, that’s a risk I have to take.

Izuku chews his pen nervously. I need more information. The few interaction he’s had with the blonde were guided by instinct alone. His brain translated everything about the naga his as a threat
and froze him in place. He’d need to find a way past it.

*It'll be like fighting a bear,* he thinks. *I can’t back down. I am NOT prey.*

His heart pounds in his chest, but he feels his confidence rising. The plants in the greenhouse are starting to bud and bear fruit. He has Yagi’s wisdom and Mei’s inventions. He removes the “CHAMP” note from his shirt and sticks it in his notebook as a bookmark.

*I can do this.*

***

**FIGHT 1**

It’s mid-afternoon when Izuku sees the alpha naga again. He gets no warning, and is so fully engrossed in sketching a blue flowering plant growing from the rubble that he doesn’t hear the other’s approach. When the naga’s throaty, pompous voice reaches him, the blood in his veins turns to ice.

“Still here? The way you were pissing yourself yesterday, I thought you’d be gone.”

Izuku steadies himself and turns to smile as pleasantly as he can. “I told you, I’m not going anywhere. Where did you want to fight?”

“The beach is fine. But we could start here if you’re into having your bones smashed against the trees and ruins.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “I’ll take the beach, thanks.”

It’s the hottest time of the day and the moisture in the air clings to his clothes and skin. Izuku ignores the heat as best as he can as he walks. His goal today is to preserve himself. Two weeks’ worth of thrashing from the naga would destroy him. Today he is to dodge, and learn all he can from the naga’s movements.

They face each other on the sand. Izuku chooses a spot closer to the waves. If he’s thrown, the impact will sting, but if he’s to dodge, he’ll need the proper footing. He takes a breath and takes in the sight of the monster before him. The naga’s mouth is curved into his signature crooked grin.

“Before we start, I’m making a new rule.”

Izuku frowns. “And that is?”

“I need a daily report of everything you do each day.”

“Seriously?”

The naga nods. “I want your exact routine. If you think you’ll stray from it in any way, you are to let me know in a day’s advance.”

“Um, okay. Why?”

“I have a life outside pummeling idiot humans, you know. I can’t devote my time to watching an intruder. Which brings up more rule. You’re forbidden from leaving your camp, except for the beach skirmishes. Is that clear?”

It’s very clear to Izuku that these rules reduce him to a prisoner with a long leash. Internally, he
seethes. *It’s still his land, Izuku reminds himself. I’m still technically trespassing.*

“Sure,” he shrugs, biting his tongue and setting a timer on his watch. “I guess I can live with that.”

The battle is nearly over before it starts.

The naga lunges with arms extended and Izuku ducks and rolls to the side. It would have been a clean dodge, but the naga’s tail catches his foot, and Izuku stumbles. The tail quickly winds around his ankle and yanks him forward. Izuku is thrown on his back harder than before.

The sand is a nice cushion, but the force nearly knocks the wind from him. Izuku is still recovering from the hit when the coil slithers up his leg and loops twice around his chest. He’s suddenly dragged towards the naga, who effortlessly slams his arms down into the sand.

“Pinned underneath me again? What a surprise,” the blonde boasts as he runs the tip of his claw under Izuku’s jaw. “Tell you what. I’m feeling merciful, so if you’d like to give up now instead of waiting for our time to run out, I’ll let you go.”

“Fine. I give.”

The naga slides off him, and Izuku rises to a sitting position. “Better get used to losing, human. You’ve got thirteen more losses to look forward to.”

Izuku groans. *That was what, maybe, four seconds?* The dread from the day before returns. It nearly engulfs Izuku when a thought occurs to him.

“What’s your name?”

He’s heard of hostages introducing themselves to their captors. Just knowing their names and what they did for a living was sometimes enough to spare their lives. But the naga knew both of those things and was as bloodthirsty as ever.

_Maybe the ball is in my court, _he thinks. **We’ll be seeing each other consecutively for the next two weeks. Anything could happen. Things could change.**

“Bakugo Katsuki,” barks the blonde. “Alpha of this island, and don’t you forget it.”

“I’m Izuku Midorya.”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard.”

“But…you keep calling me, human.”

“I’ll call you what I fucking want to,” Katsuki snarls.

*Of course, _Izuku thinks glumly. Why did I think this would go any other way?*

At the camp, Izuku heads straight for Mei’s equipment. The first piece he puts on is wrist watch like device that wirelessly connects to each machine. Once he’s fitted the jet pack, knee and calf boosters, and steel anti-gravity shoes, they only take seconds to calibrate. Izuku sets the remote on his wrist to its lowest custom setting and gingerly takes a step forward.

Izuku had always enjoyed testing her things. Mei was never one to include manuals with her prototypes. She had insisted that every note in the manual be based around the user’s initial reaction to her tech. Thus, she had an insatiable need for her own personal guinea pigs. Not that Izuku minded.
It was that determined and shameless personality of hers that drew them together and then later blew them apart. Romantically, things were over, but Izuku’s fascination with the engineer’s work never waned.

And of course, who was she to turn down a willing test subject?

As with most of Mei’s “babies,” Izuku is pleased to discover the controls are intuitive. Already the tech feels like an extension of himself. He’s enamored with the anti-gravity shoes the most, and marvels at the new lightness of his body.

If he’s going to train the way he plans to, the shoes will soften his landing when he falls. If he does it right, he won’t be injured.

Izuku remembers his helplessness in Katsuki’s coils, but steadies his breathing. The day isn’t a waste. He’s made notes from the battle. He’s training with the tech. He even learned the naga’s name.

*Bakugo Katsuki.*

Izuku thinks it fits him perfectly.

***

**FIGHT 2**

The next day, Izuku is early to the beach. Tucked against his stomach is a notebook of his report. He aimlessly strums the pages against his fingers as he waits. He wants to show Katsuki his tenacity.

If Katsuki is impressed, he doesn’t show it. He doesn’t even give Izuku a nod as he slithers up to him.

“Report?”

“Good afternoon to you too,” Izuku says with a smirk. “Alright, well. Every day I wake up, go for a run, wash in the river, eat breakfast, water the plants, take pictures and sketch them, record their progress, have lunch, do some yoga, fight you, and then test some experiments with the bacterial strains and plant cells, eat dinner, and finally go to bed.”

“Why do you eat so much?”

The question throws him completely. “Huh?”

“Three meals a day?”

“Um. That’s pretty normal.”

“More like inefficient,” Katsuki growls. “You waste all your time foraging like a rodent.”

Izuku glares at him. Katsuki waits, but Izuku doesn’t take the bait.

“Really? Nothing to say to that?”

“Are you done?” Izuku snaps. “I have tests to run.”

Katsuki glowers and crosses his arms. “Not quite. I need to know how long each task takes.”
Izuku looks at him incredulously. “I didn’t keep track.”

“Guess.”

“Oh, fuck off. I’ll look into it tomorrow, alright? I was good, I promise.”

Izuku would like to believe he does better this round. He’s more wary of the tail and tries to keep track of its presence as he darts for Katsuki’s torso. However, it’s not enough. Katsuki catches Izuku with a coil tosses him to the sand. This time, Izuku’s left arm is pinned to his side. While Izuku struggles, Katsuki nonchalantly picks at his claws.

“Alright, I give,” Izuku grumbles. “You can let go.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no?”

“Not this time. We’ve got over a minute left.”

“Are you fucking serious...”

Katsuki says nothing as Izuku squirms.

“GET OFF!!!”

Katsuki finally lets go when the timer rings.

“Twelve days, human.”

That evening Izuku kicks things up a notch with the equipment and sets it to medium. He starts in the field and runs. His surroundings shoot to a blur and he’s intoxicated with the speed. The moment reminds him of how he felt in the water when he first used diving fins. He does laps, running from the greenhouse to the edge of the jungle.

Then he’s in the air, propelling himself through the trees. He rushes through them, dodging and blocking their branches the best he can with his new speed. It’s not the same as sparring with a partner, but it’s improving his reaction time.

It’s better than nothing.

***

FIGHT 3

The sound of mild shuffling rouses Izuku in the early morning. Cautiously, he rolls from his cot, and fetches the ruined knife from his backpack. When he creeps to the entrance of the tent and opens the flap, he sees the wild pigs of the island helping themselves to his greenhouse.

“HEY!”

Izuku rushes forward, snatches his pot from the campfire, and bangs it together with the knife. Despite being about the same size as the human, the pigs panic and frantically scramble in all directions. The young scientist watches them disappear into the jungle with a building rage.

Trembling slightly, he examines each of the plants. It looks like the pigs have been digging to get to the roots. Strewn around them in the dirt are striped nuts about the size chestnuts. Izuku has
never seen them before and wonders if this is a new development in the plants’ budding process. He sighs and trots back to the tent for his notebook.

*This new growth must be what’s attracting them.*

Irritated, he goes about using some rope and the ruined knife to make a snare. He hasn’t made one since camping in high school, and the state of his weapons aren’t much help. The pigs are huge, so he estimates the best he can. He’s not sure how to best deter the animals, but he has to at least send a message.

Izuku’s mood is further dampened by his next defeat to Katsuki. He let the blonde take the offensive, remaining careful of his claws and tail. Izuku’s footwork is shoddy at best, but he manages to last a full minute before Katsuki trips him and he stumbles to the ground. Katsuki is on him in seconds. He seizes Izuku’s head with his palm forcefully shoves it to the side. His claws extend past Izuku’s face to the sand and hold his head down in a cage.

“Look at yourself,” Katsuki chuckles. “Same result three days in a row. Do you honestly think you’re improving? Maybe you need some extra incentive. Maybe I should take little bites out of you every day you fail to hit me.”

“It’s only been three days,” Izuku snaps. “And I’m getting better, whether you see it or not!”

Katsuki scoffs. “Admit it. You’re just as useless as the rest of your kind.”

“Human beings aren’t useless!”

“Oh really? I think your body speaks for itself. You’re physically weak, you can’t see in the dark, your claws aren’t retractable, your stare isn’t hypnotic, and your teeth aren’t venomous.”

Izuku pauses at the last one. “Wait, you’re venomous?”

Katsuki smirks and slowly runs a forked tongue over his fangs. “Did you think these were just for show?”

Izuku shudders and he feels his face begin to flush. “A-Alright, fine. So humans are built differently. But we don’t let what we lack that stop us. We study and adapt. We develop inventions and tools to survive.”

“Sounds like humans are a bunch of lame-ass nerds.”

Izuku feels his anger rise from his stomach like bile. “Better to be a weak and adaptive nerd than an intelligent species that lives like a beast!” he shouts. “At least we know what we are! What do you even do with yourself? There’s not much to your life besides patrolling, eating, and sleeping, is there?”

Katsuki’s fury bursts forth without warning. “I DON’T WANT TO HEAR THE BRAYING OF SOME LOW LIFE PREY!” he snarls in Izuku’s face. “Make no mistake. We’re the superior species. Always have been, always will be. I’m going to drill that into your fucking head even if I have to mash it to a pulp!”

Katsuki’s sincere ferocity takes him off guard, and Izuku blinks in surprise.

*What the hell?*

Katsuki tosses him aside with such force that Izuku is sent rolling against the beach.
“ELEVEN DAYS!”

Katsuki storms off with smoking palms but Izuku feels his own fire grow in his gut.

That night he sets the machines to up to the next level and takes to leaping in the branches of the trees.

*I don’t care if I’m at a disadvantage,* he thinks as the wind blows past his ears. *I’ll win. I’m going to beat you and live.*

***

**FIGHT 4**

Izuku wakes up to screaming.

He’s out the tent in an instant with his backpack. He’s relieved to see the screams are coming from one of the sows that has been caught in the snare. The animal is frantically thrashing in the dirt to escape, but the rope around its head and front hoof hold fast. He’s relieved to see the other pigs have fled the scene, but the young scientist doesn’t have the chance to feel satisfied with his work.

Any other animal would have stayed far, far away from the noise. But the alpha boar is different. Izuku hears the animal before he sees it. This pig is nothing like the others. It’s a monster the size of a tank.

There is tension in his posture when it’s hulking form focuses on the human. He leans forward and snorts, and stamping his front hooves in the dirt. The alpha boar pops its jaw. Foaming spittle flies from its tusks before it charges right for him.

“FUCK!”

Izuku whips around and hurtles towards the jungle, backpack smacking against him with every step. A regular sized boar would wreak a human. A hit from this one would be like being smashed by a train.

*PICK A TREE,* he thinks frantically. *ANY TREE.*

The boar’s thundering hooves are getting louder and Izuku’s mind is getting desperate. *I’m not going to make it. He’ll gore me right into the trunk.*

Just as he’s fearing the end, the earth trembles and a terrible crack erupts in the ground beneath him. The boar squeals. Izuku stumbles but doesn’t stop. He chances a look behind himself to see the boar struggling to pull its hind legs out of a hole from the ruins.

Izuku’s arms slam into the tree and he scrambles up the branches as fast as he can go. He finally decides to stop at one of the higher branches and crouches. He’s high enough that the boar looks to be about the size of a cat. He spitefully watches the animal below as he catches his breath. The boar paces directly under the branch he’s sitting on and looks up at him. It could be a while before his feet touch the ground again.

“Don’t you have anything better to do?”

Izuku decides to make the best of the situation. He sketches the boar in his notebook and jots down a brief description. **Proud, intelligent, fierce, and stubborn.** Izuku frowns at the pig. “You’re a lot like him, aren’t you?”
When the sketch is done, he pulls the binoculars from his bag, and searches for the rest of the pigs. Instead he spots some activity on one of the beaches. He adjusts the binoculars to zoom in and feels his breath catch.

It’s Katsuki. He’s sparring with another naga on the beach.

This one is a male with a yellow body and he seems to be shooting webs of electricity from his hands. Katsuki faces them head on, and explosions engulf the two in smoke. However, when they’re close enough, they weave together in close combat.

Izuku snatches his notebook from his bag, and scribbles frantically with one hand, holding the binoculars with the other. His heart pounds with excitement. When he isn’t writing, he’s sketching, trying to capture Katsuki’s movements on paper. He’s not sure when he’ll ever have another opportunity to observe his opponent so freely and he tries to note everything, including the questions that flood his mind.

*Do each of them have their own special abilities? Are they fighting for territory? How many are there on this island?*

It becomes abundantly clear that Katsuki is the more skilled of the two. Each of his movements are powerful and precise. A small part of Izuku is appreciative that Katsuki hasn’t been holding anything back in their skirmishes.

*He’s incredible.*

Izuku loses track of time, but based on the number of pages he’s filed and the cramping in his hand, it has to have been at least two hours. During this time, the rope that ensnared the sow snaps and the pig rushes free to the jungle. It’s not long after that the boar gets tired and runs to follow.

When Katsuki and Izuku spar things come a little easier. Thanks to what he learned from the fight earlier, Izuku is able to predict Katsuki a bit more and manages to go slightly on the offensive. He spots an opening, but forces himself to miss.

*Not yet, Izuku thinks. I don’t want to make it too obvious.*

Katsuki strikes him as the competitive type. The alpha naga would only become more ferocious as Izuku put in his all. The young scientist would prefer to gain more information before fully engaging him.

After the fight, Izuku wants to ask Katsuki about the earlier spat. He wants to ask all the questions in his notebook, but doesn’t. He hasn’t mentioned anything he observed in the tree in his report to the alpha naga. Instead, he asks about his new pest problem.

“What do you do about the pigs out here? I made some traps but they broke right through.”

“We hunt and eat them,” Katsuki snarls. "We don’t use traps unlike some cowardly *other* species. Sounds like a human problem.”

“Well, it’s definitely my problem, but thanks for the tip,” he says sarcastically.

Katsuki shrugs. “Ten more days.”

Izuku challenges himself that night, trying to stay airborne for as long as he can with the shoes. He’s beginning to get comfortable with running at medium speed. It’s nearly second nature at this point, and shooting through the sky with the shining armor makes him feel like a ninja. He
whoops, and makes a dash to the next tree.

This time, while he’s in the air, he spots Katsuki below on the jungle floor. Katsuki’s head whips up in time for the two to make eye contact. Without a second thought, Izuku flips him off with both hands as the jetpack propels him forward through the trees.

The expression on Katsuki’s face is priceless.

***

**FIGHT 5**

Izuku wakes up to the now familiar sound of rustling near the greenhouse. If this keeps up, he won’t have any results to report to his lab back home. He has to do something. He clenches his teeth.

*Alright. That’s IT.*

He straps on Mei’s gear, and snatch the pot and knife. With his new speed, he tears out of the tent, hollering and making as much noise as he can. The pigs are worked into such a tizzy, they scramble and run into each other. If he forgets why he’s chasing them in the first place, Izuku might even admit he’s having fun.

He’s chased them nearly to the beach, when he spots the familiar shape of the alpha boar. Izuku tenses at first, but then remembers he’s wearing Mei’s equipment. Izuku grins and gleefully pulls the goggles on his hair over his eyes.

“Hello, sparring partner.”

Izuku presses a button on his wrist and watches the boar’s shoulders as it charges. He sees the shoulder blades shift to the right, and he rolls out of the way. The beast is a mess of hooves as it reverses itself in the sand, creating a cloud of debris in the process. It doesn’t even stop to readjust its charge and its back to running at him head on.

*Yep, just as relentless as Katsuki, Izuku thinks.*

This time he tucks and rolls away, but crouches in time in the sand to smack the boar in the ribs. He wonders if he’s being cruel, but decides some playful teasing is better than delivering forceful blows. He’ll stop pestering the animal once it gets tired and loses interest.

Besides, he could use a bit of revenge for yesterday.

To Izuku’s delight, the animal is in a blind rage and shows no signs of stopping. Izuku fearlessly dashes forward and meets the boar head on. He smacks its nose, rolls and pushes off its shoulders. With the help of the anti-gravity shoes, he lands perfectly on his feet.

Maybe it’s the stress of finding a cure. Maybe it’s the fear of being eaten. Maybe it’s the chore of chasing off the pigs. Maybe it’s the worry that Katsuki is right, and humans are the inferior species. All of these things could be what drives Izuku to his frenzied battle. At the moment, he can think of nothing else.

“IS THAT ALL YOU GOT?”
He flings himself into his mania, an energy which the pig challenges without hesitation. Sweat pours down his face, and he can tell the boar is tired as well, but its eyes are gleaming against it’s dark pelt. The animal is stubbornly determined to maim him. It charges forward once more and Izuku pushes himself off the ground.

He’s only airborne for a second before he crashes to the sand.

Startled, he shuffles to his feet and attempts to take a step forward. The left anti-gravity shoe is offline and unresponsive. Its deadweight alone is enough to unbalance his entire footing. His hands dart to the straps, working frantically to loosen them, but he knows it’s too late.

The pig is rapidly approaching and all he can do is watch.

Izuku has nearly accepted his fate, when a black and orange blur bolts forward, and clobbers the boar in the side of its head. The animal stumbles, but stays on its feet. Izuku’s head whips to see Katsuki tensing and winding his coils like a spring as his claws extend at all once. The naga spits a hiss, openly displaying his dripping fangs to his quarry.

Despite the blow and Katsuki’s warning, the pig doesn’t back down. The boar dips it’s head and leaps forward. Katsuki’s response is swift. He slices the boar’s eyes, and then its throat. The pig emits an ear splitting scream.

“IT IS TOO. GODAMMNED EARLY. FOR THIS BULLSHIT!” Katsuki roars.

The animal is still crying when Katsuki finishes it with an explosion to the skull.

The head splatters in a mess of fire and blood and the beach goes quiet. When Katsuki turns, Izuku sees his entire front has been covered in gore. The young scientist sits paralyzed in front of the smoking carcass as the naga fixes him with his glare. Katsuki’s tongue runs from his wrist, down his to his elbow, picking up blood that looks as red as his eyes.

“That’s interesting equipment for just one boar,” Katsuki says as he licks his lips. “Seems like overkill.”

*Holy fuck.*

Izuku’s teeth threaten to chatter, but he twists his mouth into a grimace that he hopes looks intimidating.

“You destroyed my gun, remember? That…and most of my things. Super cool of you, by the way.”

Katsuki ignores him. “Why haven’t I seen you wear that armor in our matches?”

“I-It’s only fair, right?” Izuku stammers. "You don’t use your eyes or explosions.”

“It’s fine. Use it. I mean, it wouldn’t even the field much, but it will make beating you down more interesting.”

Izuku raises an eyebrow. This was an opportunity if he’d ever seen one. *Now this I can work with.*

“Hrmm, well,” says Izuku as he lazily scratches the back of his neck. “This is a prototype for testing only. Even I don’t know how it would respond to rough housing.”

Katuki jabs a claw at the boar. “*That* was rough housing.”

“Well, to clarify, a pig would do considerably less damage than you. In any case,” he continues,
“It’s not happening. I’m too unfamiliar with your movements. If I hurt the machines too badly, they could break beyond repair.”

“Then hurry the hell up and get better,” Katsuki orders. “I wanna see if I can outpace it.”

“Yeah, sure. I’ll get right on that,” Izuku snaps. “I should be able to have total mastery by about a week, right?”

Katsuki’s face twitches in irritation. “Whatever. I’m already here, so we might as well have our fight.”

Izuku removes the equipment, and the skirmish goes about the same as before. Izuku lands no hits, and ends up thrown on his back. He’s still catching his breath when Katsuki yells down at him. “I’LL TEACH YOU!”

Izuku jolts. “What?”

“If you’re really worried about wasting that damn equipment, I’ll teach you how to fight.”

“Really?”

“Don’t make me repeat myself,” he snaps. “Get up.”

Izuku bites down his smirk, and pulls himself to his feet.

“First things first, learn how to guard. Figure out how to block hits and recover.”

“This is just an excuse to punch me, right?”

Katsuki’s eyes crinkle in what looks like amusement, but he doesn’t acknowledge the comment. “Turn one shoulder towards me and raise your arms to your head.”

Izuku obeys and faces Katsuki directly.

“Good. Now bend your knees so that they’re under your shoulders…”

It’s training, sure, but the way Katsuki guides his arms and corrects his posture feels almost intimate. The flaking gore from the pig on Katsuki’s body somewhat subtracts from the mood, but Izuku still feels his pulse quicken each time he leans behind him and speaks in his ear.

What is happening?

Katsuki focuses on teaching Izuku defensive moves only. Anything more than that he explains, would be against his own interests. The lesson comes to a close and Izuku feels awash with conflicting emotions. He snaps back to reality when Katsuki flips him off.

The naga points at the middle finger with his other hand in puzzlement. “What is this?”

Izuku is startled but only for a second. Right, he thinks. He remembers it from last night. “It means ‘Fuck you’ in human.”

Katsuki grins and flips him off with his other hand as well. Izuku happily mirrors the gesture.
“Nine days.”

“Nine days,” Izuku agrees.

Chapter End Notes

AU’s Note: Ha ha… I’m a silly lady. I actually believed I could fit the two weeks these dorks spend fighting each other into a single chapter.

Stay tuned! :D
Ruins

Chapter Summary

“And I will hold on hope
And I won't let you choke
On the noose around your neck”

Chapter Notes

Woo hoo, longest chapter! Couldn’t bring myself to break it apart.

AND HOLY CRAP. I HAVE FANART:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FIGHT 6

Izuku wakes up feeling brighter than he has in days.

He hears the pigs snorting outside his tent, but the animals bolt as soon as he opens the flap.

Yeah, that’s right, he thinks triumphantly. This is MY HOUSE.

Izuku inspects the soil in the greenhouse, but can find no sign of the striped seeds in the dirt. After this, I might not see the pigs again. The scientist hums as he marks down the progress of the plants in his notebook. For once, things might finally be looking up.

The strains he has are showing promise. Once they reach maturity, he can breed them with the hybrids he’s been raising. Hopefully, the resulting plant will be able to grow outside the island. All he needs to do now is wait.

While he munches on some granola for breakfast, Izuku thinks of the plant he was sketching in the ruins a couple days before. It had such striking blue petals. The pigment could even be used for paint.

He wonders which other plants can be used for paint and decides to check in his favorite botany book. However, it isn’t at his desk or on the bookshelf. Puzzled, he crawls on his knees and checks under the bed and even in the original bag he carried it in, but finds nothing.

Well, it’s not like it grew legs and walked away.

He decides to experiment with the plant anyway. He takes the petals and mashes them to a paste with his pestle and mortar. He fetches his pot and after boiling the paste tests the wash of blue in his sketchbook. Encouraged, he mixes it with some the charcoal to color the alpha boar. The sketch pops to life, and the finished piece looks nearly as menacing as the real thing.
Yet again, he feels lucky to be alive. If Katsuki hadn’t intervened in time, there was no doubt he’d be a gory pancake on the beach. Izuku presses his lips together at the thought of Katsuki and his new challenge. Fighting Katsuki with Mei’s gear should make things much easier for him now.

The anti-gravity shoes had been left to charge in the ship overnight. Izuku was relieved to see he had only overworked the unit. He decides to make notes to Mei, letting her know of the machine’s limitations. And of course, she’d be very interested to know how her tech fares in actual combat.

At the beach, Katsuki immediately perks up when he sees Izuku wearing Mei’s gear. If this wasn’t a battle for his life, Katsuki’s reaction would almost be endearing.

“Ready?”

Izuku gives him a wry smile. “Don’t you want your report?”

Katsuki grins and cracks his knuckles. “After.”

Izuku takes a moment to calibrate the equipment. He sets the timer and the two throw themselves into action. This time it matters. If I can’t land a single hit today, I won’t survive the end of the week, Izuku thinks. It’s a harsh thought, but he can think of no reason why he shouldn’t be hard on himself with this new advantage.

Katsuki too, is more reckless. He opens his first strike with a battle cry.

“DIE!!”

If Izuku wasn’t awake before, he sure as hell is now. Katsuki’s strikes are more frequent and manic, forcing Izuku on the defensive. Izuku ducks in time for Katsuki’s fist to brush past his shoulder. It’s far too close to the jetpack for his liking, and he rolls out of the way, pushing off the sand with the anti-gravity shoes.

“Jeeze! Watch where you’re hitting!”

“BLOCK, DAMMIT!” Katsuki snarls. “I’ve fought pups with more self-preservation!”

“What kind of psycho fights babies?” Izuku yells as he dodges a strike meant for his chest. He goes in for a hit of his own, but Katsuki lunges with his other arm. There’s a crunch, and piece of the metal goes flying. Izuku loses his balance and crashes in the sand.

Katsuki crouches to pin him, but relaxes when the timer goes off.

“Fuck. I was afraid this would happen,” Izuku mutters as he twists to look at the damage over his shoulder. He unhooks the jetpack and carefully runs a finger along the gash.

Katsuki scoffs. “Maybe you should have paid more attention in your training.” He pauses and then adds a bit tentatively, “Is it dead?”

“No, it’s not too bad. I can fix it.”

“You should have made it sturdier.”

Izuku sighs, and walks over to the piece. “I didn’t make it, my ex-girlfriend did.”

The scientist examines the broken metal and ponders the equipment he has available back at the camp. He should have a tool kit at least on the ship if nothing else. He can’t imagine Mei not leaving a stash of screws, nuts, and bolts behind.
“Girlfriend? As in your mate?”

“Yeah, as in a mate who didn’t work out.”

“But you still use her things,” Katsuki says it slowly almost like a question. “You still have feelings for her.”

“Um, no. I do not. We’re just friends. Honestly, she’s like a big sister to me.”

Katsuki raises an eyebrow. “You chose her because you wanted to mate with your sister?”

Izuku pinches the bridge of his nose in frustration. “Oh my God. NO. Neither of us have siblings. We met at school and happened to hit it off. She’s a brilliant person and I still like testing her stuff. That’s it.” Izuku glares. “Can we stop talking about this? I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Katsuki nonchalantly picks his teeth with one of his claws. “Eight days.”

Back at camp Izuku is thankful the damage is mostly cosmetic. It would be a problem if debris got into the machine, so fixing it makes the top priority in his evening. What he doesn't have is a blowtorch, which would have been ideal. In order to reshape the metal, he has to hammer it out.

He shakes his head after he’s completed his job, knowing it would work, but it won’t look pretty. Mei would demand specific answers for the damaged “baby”. Izuku decides he could lie and say he tripped while wearing it and fell. It’s a cliché excuse, but if he explains how astounding the new island is and how distracted he became, she’ll probably buy it. He taps the machine thoughtfully.

_I still wasn’t able to land a hit. Maybe I was too hard on myself. This is a brand new battle, and I need to adjust._

He tightens his hands into fists.

_But I need to land a hit tomorrow for sure._

**FIGHT 7**

Izuku dreams about the plants.

He dreams they unfurl their leaves, push against the restraints of the greenhouse, break through, and reach for the sky above. In the dream his work is done, and he takes this new little piece of the jungle back with him across the sea. When he actually monitors their state in the morning, he can’t help but feel disappointed.

“Grow faster, dammit.”

At least the pigs haven’t returned. He still can’t find his book and wonders if pigs eat paper. He has a sinking feeling that they absolutely do. He groans. It really was his favorite. He remembers how excited he was when he found an equally worn and dog eared copy in Yagi’s library. Paging through it was just one of the many ways he felt connected to his mentor.

To distract himself from the loss, the young scientist goes out and plucks more of the blue flowering plants. There’s some orange and red berries that he collects and stores in his vials as well. He can use these colors for the sketches he has of Katsuki. He might not be able to capture the iridescence of the naga’s scales, but he already has the drawings done, and it’s worth a try.

It’s then he spots the gaping hole in the ground. The weathered bricks of the ruins have broken and
given way to an underground tunnel. Izuku scrunches his face and approaches cautiously.

This is new.

It’s then he remembers his first brush with death from the alpha boar. This must have been where the beast stumbled in its chase. Izuku swallows. If it weren’t for that moment, he wouldn’t have had the time to escape up the tree.

The hole has revealed what looks like an underground temple. Excitement bubbles in Izuku’s stomach and he races back to camp. Maybe now he can finally get some answers about the island’s history. He snatches his backpack, lantern, camera, and notebook.

He giddily puts on his hardhat and flicks the switch for the light on top, delighted he finally gets the chance to use it. Once he’s suited up, he feels like one of the action heroes of his childhood. He practically skips his way back to the crevasse.

Briefly, he wonders if Katsuki would care.

I can mark this down in my report as a part of my morning walk. It’s still technically near camp.

Izu ties the rope to a nearby sapling, and edges down the mouth. When he’s close enough to the ground, he lets go and drops to his feet. What he sees next astounds him.

All over the walls are carvings of some kind of logographic alphabet. Above the writing are enormous murals of naga, demigods, mermaids, and other creatures. The imagery and overwhelming presence of snakes and animals reminds him of artwork from the Aztec Empire. His jaw drops.

I’m not an archeologist, he thinks. But if I was, I’d be creaming my shorts.

As he walks, a story unfolds. Moving down the hall is like traveling through a comic book. He notices in some areas the walls have been afflicted with long gashes. It’s as if someone went through and dragged their claws through the stone. Izuku runs his hands in the grooves. He’s nearly positive they’re from naga claws.

The next thing he notices is the large shadowy creature that looms under every drawing. It watches the activities of the people from its own private sea. Izuku has decided to refer to it as the Leviathan. The Leviathan could resemble a naga if he squints, but its form is far too monstrous. With it’s long jaw and huge neck pouch, the huge monster reminds him of the gulper eels from the abyss. Its dead, pupil-less eyes makes him uneasy and he makes a point to ignore its presence.

He’s fascinated to see the pigments on the waves match the blue from the plant he plucked earlier. He smiles. Looks like we had the same idea. Idly, Izuku studies the colors and wonders what other materials were used for the murals.

His breath catches when he spots an illustration of the very plant he’d been studying.

OH. My God.

Suddenly, the tunnels are extremely relevant to his interests. With a new eagerness, Izuku trots down the wall. It looks like the ancient nagas had collected it and used it as medicine as well. The drawings show the plant had even been farmed, taken into villages, and boiled it into a pot for some kind of tea. Izuku frantically whips out his notebook and begins copying the hieroglyphs.

The name of that plant is hidden somewhere, and right now I’m looking at its entire history, he
thinks ecstatically. I’m going to solve it.

When Izuku begins his new mission, time seems to stop. He moves deeper into the cavern, which seems endless by now. At one point his ears pop, which is enough to distract him, but not enough to slow him down. He can’t quite pull a pattern from the symbols just yet, but he notices the destruction in the walls is more pronounced and targets specific figures. He squints and gets a closer look at one of them. It’s very faint, but he can make out legs. It’s then the realization hits him.

There were humans.

Humans had lived among the creatures of the island. For some reason nearly all of them had been violently scratched out of the paintings and carvings. All that remains of the boy’s own race are blank supernovas entwined with the mythology of the mermaids, nagas, and the leviathan.

The damage only intensifies further down the tunnel. Large chunks of the artwork have been ravaged. Entire scenes have been violently removed, leaving a mess of rubble on the ground. Then he finds the graffiti. The mess cloaks the walls and devours the original drawings. The new art is vulgar and contains no hieroglyphs at all. It’s mess of crude drawings of humans with their limbs pulled off.

Izuku’s unease turns to horror, when his lantern illuminates the human skeletons. At first, the dead are only scattered about the floor, but then the carnage takes a creative turn. An entire section of the wall has been decorated with skulls. The center piece of the display has human skeletons arranged in a grotesque bouquet on some wooden spikes. However, the dead aren’t limited to a single species. Every once in a while he’ll spot the skeletal remains of nagas pinned to the wall with spears sticking through their eyes. Izuku covers his mouth and side steps away from them.

What happened here?

His elbow nudges what remains of a door, and a skeleton falls into his arms. Its jaw swings open and Izuku stares into its dark and empty sockets. “WAUUUUGH!!” The lantern falls with a clatter, and Izuku falls backwards. He kicks the corpse off and backs away on all fours.

You’re fine. You’re fine. It’s dead. There’s nothing down here.

He takes a deep breath and pulls himself to his feet. Izuku has nearly recovered and is about to dive back into his research when a hand seizes his shoulder and whips him around.

“OI! What the hell are you-GAH!”

“YEEEEEEK!”

Katsuki is blinded by the light from Izuku’s hat and momentarily shrinks back. Shielding his eyes, he barks, “Turn that damn thing off!”

Izuku calms his nerves enough to hit the switch, and Katsuki resumes his rant. “The FUCK are you doing?” he snaps. “You are absolutely not supposed to be here.”

Izuku cringes and nervously clenches his hands around the lantern’s handle. “U-um, I fell?”

“There’s a rope leading down the hole.”

Izuku tries again. “I fell while walking backwards with the rope?”
Katsuki rolls his eyes and snatches Izuku, throwing him roughly over his shoulder. The force of the toss nearly knocks the wind out of his lungs.

“**Oomph! HEY,**” Izuku snaps. “I can walk, you know.” He squirms, but Katsuki’s grip is firm and holds him in place, and he begrudgingly gives up the fight a minute later.

“So…” he murmurs resting a hand on his chin. “Humans lived here at one point, huh?”

“What clued you in?” Katsuki growls, “The artwork or the bodies?”

“But what’s the story?”

“We killed them.”

“Okay, yeah. But what happened? What do the walls say?”

“It’s not important.”

“What about that scary creature that watches everything under all the drawings? What’s that about?”

Katsuki snorts. “That’s me.”

Izuku rolls his eyes but doesn’t give up. “I noticed the plant I’m studying was used by your people as medicine. What do you call it?”

“It’s just a plant. Who cares?”

“Uh, me. It’s kind of the reason why I’m here.” He waits patiently, but Katsuki continues to ignore him. Izuku sighs. “C’mon, if you don’t tell me its name, I’ll name it after myself.”

“Call it whatever you want. Once you’re dead, it won’t stick.”

Despite the jab at his own death, Izuku remains unperturbed. “What about the big mural on the way over here? Based on the illustrations, I’d say it’s a creation story. It’s a story of a great flood, which could line up with the Universal World Flood myth. After the flood, it looks like three species came together and lived in harmony. Were they were gods? Or maybe demi gods?”

“It’s just the scrawling of the dead. It doesn’t mean anything.”

“But it’s the writing of your people, isn’t it?” Izuku argues. “They left it for you.”

Katsuki doesn’t answer but Izuku feels the naga tense under him. If he pushes a bit more, Katsuki will crack. “Ooh, there’s an interesting one coming up. Riiight here!” Izuku sticks out his leg and kicks the wall and Katsuki swears.

“I noticed this one has symbols underneath that aren’t written anywhere else. It’s as if the gods have a unique alphabet for their names. How do you pronounce it?”

Katsuki snarls and swings Izuku down in front of him. An explosion rips from his hands and he slams his arm into the wall.

“LISTEN, YOU-“

But he doesn’t get a chance to finish. The wall gives, and rock falls from the ceiling. Katsuki
counters the oncoming danger with another explosion; this one is more powerful than the last. The force of the blast slams down into the ground. There’s a terrible crack as the floor opens up from under them, and they fall.

“AAAAUUUGGH!”

Katsuki defensively snatches Izuku to his chest and curls around his body. Izuku’s ear presses against the other's chest, and he can feel his heart pulse. Petrified, he watches as Katsuki takes aim at the rapidly approaching ground below. An explosion tears through the silence and the air is full of cinders. Izuku shrieks and gets a mouthful of smoke. Izuku feels the impact through Katsuki and the naga yelps. Izuku flies loose and tumbles across the floor until he rolls to a stop.

Both of them choke on the dust as the rocks settle. Izuku coughs until he’s able to spit the gunk from his mouth. Shakily, he runs a hand over his body and rises to his feet. Thankfully, he’s mostly unharmed. He flicks the switch on his hard hat, and looks down to illuminate his body. There’s a few scratches and minor bumps, but nothing seems broken.

By some miracle, the lantern is still functional and lit. Izuku raises it to illuminate the space they now inhabit. They’ve fallen into what looks like an underground cave. Carvings in the stalagmite’s and stone give it the appearance of a natural temple. He approaches Katsuki who is still partially rolled into a ball in the rubble.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fucking fine,” Katsuki grunts. He moves to unwind himself, but stops with a hiss. His movements become slow and he inches until he’s in his normal position. His expression is pained.

“You don’t sound fine,” Izuku says as he turns off the hard hat and offers a hand. Katsuki slaps it away and Izuku waits. Katsuki stares at him with his blood red eyes as he laboriously sucks in the cool, damp air.

“Where does it hurt?”

Katuski looks away and grinds his teeth. “Lower back. My right side.”

A pang of guilt hits Izuku's stomach. The opposite of where I was.

“I’m sorry. This wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t gone exploring,” Izuku says as he takes off the backpack and pulls out a first aid kit. “Let me help. It’s the least I can do.”

He opens the kit and removes a small bottle of antiseptic. He gives it a shake before opening it and pours it on a cotton pad. Katsuki braces himself but doesn’t fuss as Izuku cleans the wound. Izuku swabs at it delicately, careful not to apply any unnecessary pressure.

“Thanks for protecting me,” he murmurs. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“It was a reflex.”
It’s an unsatisfying response, but Izuku lets it go. He chews on his lower lip as he finishes with the bandage. “Alright, it’s clean, but it’ll definitely bruise and be sore for a while. Let me change the bandages tonight and tomorrow, and it should heal.”

Katsuki growls something unintelligible, but Izuku decides to take it as a ‘thank you.’

“Any idea where we are?” he asks as he returns the first aide kit to his bag.

“Underground.”

“Yes. So I gathered.”

Izuku rummages through the bag once more and pulls out a tool. Katsuki growls and shows his teeth.

“Is that a weapon?”

“Nope. It’s a special kind of machine,” Izuku explains as he punches in the buttons. “It emits sound that allows it to detect barriers. Since you’re not going to help, I’ll use it to guide us to the surface.”

Izuku walks in a circle, holding the machine outward. The device gives a beep, and he walks past Katsuki. He stops when he realizes his companion isn’t following.

“You coming or not?”

Katsuki is surprisingly melancholy. After the earlier outburst, Izuku was expecting the full rant to resume once his injury was treated. In the few glances he steals of the other, he observes Katsuki studying the carvings almost wistfully. It’s a side of him Izuku has never seen before.

The art in the cave feels much older and almost sacred. The carvings aren’t as refined and the subject matter seems more primal, with an emphasis on hunting fish and boar and comradery among naga. After a while, Izuku notices Katsuki becoming sluggish. He finally says something when Katsuki no longer matches his pace.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Katsuki mumbles. “Just cold.”

“Do you need my body heat? We can stop. I owe you for rescuing me from that boar a couple days ago.”

Katsuki hesitates and swears under his breath. Eventually he winds his tail around Izuku’s body. “Don’t make this weird.”

“It’s only weird if you make it weird,” Izuku counters. “You’ve coiled me up when I was wearing less, remember? Just let me keep my arms; I want to check something.”

Izuku flops his arms over on the top of the coils and works with the sonar machine. He types in a formula and attempt to calculate the distance they’re traveled and how much farther they have left to go. The numbers he finds aren’t encouraging, and he mutters to himself. They could be stuck for hours. While he tinkers with the device, he nonchalantly rubs a hand on the scales to spread the warmth through Katsuki. He snaps out of it when Katsuki lunges at his face.

“What are you doing?”

Izuku’s hand freezes over the scales. “Uh, helping?”
“Do not. PET ME,” Katsuki snarls.

“Okay, okay. Sorry.”

“Are you finished muttering to yourself? It’s been half an hour already.”

The young scientist isn’t surprised. It’s always been a bad habit of his. They go, and leave the peaceful area behind. The cave eventually opens to what appears to be a ceremonial chamber dedicated to a broken god with human legs. Izuku shines the light to reveal a floor is covered in dozens of twisted bodies. The ones at the edges of the pile look like they were trying to crawl away with their hands.

The massacre leaves Izuku breathless. “What the hell…? Did you know this was down here?”

Katsuki shrugs. “No one’s been down here in ages.”

“How do you think they died?”

“Painfully.”

“No, I mean it looks like they were rounded up. None of the corpses in this room have weapons. It’s possible they were confiscated after the murder, but I doubt it. Everyone here was unarmed. Some of them are still holding hands.”

“Just looks like a human garbage pile to me.”

“No, there’s naga in there too. I can see their tails.”

Katsuki bristles. “They are NOT naga. Do not associate my kind with that pile of human loving trash.”

Izuku stops, and raises the lantern to Katsuki but regrets it instantly. With the limited lighting, the naga looks demonic. Most of his features are unnaturally cloaked in a dark mask.

“It’s a fact,” Katsuki continues. “That we’re superior in every way. That scum denied their birthright the moment they mingled with humanity. They’ve rightly suffered the consequences.”

“How can you say that?” Izuku retorts. “The murals we saw earlier showed them prospering together! They were a healthy society until your kind slaughtered them off! The writing probably spells it out for you! Can’t you read?”

Katsuki roars and sets off a series of explosions from his palms. Izuku leaps back until he’s pressed himself against the wall. When the outburst subsides and the smoke spreads through the hall, Katsuki speaks again.

“You human piece of shit. It should be obvious to you by now, but I guess you need me to spell it out. Humanity is a scourge.” he spits.

With an extended claw he gestures to his mouth. “This isn’t my native tongue. It’s yours.”

Izuku’s stomach drops as Katsuki gives a dry, humorless laugh. “I wouldn’t recognize our language if I heard it myself! Even if I could understand these damn walls, I wouldn’t read them to the likes of you! Having the humans and their influence wiped out was a blessing. As alpha I’m shamed every time I speak. Because of your cowardly kind, we lost our culture! Even if I can’t read, it’s obvious our idiot forefathers dulled their teeth and trimmed their claws to welcome you.
And we lost everything. Everything but your damn words!"

“And you come to me now,” Katsuki seethes, “Showing off your fucking technology to close the gap between our abilities. You think we’re equals? You think you’re worthy to share a space with us in this world? You’re NOTHING. In these next few days, I’ll crush you, and the technology you attempt to rise with by my birthright alone.”

Izuku marches right up to Katsuki with fists clenched. “You absolute, ass. A holocaust is never justified, no matter how different or weak a group appears. And for the record, humans aren’t the worthless cowards you think we are. There’s plenty of worth in us, and I can prove it.”

Katsuki’s coils make a whispering sound as they slither around his feet. The naga extends his claws to the boy’s face and runs the tips against his cheek but Izuku doesn’t flinch.

“Trying to redeem the sins of your people all by yourself?” he coos. “That’s cute.”

“I’m sorry that you lost your connections to your culture,” Izuku says as he fights the shivers running up his spine. “That’s unforgivable and that loss is something I’ll never fully understand. But you’re wrong to call all of humanity a scourge. We’re strong in our own way and deserve to live as much as you.”

“Show me then,” Katsuki leers. “Let’s go. We’ll have the match right here.”

Izuku places the lantern at one side of the temple and the hard hat at the other. It’s not a good amount of light, but it’s the best he can do. They lunge and Izuku immediately notices Katsuki’s movements are different. The sore spot in his side definitely taking its toll.

Izuku goes in for a strike, and Katsuki cringes. The opening is a gift, but Izuku can’t bring himself to take the shot. Katsuki meets his eyes with pure rage and savagely sweeps his feet from under him. Izuku lands hard on his butt as Katsuki sets off a series explosions.

“Don’t fuck with me!” Katsuki screams. “Why are you fighting?”

“Why am I fighting? Because you attacked me, idiot!”

“Shut up! That’s not what I’m asking!”

Izuku blinks in confusion and Katsuki growls. He flexes his injury and pants slowly. “Why are you still here?” he snarls. “Why are you still defying me?

There’s a beat and then Izuku understands.

Katsuki asks again. “What are you fighting for?”

Izuku straightens his back before responding. “I’m fighting for my life and for the cure. I’m fighting to save the lives of everyone suffering and dying from the Zaba virus. And now, I’m fighting to prove that humanity has worth.”

“Then fucking act like it,” Katsuki spits. “I don’t need your pity. Don’t give me this half assed bullshit!”

The words pierce him and Izuku’s heart flutters. He feels his face flush.

Right.

“Okay,” he says as he reaches for his watch. “I’m resetting the timer. I’m ready when you are.”
This time Izuku lands a hit. It comes with a cost however, and Katsuki is able to knock him over nearly immediately after. Izuku recovers the best he can but he’s still caught and held down until the timer runs out.

“Congratulations, you’ve got seven days left,” Katsuki sneers. “At your current pace, you could win in two weeks.”

Izuku ignores him and collects his things. It doesn’t feel like a win and he wonders about the vile hatred in Katsuki’s words. Had he been carrying this grudge against humanity his entire life? If he wanted to, Katsuki could just kill him now. Would Katsuki really give a lowly human like himself two weeks to prove his worth?

No, this is all a game to him. I’m not supposed to win. Izuku thinks grimly. I’m only breathing because I’m a goddamned delicacy and he isn’t hungry yet.

Izuku pulls his last granola bar from his bag, and chews on it in silence as they begin traveling once more. He’s been trying to avoid the snack for hours. It’s the last of his food. He tries to relish each bite and save some for later, but his stomach clamors for more and he reluctantly polishes it off.

His feet are killing him, and he swaps his backpack around to his front for some pain killers. He swallows them down with the water he’s now forced to ration as well. The numbers from his machine estimate they’ll be walking for another six hours. The thought of spending the night in the tunnel with the naga only darkens his mood and Izuku sighs bitterly.

“I guess sleeping in your coils tonight is non-negotiable, huh?”

Katsuki chuckles, and loops his tail over Izuku’s shoulders pulling him close to his face. “If you’re worried, I could always help you doze off to make it more pleasurable.”

FUCK.

Katsuki’s suggestive tone gives Izuku goosebumps. His hand quickly flies to the light on his hard hat. He ducks and flicks it on, blinding Katsuki instantly.

“GAH!”

“Knock it off. I’m not in the mood.” Izuku snaps as he pulls Katsuki’s tail from his shoulder. “I just ate my only snack I can tell we won’t make it back in time for dinner. You’re way comfier than the stone floor, and I need something to look forward to. That’s the only reason I asked.”

Katsuki shouts a string of slurs after him, but Izuku ignores him and plods ahead to hide the deepening blush on his face. After their explosive altercation, hypnosis might be the only way to relax him enough to sleep. If Katsuki’s tone was any indication, he’d probably kiss him mockingly as he slipped under, just like their first encounter.

We need to get the hell out of here.

The interaction is enough to fuel Izuku for another hour and the two stop only when they encounter a particular kind of door. It has an asymmetrical design. A small tunnel runs through the left side, and a large switch appears on the other.

“Haven’t seen one of these before,” Izuku mutters.

Katsuki groans. “These kinds of doors are a pain in the ass. They’re made so that human
companions can hit the switch to open them. They’re impossible to deal with unless you blast your way through.”

“Well, I’m a human,” Izuku says brightly. “I could open them.”

“I’d rather blow them up.”

“Please don’t. This is a precious relic of your heritage.” Izuku sighs. “Also, the walls could cave in and kill us.”

“It’ll be a controlled blast.”

“I seriously doubt it,” Izuku argues, but he feels himself losing this battle. A thought suddenly occurs to Izuku and he shouts after him. “Hey, wait! Why don’t we sort this with a game? There’s a quick one I know that tests the users’ dominance of will.”

Katsuki has one palm already smoking, but his curiosity is piqued. He eyes Izuku suspiciously.

“It’s easy. We call it Rock, Paper, Scissors. All we need is one round to determine the winner.”

“How do you play?”

After a brief explanation, they start. Unsurprisingly, Izuku wins.

“Ha! Paper beats rock.”

“That was stupid,” Katsuki mutters. “It didn’t prove anything.”

“Not true! It’s actually a very psychological game. The goal is to recognize the unconscious patterns of your opponent and predict their play. Aggressive types are almost always guaranteed to play rock,” he explains with a smirk. “If you’re feeling more confident, you’ll choose scissors. Paper is a subtle choice that seems passive and friendly. If you’re up against an expert, you should lead with scissors. At the very least, you’ll tie.”

“You didn’t mention any of that before we started,” Katsuki growls.

Izuku shrugs. “You asked me how to play, not how to win.”

“I want a rematch.”

“Nope, sorry. I said one round. You’ve got to call the number of rounds before you play. That’s a universal rule.”

Katsuki seethes and shouts a series of expletives after him, but Izuku runs off to the human sized tunnel in the door and works the switch. He waits until he hears the click from Katsuki’s side and emerges to see the door swing open.

“That wasn’t so difficult, was it?”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Yeah? So are you,” Izuku shrugs. “You just learned a new game.”

They push forward until they can’t anymore. When they stop for the night Izuku replaces Katsuki’s bandage with a new one. Once that’s done and Katsuki has him coiled, Izuku braces himself for his spell, but instead, Katsuki raises a fist in the air.
“We’re playing again.”

“What?”

“Your stupid game,” Katsuki rumbles. “The one you cheated at.”

“I didn’t cheat! I just have more experience, that’s all.”

“Explain everything. Don’t leave anything out.”

This Izuku can deal with. He explains the tips he’s learned and feels relieved as they play, but after fifteen rounds of rock, paper scissors in a row, Izuku wants to kill himself.

“Are you even trying?” Katsuki asks dubiously. “You definitely just let me win on purpose.”

Izuku smacks himself and drags his hand down his face. “Alright, no. No more ‘Rock, Paper, Scissors’. I’m teaching you a new game. Let me get my backpack.”

“This game is called ‘Bullshit,’” he says as he pulls out the deck of cards. Katsuki watches with fascination as Izuku divides the deck in halves and shuffles them together. “Much like our current situation.”

“What’s the trick to this one?” Katsuki asks cautiously.

“What you’re looking for is tells from the other person. You need to catch them lying.”

At first it’s easy. The tip of Katsuki’s tail is a dead give away. Once the naga catches on and stuffs it underneath himself, Izuku switches to studying Katsuki’s face. The usual bloodlust Katsuki so blatantly wears in battle has been replaced with a quiet determination.

He’s pretty handsome, which is annoying.

Izuku was never suave enough to compose himself around good looking people. His brain would always short circuit and turn him into a bumbling mess or a silent statue. Good to know he could overcome his nerves as long as the pretty person threatened to kill him and also happened to be half serpent.

They stop playing when Izuku’s speech becomes slurred and they can’t remember which round they’re on. They bicker and the two are still holding the cards in their hands when sleep finds them at last.

**FIGHT 8**

The day begins in darkness. Katsuki pokes him in the face until he’s awake.

“No…” Izuku mutters, burying his head into his arms.

“Get up. It’s morning.”

“Mph…it’s still dark.”

“Yeah, we’re underground, dumbass.”

Groggily, Izuku stumbles out of the coils to his lantern and hits the switch. It doesn’t light up, so he reluctantly switches to using the hard hat.
Katsuki pokes him again. “Do you remember who won last night?”

“Nope,” Izuku yawns as he picks up the cards. “And they’re too scattered for me to tell.”

“It was definitely me.”

“Whatever.”

Izuku is completely unprepared for what they find next. The next room appears to be a temple dedicated to a fertility god. Throughout the entire room is a mural featuring nagas and mermaids twisted into various sexual positions. Sometimes humans are with them. There’s nowhere to look where the creatures aren’t copulating.

Izuku makes the unhappy discovery that male nagas have two penises. Great. Yet another thing for Katsuki to boast about. As if the naga didn’t make him feel inadequate enough already. He can only hope Katsuki doesn’t notice.

“Er,” Izuku mutters as he forces his gaze upwards. He tries to ignore the art around him and focuses on the enormous hurricane that has been painted on the ceiling. “Well, this is awkward…”

Katsuki cackles and gives him a salacious grin. “You’re a virgin. I knew it.”

Izuku turns bright red. “What? What the hell! I am not! Even if I was, so what?” he snaps as he puts his hands on his hips. “You know, the people who care about that stuff tend to be pretty insecure themselves.”

“I’m the alpha of the island,” Katsuki says coolly. “Most of the pups in the sea are mine.”

“You’re a father?”

“What did you think alpha of the island meant?”

“I don’t know. King? Strongest warrior? Honestly, I thought you just liked saying it,” Izuku says bashfully. “But hold on. Did you say your kids are in the ocean?”

“All the pups stay with the maids until they’re old enough.”

“Maids?” Izuku repeats in shock. He remembers the murals of mermaids in the sea. He had assumed they were symbolic deities. “You mean the mermaids? The mermaids are real?”

“Of course they’re real,” Katsuki snarls. “They’re the females of our kind.”

“Huh.” Izuku says as he tries to absorb this new information. “You know, maid can also mean someone whose job it is to clean a mess.”

“Then that suits them. They’ll summon the previous alpha from the depths to wipe unworthy males off the island and start the cycle over,” Katsuki explains as he stretches lazily. “But under my watch, there won’t be any need.”

At the mention of the previous alpha, Izuku remembers the leviathan that appears under every illustration. Katsuki’s boastful words hit him again. “That’s me.”

Oh God. It really was. And someday, somehow, it really will be.

“So you’re telling me, that one day you’ll become that giant monster? The thing underneath all the murals?”
Katsuki proudly flashes all of his teeth. “When the day comes, I’ll be the strongest guardian this island has ever seen.”

It’s too much. Maybe it’s also the exhaustion and lack of food, but Izuku feels lightheaded. They break, and Izuku collapses on his back in the dirt. He would kill for breakfast. His stomach growls and he places a hand against his belly with a groan.

“You’re so whiny when you’re hungry,” Katsuki scoffs. “Can humans eat worms?”

“We cannot,” he replies. “If we could, I’d be snacking on some right now.”

“What about meat? I could catch a mouse.”

Izuku gags. “Tempting, but I think I’ll hold out for my campsite. If I’m right, we’ve got three hours to go.”

There’s a beat of silence when Katsuki asks, “Do you still have the Shitty Cards?”

“Uhh, I have my Playing Cards. They can be used for other games too. We don’t have to play Bullshit.”

“How many other games are there?”

Despite himself, Izuku grins. “Tons. You can do math, right?”

Katsuki rolls his eyes. “YES.”

They play Blackjack. At first Katsuki is impatient to have more cards added to his sum, but eventually becomes invested enough to think things through based on Izuku’s deck.

The game serves as a nice diversion and improves the hungry human’s mood enough to get him back on his feet and they finally emerge from the tunnel two hours later.

“Oh, thank God.”

Izuku has never been so happy to see the sky in his life. His happiness is ruined when Katsuki gives him a shove. “If I ever find you in there again, I’ll eat you on the spot. Deals be damned. Understand?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Izuku grumbles as he catches his footing. “Ugh, I’m starving. I could really go for some fresh fruit and beef jerky. Which way is camp?”

“HEY, NERD,” Katsuki yells as he mashes a fist against his palm. “I’m pretty pissed at you. We wasted a whole goddamned day in the dirt and the dark. Why don’t we fight here and now?”

“Haha. Absolutely not,” Izuku says as he crosses his arms. “Point me to camp, please.”

Katsuki’s eye twitches and he growls, forming his other hand into a fist. “I’m starting it.”

“You want to fight me in my tech?”

Katsuki stops.

“I mean, after all that talk about crushing me and proving that we aren’t equal, you’ve gotta,” Izuku says lazily. “The tech is back at my camp too. Which way?”
Katsuki deflates. He glares daggers and jabs the air violently with his middle finger.

“THAT WAY.”

“Thank you.”

Izuku walks and Katsuki trails behind in silence. Luckily the tunnel spat them out in a reasonable distance from the campsite. It must have taken them in loops that wound around over and over; like the body of a snake.

The first thing Izuku does at camp is fill a pot to cook some rice. He later adds jerky and some canned vegetables as Katsuku watches. Katsuki’s irritation builds as Izuku takes each bite until he can take it no longer.

“Nibbling mouse,” Katsuki finally spits. “No wonder you didn’t eat the meat I offered to hunt. It would be like devouring your own kind.”

“Will you shut up?” snaps Izuku with a mouthful of rice. “Why are you even here? I’ll meet you at the beach.”

“You’d probably take your time and make me wait.”

Izuku shakes his head disapprovingly. “Mmn-mn!” He grabs a bottle of water and with a hard twist he wrings the cap and washes down his food.

“How’s your back?”

“Fine...”

Izuku nods. “Good. I should still disinfect it at least once more. You don’t want to mess with dust from ancient tombs.”

Katsuki grumbles, but he complies after Izuku finishes eating.

Before he sets the timer and begins the fight, Izuku calls out to his opponent.

“Katsuki! I don’t blame you taking out your hatred for humanity on me. Your feelings are completely justified.”

“The FUCK,” Katsuki snarls. “I don’t need to hear this from you, filth!”

“Yeah, I know, but here it is. The constant anger you’re carrying is toxic. I’m not going to lie and say that killing me won’t make you feel better. It probably will, but that feeling won’t last. After I win, I don’t just want to continue my work in peace. I’ll also be working to translate your alphabet and undo some of the damage humanity caused.”

Katsuki growls and flexes his claws. ”You mean, IF you win.”

“Yeah,” Izuku says as he sets the timer. “If.”

I get it now. I really do, Izuku thinks to himself. He’s the one being eaten alive. This is a fight he can’t afford to win, even if he doesn’t realize it.

Izuku fights with a new purpose and with the advantage of Katsuki’s injury, is able to drive him to the defensive for the entire battle. With ten seconds left on the timer, Izuku delivers a hit to the Katsuki’s shoulder and nimbly dodges a grab. The alarm beeps, and Izuku hasn’t been caught once.
The expression Katsuki gives him is one Izuku has never seen before.

This time Izuku is the one who doesn’t bother hiding his satisfied smile. “Six more days, right, Katsuki?”

Katsuki’s look of awe disappears and he flashes Izuku a grin full of malice and self-assurance. His palms smoke and he wipes the sweat away from his upper lip.

“Don’t get cocky, punk.”

Chapter End Notes

AU’s note: I’m officially in BnHA hell! You guys excited for this week’s new episode, or what?

All comments and criticisms are strongly encouraged! c(´ `*c)

2nd AU’s note: You guys are amazing. I had a 2 1/2 hour delay in the airport but it didn't phase me at all. I sat around the terminal smiling like an idiot reading all the comments.

Thank you all and fuck United Air.
Defeat

Chapter Summary

“I will fight for, I have fought for how I love you, 
I have cried for, I will die for how I care.”

Chapter Notes

*Pulls up a chair and takes a seat in front of you*
Hi. My name is Cheshire Button, and I’ve lost control of my life.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

FIGHT 9

Izuku anxiously strums his playing cards against his fingers as the sun bleeds crimson orange against the purple sky. Red in morning, sailor’s warning. He inhales and savors the scent of rain. It’ll storm later, perhaps as badly as when he first met Katsuki. The only question is when.

He picks one card from the pile and smooths the back with his fingers. The cards have been marked with tiny punctures and scratches by a certain someone. It wouldn’t have mattered if it was just one or two, but it’s the whole deck. Izuku clicks his tongue in annoyance.

Bastard.

They’ll play again today, he just knows it. And when they do, he’ll scold Katsuki for the damage. Izuku puts the cards back in their box and drops them in his backpack.

That injury of his is a gift.

Izuku bites his lower lip as he suits up in Mei’s gear. He takes no joy in Katsuki’s pain, but Katsuki has made it crystal clear that despite his handicap, he is not to hold anything back. If Izuku has any hope of surviving, he needs to take advantage of the injury and land those three hits today; tomorrow at the latest.

Who knows how quickly naga injuries heal?

He sets the equipment to its highest setting and it hums to life. He’s never tested this level before, and the new white noise from the machine is something he’ll need to get used to. Once he’s in action, the earth breezes past his feet. A single step feels like a dash and he tumbles. He cartwheels to catch himself but doesn’t take the extra inertia into account and flips, landing squarely on his side.

Startled, he nearly loses himself in doubt and self-loathing. Izuku gives a shuddering sigh. This shouldn’t be a surprise. He should have all the settings mastered by now. No, he thinks gritting his teeth. Now isn’t the time to let his anxiety get the best of him. There’s still time.
Alright. You’re fine. Easy does it.

He dials back to the lowest setting and tries again. Izuku makes a game of it and challenges himself to dash and pluck interesting plants for the drawings in his notebooks. After collecting a decent amount, he then eases into the higher settings. He tries to snatch a nearby plant but misses, and whiffs the air.

Frustrated, Izuku works himself harder, earning a handful of scrapes and bruises. Damp stains of sweat soak through his clothes and he only retreats back to camp when the sky darkens to an ominous navy blue and the jungle sways with the winds. He swears and grabs his notebook and camera to run a rushed report on the plants in the greenhouse. He’s already exhausted, but he pushes himself forward.

Once in the tent, Izuku clumsily trips over one of his shelving units and pain shoots up to his toe. Books scatter to the floor as he hops on one foot, muttering angrily to himself. When the pain subsides, he bends to pick up the mess. One of the books is the Plant Encyclopedia he’d been missing day ago.

He could have sworn he checked the spot in his previous searches, but its discovery is a blessing and he cradles it against his chest like a lost child. Flipping through the pages gives him a new sense of calm. He sits at his desk with the plant samples, and places his reading glasses on his nose.

He works with his head resting in one hand. Occasionally, he’ll drift back into the Encyclopedia, and eventually rests his face on one half as he reads the opposite page. It begins to rain, and the soft patter of droplets against the tent lulls him to sleep.

“HEY, DUMBASS! Did you forget what time it was?”

Izuku nearly jumps out of his skin.

He jerks awake to see Katsuki at the edge of his desk. The naga is completely soaked. His blonde hair is flattened and drips trails of water down his face, neck, and chest. With the light of the lantern, he looks like he’s glowing. The way Katsuki arches his back and hips as he smooths the water out his hair reminds Izuku of a model. He feels his breath hitch and Izuku mentally slaps himself.

What the actual fuck.

Katsuki holds up both his hands in front of his body. “Are we doing this, or what?”

Izuku feels a blush rising, but fights it down as his brain resets. The match, stupid. He’s asking about the match.

The fabric of Izuku’s tent shudders against the howling wind and splattering water. Izuku cranes his neck to get a better view of the weather, but it’s unnecessary. They’re in the middle of a maelstrom. The storm’s intensity is about as bad as it was the night Izuku met Katsuki in his cave. The flustered human tries his best to keep his eyes from lingering any lower than Katsuki’s face as he answers.

“Um, I guess?” he mutters distractedly as he removes his glasses and rubs the lenses against his shirt. “I mean, it’s kind of storming.”

I need to get laid, Izuku thinks glumly. Like, as soon as I get out of here.
“You’re fighting for your life, aren’t ya?” Katsuki smirks. “Unless you want to give today a pass.”

Izuku sighs. “Okay. I’ll suit up and meet you at the beach.”

“I can wait.”

Izuku stops. “Um. Okay? If you want to?”

Izuku feels Katsuki’s sharp red eyes trace his every movement as he straps the equipment and calibrates the settings. He looks up while pressing the buttons to see Katsuki staring straight at him. Butterflies clamor in his gut, but Izuku keeps his face neutral as he pulls the goggles over his eyes.

Katsuki breaks the silence suddenly. “Will it still work in the rain?”

“Huh? Uh, well. I’m not sure,” Izuku answers with a shrug. “Haven’t tested it.”

“If you’re really worried about the weather, I know somewhere we can go.”

“Really? That would be nice.”

“Bring the lights.”

As the wind howls and water drenches his raincoat, Izuku notes not to step in the giant puddles that have filled grooves in the earth. The vegetation that grows in them is younger and still green. He remembers the marks he observed in the landscape earlier in his adventure. He notes the spacing and recalls the damage he discovered in the ruins. The difference in size between the marks is enormous, but patterns nearly match. When Izuku remembers the Leviathan from the murals he almost stops in his tracks.

_It did this._

Izuku swallows but says nothing. If he wants to get any kind of answer from the alpha naga, he’ll need to pick his words carefully. He decides to wait until they’ve arrived at the spot Katsuki promised. The new place is a large but shallow cave that appears to have been shaped by some kind of impact. It reminds Izuku of a bowl resting on its side. It definitely hasn’t been formed by natural erosion. If anything, its shape only confirms his theory.

He pulls back the hood of his soaked raincoat and gives a long whistle. “Jeeze, that’s quite a dent! But I shouldn’t be surprised. That’s what happens when all the nagas rise up against the guardian of the island. He met his end quickly, huh?”

“HAA? Are you blind? The last nagas didn’t kill him here the-” but Katsuki stops himself when he catches on. He meets Izuku’s gleaming green eyes with contempt.

_Holy shit. I was right,_ Izuku thinks in astonishment.

Sometime recently, that monster had rained its wrath upon the naga. If what Katsuki told him in the ruins was true, then there had been a purge of the previous males on the island by the leviathan. The marks in the mountains were the scars of an old battlefield.

_What the fuck even happened?_

“Clever.” Katsuki’s mouth twitches and he gives a low growl. “You know, I don’t like you very much.”
Izuku shrugs off the rest of his jacket with a smile and opens his backpack for the hardhat and lantern. “Well, I don’t exactly hate you either.”

Tension rises in Izuku’s stomach and his heart pounds as he flicks the lights to life. Banter aside, this is still a fight for his life. Izuku makes a mental note of his new surroundings. He won’t have the benefit of the sand breaking his falls.

He also notes the naga’s movements. If Katsuki is still in pain, it isn’t really slowing him down. His back might be a little stiff, but that’s all the handicap has to offer. Izuku takes a deep breath as he sets the machine to its highest setting. It’s time to put the training from earlier to use. Once the timer is ready, they start.

“DIE!!!”

Oh, Izuku thinks to himself as he dodges Katsuki’s right hook with the help of the machines. So that’s just his battle cry. It’s short, but intimidating enough.

Izuku weaves around Katsuki with ease. He lashes out with a punch, but whiffs the air, and Katsuki goes to counter with a strike of his own. Thinking quickly, Izuku quickly twists and meets Katsuki’s chest with a kick.

The hit this time is solid and Katsuki blinks in surprise. He goes to grab Izuku’s foot, but the boy flips away in time.

The fight has barely started, and he’s one hit in. Izuku feels ecstatic until Katsuki lunges towards him with a predatory ferocity. Something primal kicks in Izuku’s mind, and he overcorrects his dodge, promptly earning him a braining against the stone wall. His teeth clatter on impact, and his vision goes white. He’s stunned long enough for Katsuki to knock him on his back.

Fucking hell.

Katsuki has him pinned like he did on the first day at the beach. Izuku’s head is spinning and he winces, hoping he doesn’t appear too vulnerable. Izuku looks up and holds Katsuki’s stare in a daze as the water gently drips down from his face. They’re close enough to feel each other’s breath ghost against one another.

Is this how he looked when he kissed me?

Izuku’s heart pounds and his head throbs. He realizes timer is still ticking. There’s at least a minute left and Katsuki isn’t budging.

Goddammit, I’m so gay, Izuku thinks miserably at his attractive captor. I’m so fucking dead and gay.

He feels like he should say something so Izuku clears his throat. “Um, hey. I owe you an apology. Remember back when we first started fighting? When I said your kind is inferior because they live like beasts? That was uncalled for and I’m sorry. I didn’t know anything about your culture or history. I should have kept my mouth shut.”

Katsuki scowls. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Really? You got pretty mad. You threw me across the beach. I must have spun around at least three times.”

The timer beeps, and Katsuki pushes off him. He bristles and swings his tail behind his back.
“Five days to go. And that could have been any goddamned day.”

Izuku rolls his eyes. “Ugh, whatever. Just know I really mean it.” Izuku goes to get up but stumbles. His head swims from his injury and he tries to wait it out, but is forced to crouch to the floor.

“Actually,” he mutters pulling a pained smile at Katsuki. “Before we part ways, how about a round of Bullshit?”

He asks it naturally as if he had just invited a friend to a game. He’s still pulling the cards out of the box when Katsuki settles down in front of him. Izuku lays out five cards facedown before them both. He taps the ground behind them and tilts his head up at Katsuki.

“Before we start, can you tell me what they are?”

His companion blinks and when he doesn’t answer, Izuku taps three of the five cards in front of him.

“The one on my right is the Queen of Hearts, the one in the middle is the Six of Clubs, and the one next to it is the Two of Spades.” He then waves his hand over the last two. “Can you tell me what the last two will be?”

Katsuki narrows his eyes. “They’re facedown.”

“Yup,” Izuku agrees casually. “And I can correctly predict them just as I did with the other three. Can you?”

Katsuki leans forward with a leer. It’s supposed to be a humorless smile, but Izuku can see the flash of sincerity behind it. “Five of hearts and King of Diamonds.”

Without a word, Izuku flips all five over and reveals them to be the Queen of Hearts, Six of Clubs, Two of Spades, Five of hearts and King of Diamonds. The cards are exactly as the two had predicted and Izuku returns Katsuki’s smile with an eye roll.

“Unbelievable.”

“When did you notice?”

“I had a hunch this morning, but I really wanted to believe you weren’t a cheating piece of shit.”

“It was a test, and you passed.” Katsuki snaps. “That’s all. I wouldn’t cheat to beat a fucking human.”

“Okay. But you know, I own these cards. I have all the time in the world to look them over but you’ve only had time during our games to mark and memorize each one.” Izuku cocks his head to the side and taps a freckled cheek. “And you’d never use an opportunity like this to show off now, would you, asshat?”

“That’s alpha, to you.” Katsuki says with a widening smirk.

“My sincerest apologies, your majesty,” Izuku says as he presses his arms to his sides and gives a false bow. “Jeeze, are you really a dad? You can’t be a good influence on your kids.”

Katsuki ignores the latter half of the comment and traces the motion of Izuku’s bow in the air with his finger. “And what was that?”
“A bow. It’s a human gesture of respect, used in this instance as mockery.”

“You could perform a naga gesture of respect instead and let me place my teeth around your neck.”

“Oh, please. Get over yourself,” Izuku snaps as he collects the cards. He brings a second deck from his backpack. “You’re lucky I have a spare. Still up for a game? Or do you only play when you’re guaranteed to have the upper hand?”

Katsuki narrows his eyes but doesn’t back down. “Fine.”

“And seriously. No claws this time.”

***

FIGHT 10

Pain shatters Izuku’s dreams in the morning. He puts a hand to the wound on the back of his head and it throbs angrily.

Not good.

Time is short, and already the tables have turned. His window of opportunity has closed and there’s really not much he can do for himself. He swallows some painkillers and hopes that his head will recover by the afternoon.

The throbbing fades to an ache but still, there’s tension in Izuku’s chest. He’s only able to dispel the stress after some meditation and breathing exercises. Eventually, he decides to continue the training from yesterday. He still collects plants as he works with the highest setting, but this time he takes to using the equipment high up in the branches of the jungle.

My chances of winning keep decreasing as his hunger grows. I have to master this highest setting, even if it kills me.

He breaks when he’s collected a good amount of plants, and opens his backpack to store them properly in the vials he’s kept inside. Izuku is nearly about to take off again when he hears distant rumbling and spots smoke. Curious, he hops higher in the tree and fetches the binoculars from his backpack.

He isn’t surprised at all to see Katsuki as the culprit.

This time he’s fighting a red naga. They’re in a different part of the jungle, but it’s still an open area. This supports Izuku’s theory that each of the nagas on the island have their own territory. However, the motivations behind Katsuki’s challenges remain a mystery.

As he watches the monsters in the distance Izuku fishes his notebook from his bag. Katsuki is more reckless and uses his explosions with his punches without hesitation. It’s a completely different fight from the one Izuku observed with the yellow naga.

This time Izuku swears Katsuki is out for blood. Still, despite the size or intensity of the blast, the red naga appears unharmed. Izuku’s awe changes to a feeling of dread when he notices the cracks forming on the red naga’s body.

Oh my God. He’s going to kill him.
It’s then he realizes the red naga’s body is shifting and hardening. He takes the explosions like they’re nothing. Could this be the red one’s ability?

Amazing, Izuku thinks as he scribbles frantically in his notebook. *I wonder if there’s ever any overlap in their powers, or if they’re completely unique to each naga?*

This fight is one of power and force, and he wants to remember everything. He also takes the time to make some gesture drawings for good measure. The red naga remains steadfast and lands nearly all his hits. The ones he misses are usually due to the smoke from Katsuki’s explosions.

*He makes it look so easy. Why can’t I hit him like that?*

Izuku reminds himself of the hit he secured yesterday in the cave. He replays the moment over in his head and how his quick thinking made the kick possible.

*I got lucky.*

But then he remembers the way Katsuki reacted to the kick and groans.

*I’m a fucking idiot.*

Of course Katsuki wasn’t ready for it. Besides the birds on the island, Izuku was the only two legged creature he’d ever seen. Katsuki had probably never observed a human walking, let alone kicking. He hadn’t said anything earlier when Izuku kicked at him in the skirmish. Looking back, it wasn’t like Izuku’s opponent limited himself to only using his arms either. It was common for Katsuki to use his tail in battle to trap Izuku in his coils, especially in their earlier fights.

The first defeat Izuku had suffered left such a lasting impression that his focus went entirely to avoiding Katsuki’s tail. He would do anything to redo those first few battles with Mei’s equipment. So many of his days were wasted as he danced around those damned coils. But with the gear, Izuku was finally on the offensive and now he had a strategy.

*To win this fight, I need to move in ways that only humans can.*

For a moment, Katsuki’s crimson eyes meet his own through the binoculars and Izuku’s heart leaps to his throat. He nearly falls out of the tree but catches himself in time. With that, he decides he’s seen enough and heads back to plan his attack.

The time Izuku had spent bustling through the trees with the gear wasn’t in vain. Thanks to his efforts, the coordination with his legs is top notch. Izuku decides some target practice is in order and picks up some of the empty cans he’s stored away from his meals. Izuku then sets them up around the borders of his camp, and suits up in his equipment.

*The more I can throw him off, the better.*

Simply practicing by dashing at the cans and knocking them down won’t do him any favors. Instead, Izuku keeps himself light on his feet and stays in constant motion. Every second of training counts today, and he intends to make the most of it. He turns the extra movement between targets into feints and false hits. He takes down one can with a sweeping kick and cartwheels to the next one with another kick.

*This isn’t a technique I made up, he thinks. This is an actual martial art.*

He spins on one foot as he kicks down the third can with a clatter.
Capoeira, Izuku recalls. *That’s what this is; “The Dance of War.”*

He wishes he could access the internet for instructional videos to be sure he had the right form, but the surrounding storm makes it impossible. Still, it’s a satisfying exercise, but the cans are inanimate objects; and he reminds himself that in a few hours he’ll be fighting a monster king with an insatiable lust for battle. Izuku sighs and switches the tech to its highest setting and practices the exercise until he’s too tired to continue.

Izuku decides to busy himself with his work and then some yoga. He could use a cooldown and some light preparation for the skirmish ahead. He’s posed in a handstand, when Katsuki’s scales slide up to him. Izuku does his best to ignore him and focuses on his breathing.

“You’re early.”

“Deal with it,” Katsuki snaps. “I’m in a bad mood, and I need to get our skirmish done and out of the way.”

“Alright, alright. Just let me finish up.”

Izuku is still undulating his legs and taking slow and deep breaths when he notices Katsuki’s breath sounds funny. It’s almost as if his companion is having trouble breathing. As he spreads his legs apart and prepares for the cooldown, Katsuki suddenly pushes him and Izuku falls to the mat with a smack.

"Hey! What the fu-""I’m not asking you, I’m telling you!” Katsuki yells with a face that looks redder than usual. To Izuku, it almost seems like he’s overheating. “Beach! NOW.”

“GOD, FINE.”

After the cave disaster, Izuku gladly welcomes their return to the sand.

“TheM A L R E A L Y!”

He’s a bit clumsy using Capoeira on a moving target, and Katsuki is a quick as ever. However, Izuku notices with some satisfaction, that the naga’s movements are less fluid and confident than before. If he didn’t know better, Izuku would think that something had him distracted.

Izuku lands two hits with his feet. The first comes after a feint to Katsuki’s shoulder, and the second one is delivered as a spinning round house kick. Both strikes were made later in the battle, and Izuku feels a bit relieved.

The timer beeps and they stop. Katsuki flexes his claws and looks away as he delivers the countdown in with a slight tremor in his voice. “Four days.”

“Sheesh. What’s gotten to you?”

Katsuki’s eyes snap forward to attention. “Nothing, I’m fine.”

“Well, okay. If you say so,” Izuku says in the most neutral tone he can manage. He fetches his backpack and asks, “Wanna play Blackjack?”

They’ve barely started the game when Katsuki asks in a low voice, “What’s a card game that has the highest stakes?”
“Hrm, there’s Poker. It’s a game more of skill than chance. It can be a pretty intense, and it’s notorious for gambling addictions.”

“What do humans gamble?”

“Money mostly. Sometimes more if they’re desperate, why? Up for a gamble? I’m already betting my life in our other game. What else could you possibly want?”

“A kiss.”

Izuku blinks. “WHAT.”

“A real one. I want to know what a passionate human tongue feels like.”

“You’re fucking with me.”

Katsuki leans closer with a sinister smile as his forked tongue flicks the air. “You don’t need to act coy. With the pheromones you were giving off last night, it wouldn’t really be asking much, would it?”

Izuku’s jaw drops and his brain stutters. He can’t think of a single thing to say.

“You’d probably enjoy it,” Katsuki continues. “But I’d like to mark the end of our final fight as a special occasion. After this spat, you’ll have the honor of being the last human I ever speak to. If I ever see another, they’ll be killed instantly on sight, no questions asked. That kiss will be the final farewell between our kind, and if I’m going to be eating a fresh, live human in the next few days, I want to taste and savor every experience.”

Izuku feels sick. After everything, Katsuki still sees him as nothing more than a plaything. A meal. Prey to tease and toy with until the final curtain. Rage boils in his gut and he wants to throw up. Instead, Izuku grits his teeth and collects all the cards on the floor and begins to shuffle them with the ones in his hand.

“Alright.” He says as he takes a trembling breath. “Give me your cards.”

“You mean it?”

“Yep, c’mon. We’re taking it from the top.”

“Seriously?”

Izuku shrugs. “I need all of ‘em back.”

Katsuki complies and hands them over with a snigger. “Wow, human. I didn’t think you’d be that desperate for action.”

“I’m about to teach you a new game. It’s real simple,” Izuku explains as he splits the deck between his hands. “It can be played with any number of people, but the more you have, the faster it goes.”

Izuku keeps his tone even and calm. “This one’s called ‘Pick Up 52.’” He then launches himself to his feet and violently spreads his arms through the air. The cards scatter in all directions. They gently flutter down to the earth like confetti as Izuku stomps over to Katsuki and yells directly in his stupefied face.

“NOW PICK ‘EM UP!”
Katsuki says nothing as Izuku strides off in a huff feeling the tears pool behind his eyes. His nails dig into his palms and he suits up in the equipment as soon as he’s back in camp. He flips through the trees like an acrobat as Katsuki’s awful words tumble inside him like bile.

No matter how much he works himself, whether it be physical training, working on his experiments, or painting, the feeling of revulsion sticks.

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**FIGHT 11**

Sleep avoids him, and Izuku wakes up at 2am. His anxiety won’t leave him alone, so he flips on his lantern and opens in his notebook. Immediately, it flips to the sketches he’s made of Katsuki, and Izuku grinds his teeth.

Irritated, he kicks off the sleeping bag and carries the notebook to his desk, where he’s kept some vials of homemade paint he’s made from the plants. He sits down and dips his brush in the saturated orange, and with angry, purposeful flicks of the wrist, brings his oppressor to life.

Despite his frustration, he’s amused to see the orange nearly matches the naga’s scales. All that’s left is to color in the dark stripes. He somewhat impatiently swipes in the black and watches as it slowly bleeds in with the wet orange. It isn’t a bad look, and reminds him of watercolor paintings. Once he’s added the other details, he sits back and admires his handiwork as it dries.

It’s Katsuki alright.

Pleased, he cleans the brush, and flips to the pages that contain sketches from the ruins. Much of what he’d copied consists of passages that he assumes describe the ancient medicinal uses of the plant he’s studying.

He had been in a rush before, but he managed to accurately copy the symbols as much as he could. The characters look as though they should be written in one or two strokes, but in his haste, he had gone for visual accuracy alone and given little thought to the movement of his pen. Izuku opens up to a fresh page and begins to write.

The next time Izuku looks at the clock, it’s 4am. He’s still not tired. With a groan, he sets the paintbrush aside and stands up to begin his day.

He suits up, but once he’s in motion and his heart is thudding in his ears, the anxiety returns with a vengeance. All he can think of is Katsuki’s red eyes and forked tongue. When breathing exercises fail him, he decides to crank up his training. Once he’s geared up, he scatters empty cans in the trees and sets his alarm for ten minute intervals.

He combines the exercises he’s been doing over the last two weeks. He’ll maneuver and flip through the trees collecting plants and kicking down the cans in the branches. If he doesn’t have ten different plants and has knocked down over half the cans at the end of each session, then he’s failed, and has to try again.

It’s a ruthless endeavor, but he pushes at it for hours. Even with small breaks in between, he feels it. Izuku drives himself through it anyway with willpower alone, but stops when the colors in his vision meld and he nearly crashes out of the tree he’s perched on. He shakes his backpack off with a grumble and chugs down what water he has left.

His stomach growls and he remembers he hasn’t had breakfast. Izuku tries to ignore it, but it growls again, and when he checks his watch, realizes he hasn’t had lunch either. It’s time to stop.
Out of the 30 rounds, he’s only successfully reached his goal 17 times. It’s not even half. Suddenly, he notices the time. It’s two thirty, about time for the skirmish. Izuku swears and takes off to camp.

I have to eat something.

He chooses something quick and simple and scarfs down some trail mix. He nearly chokes as it goes down and has to sprint to the other side of camp for more water to wash it down.

Once that’s taken care of, Izuku slaps on the equipment and hooks his partially zipped backpack around one of his arms as he makes a mad dash to the ocean. In his hurry, he trips in the sand and falls, and his backpack erupts, scattering his things all over the sand. Izuku goes to pick himself up from his knees but stops. A wave of nausea rises in his stomach, and his meal threaten to rise from him. He covers his mouth to calm himself, and watches as Katsuki approaches. Izuku has managed to mostly recover when he sees Katsuki pick up his open faced notebook out of the corner of his eye.

“HEY!”

He leaps for it, but Katsuki coils around his chest and holds him back.

“What the hell is this?” he mutters as he turns the pages, and observes the drawings quietly.

Izuku peeks up at the book and is relieved to see Katsuki is only on the pages with sketches and symbols from the ruins. “Just some notes. I’m working on translating the language in the ruins.”

“You went back?”

“No, that was from a couple days ago. I’m still working on it.”

“Doesn’t seem like the best use of your time…” he mutters, flipping the pages. He stops and turns the notebook over it Izuku with a claw jabbed at one of the drawings. “Is this me?”

Izuku turns bright red. “U-um! I was just uh…that’s…um, er!”

“You fucked up my stripes. They’re more jagged.”

Izuku squints in disbelief. “Uhh, sorry?”

Katsuki tosses the book aside and lets the human loose. “You look like shit,” he growls. “If you’re going to waste my time, go back to camp.”

“Get bent,” Izuku snaps. “By going through my stuff and talking down to me you’re wasting your own damn time.”

“And I’ll only waste more by fighting a weak and sickly human.”

“FUCK OFF! This isn’t a goddamned game, and you’ve got some nerve to act like it is.” Izuku barks with a boiling rage. “Remember what you said when you stopped our fight back in the ruins? Well, I don’t want your pity either. This fight was never just about you and me. We’re both fighting for our honor and to protect our own, so don’t you dare patronize me. We’re both here now, so let’s get this over with.”

Izuku sets the timer, and this time leads the battle with a battle cry of his own.

“GO TO HELL!!!”
Almost like magic, the fight becomes a dance. There isn’t a single second’s hesitation from either challenger. Every move is calculated and precise in a push and pull; a song without lyrics. Whether it’s Katsuki’s coils or Izuku’s legs, both are in constant motion. None of the naga’s moves hit the human as he twirls and steps away from claws and coils like water.

Izuku reels back with a roundhouse kick and lands a hit. The second one lands with his foot with fifteen seconds left on the timer. In those short seconds, he has Katsuki on the defensive, and for the first time, Izuku is proud and exhilarated from the energy of battle.

When the timer goes off, both fighters lock eyes. Neither move as they catch their breath. There’s an unspoken yearning between them to keep the battle going; to see how long it will take for the third and final blow to land. Neither wants the battle to end.

So it continues.

They’re back at each other in an instant. Katsuki makes no attempt to pin him and Izuku understands that this is akin to the battles Katsuki gives his pack. They fight until sweat pours in Izuku’s eyes and he’s wheezing for air. The food he scarfed down from earlier crawls up his throat and his stomach threatens to betray him. He stumbles, and nearly falls when Katsuki catches his arm.

Izuku covers his mouth with his other hand as he gasps and calms himself. While he’s recovering, Izuku hears a growl. It sounds gastric and bubbly, and with a sinking heart he knows it isn’t coming from Katsuki’s throat. It seems that the naga’s appetite has finally returned.

Izuku’s skin prickles and he tears his arm away from Katsuki, stumbling backwards. As he turns to leave, he calls out his remaining time.

“THREE DAYS, ASSHOLE!”

Izuku decides to call it in, and throws himself in bed before sunset. He feels a wash of content even through the tide of fear and pain that swarm his body.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Reluctantly, he turns on the lantern to study the bruises and scrapes he’d earned on the beach. With a sigh, he gets up for the first aid kit before returning to his cot. The extended fight between them was stupid and insanely reckless. Katsuki is all muscle. The naga could have easily broken the boy beyond recovery. But Izuku knows in his heart, the second spat was necessary, even if the exact reason escapes him.

He clutches at the artificial material of his sleeping bag. It’s going to be close, real close. But it’s going to be the fiercest he’s ever fought. Katsuki better be ready.

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FIGHT 12

Izuku wakes up on his back. The sun shines through giving the tent an orange hue.

The plants he’s tied to the roof from his training look as though they’re growing on peach sand. It’s as if he’s seeing them for the first time and he smiles warmly. There’s a mixture of flowers, leaves, and berries. In those days of tireless work, he’s collected his own garden. He marvels at the
rainbow of sheer variety he’s collected in just a series of days.

*There’s more than enough biodiversity for a lifetime’s worth of research,* he thinks. *In fact, maybe more.*

He cautiously touches the spot on his head from days before and feels a pang of soreness. He winces and takes in a breath. It’s an improvement. Finding the cure for the Zaba Virus could only be the beginning. Who knew what other secrets were waiting?

*I’m going to win. Today’s the day; I can feel it.*

Izuku steps outside and smells the rain once more. The sky is blood red and orange. It’s going to be another fight in the cave. He subconsciously goes up to touch the spot on his head, but he straightens himself and goes to suit up in the equipment for practice.

*I’ll just need to be careful.*

This time, he practices with music and nestles the hooks of his earbuds between his ears. If the last fight became a dance, why not add some rhythm to loosen up? This new addition helps him relax considerably, and for once, his stress and anger towards Katsuki fade away.

After an hour, he calls it in, and uses his good mood to his advantage in his work. It takes him less time than he thought it would, so his extra time goes to reviewing his notes from the ruins and from his observations around the island.

Katsuki arrives at the camp while he’s writing in his notebook. Izuku doesn’t acknowledge him, and flips the page before continuing. In the corner of his eyes, he sees the naga grind his teeth. Eventually Katsuki gets tired of waiting and is forced to speak.

“It’s gonna storm.”

“Probably.” Izuku agrees without looking up.

“It’ll be bad.”

“Mm-hm.”

“So we should fight in the cave again.”

“Yeah.” Izuku says as he continues writing. “Kinda figured we would.”

There’s a beat before Katsuki asks, “So are you coming or-”

Izuku’s emerald eyes snap up from his book. “I sure am, but I can get there myself, *thanks,*” he says icily. “It isn’t quite time for our match, and I’m in the middle of something. So don’t wait up for me. I’ll be there.”

It’s storming in full force when Izuku arrives, and he’s still unbuttoning his soaking jacket when Katsuki forcefully shoves a small box under his nose.

“Here.”

It’s the second deck of cards.

“Are these m-”
“Just take it. You left behind a fucking mess,” Katsuki interrupts.

“Yeah...” Izuku says with a pause as he slowly crosses his arms. “I guess I did.”

“And I knew you’d want them back.”

“OKAY.”

Izuku doesn’t step forward and the two stare at each other in silence. Katsuki grits his teeth but continues holding out the cards. “You know, I’m not normally this gracious,” he says with a snarl. “Especially not to prey. And I don’t ever try to set things right with my dinner.”

“Well, maybe if you hadn’t said the things you did, your dinner wouldn’t be upset,” Izuku counters. “And then you wouldn’t be here and have to apologize.” He waits patiently, but Katsuki doesn’t engage the issue further.

Eventually, Katsuki snaps. “Are you taking them or not?”

Izuku snatches away the box and pops it open. He sees all the cards have been neatly stacked and put back. “Great,” he says awkwardly. “Thanks.”

“Don’t expect an apology.” Katsuki mutters. “It’s not the alpha way.”

It takes all of Izuku’s self-control not to roll his eyes. “Wow. How charming.”

Katsuki ignores him and Izuku tucks the cards away in his raincoat’s inner pocket. After he’s pulled out his arms, he places it on the stony floor. He’ll examine the cards later for signs of damage or cheating, but he has a feeling Katsuki left them alone. Still, the apology or lack thereof brings about a nice feeling in his gut. Granted, it’s a conflicted and confusing one, but the unease he’s had on his mind is replaced by the rising hope he woke to that morning.

*Today’s the day. I’m taking the win, and I’m ending this nightmare once and for all.*

When the countdown begins, both challengers scream a battle cry.

“DIE, FUCKER!!”

“GO TO HELL!!”

The battle combines everything he’s learned. All the practice spars, leaping through the forest, fighting the alpha boar, dodging Katsuki’s coils. He lands the first hit as a spinning kick in Katsuki’s torso and twirls out of reach of his tail. He's then mimicking the movements of Katsuki’s comrades. The quickness of the yellow, and the brashness of the red. The second kick lands and hits the left side of Katsuki’s ribs.

Recognition passes through Katsuki’s eyes and Izuku feels a jolt of excitement.

The third hit lands right after the timer beeps.

Izuku screams. “DAMMIT!!!”

Katsuki whips around and hits Izuku with his tail so hard, that he spirals in the air tumbles against the rocky floor. There’s a terrible crunching sound on each impact, but once he’s stopped moving, Izuku grits his teeth and trembles as he raises his head to meet Katsuki’s eyes.

Katsuki fills the cave with his explosions and the floor rumbles. Izuku presses both hands over his
ears as the naga throws back his head in a fit of hoarse, unhinged laughter.

“YEAH. THAT’S IT. That’s what I want to see. There’s the humanity I’ll crush. That’s the human I’ll devour. That passion and stubborn mask you wear on your face while you’re scared out of you mind; I love it. You’ll lose, and I’m going to smash it into tiny pieces.” His eyes shine and his mouth twists to a euphoric grin that shows off his fangs and all his teeth. Izuku sits frozen at the mercy of the monster as muscular coils slowly circle around him. Katsuki tilts his head and leers down at the human.

“Give it to me,” Katsuki rasps. “I want more! I intend to follow through my end of the deal NO MATTER WHAT. THESE NEXT FINAL DAYS YOU BETTER COME AT ME WITH EVERYTHING YOU’VE GOT. I WON’T HAND OVER YOUR WIN SO EASILY.”

Izuku pales and Katsuki pulls away with a deep chuckle. The boy shivers as he watches the alpha naga slither out of the cave into the storm. Izuku grips his shoulders with each of his hands and tucks his chin in his elbows.

Holy fucking shit.

Izuku runs his shaking hands over his body, testing for any injuries and is relieved to find nothing broken. The machines however, are a different story. The gentle hum they make at their highest setting is absent, and Izuku hastily switches them off.

It’ll be fine. I’ll take a look back at camp and have it running again, just like before.

At camp he eats in his tent and stares at the jetpack, knee and calf boosters, and steel anti-gravity shoes arranged on the table. He has his tools neatly arranged directly beneath them, but he doesn’t like what he sees.

Katsuki’s final blow was devastating.

There are no missing pieces this time, but everything is dented and scraped. In some spots the metal peels way to reveal the wires of the interior. The shoes are dead weight. The wrist communicator is turning on, but the machines aren’t responding. Izuku seizes a handful of his dark hair and pulls in frustration. The only person capable of fixing something this mangled is Mei herself.

The equipment is shot.

“FUCK!!!”

It’s hopeless, Izuku thinks. I wouldn’t even know where to start.

Izuku curses Mei and her decision to delay in writing her manuals. The mechanisms and functions of the machines came to her like music and she’d store all the blueprints in her head until it needed approval for production. As long as she could hum the melody, there was never a need for her to write anything down, and now there were no notes for Izuku to analyze.

No, he tells himself as he beings to sweat. It can’t be over.

He still has his new technique. He could potentially keep himself out of harm’s way and avoid the worst of what Katsuki has to offer. But to land an attack? To land three under two minutes?

"Goddammit, no. NO!!!” he yells as he slams his hands on the table. “It can’t end like this. This isn’t over!”
He grabs the tools and works on opening the anti-gravity shoes. He dissects the machine looking for any rubble that could possibly interfere with the mechanisms, but finds nothing. He puts it back together, and tests its connectivity with the wristwatch, but the machines remain unresponsive.

"RUN, DAMMIT! WORK WITH ME!"

Izuku doesn’t give up. He takes them apart one at a time, and hammers on the dents from the other side to smooth the metal. He checks the gears, fans, and wiring and re-assembles. He tries using the wrist watch again. Nothing. He takes them apart again and when he puts them back together, the sky turns a light blue and the sun begins to rise.

He’s out of time.

The machines will never run again. The Zaba Virus will continue to spread. People will continue to wither away and die as the disease infests their brain. Adults will have five years with medication. Newborns will be given three years of life at most, but even those days will be full of pain. If Izuku wants more time to finish his research, he’ll need to stay and fight Katsuki. But if he does, he’ll lose and be eaten, and become yet another forsaken soul, lost to an island that doesn’t exist.

*It doesn’t have to be this way, he thinks desperately. I can leave.*

He could pack everything up. All his notes, most of the equipment, and some of the healthier, more promising of his specimens could be fit into the ship in the next few hours. Running away would be easy and he almost gets up to begin packing, but he stops himself.

He thinks of Katsuki in the ruins, and how the naga unveiled the malice and hatred in his heart. Izuku’s memory takes him back to the underground temple with the countless dead. He remembers the way Katsuki winced and ground his teeth when his side throbbed. Izuku nearly refused to fight him back then too. Katsuki’s anger echoes in his mind.

"Why are you still here? Why are you still defying me?"

Izuku clamps his hands over his mouth and breathes in the space through his palms to calm himself. There’s more to this fight than just himself. It was never a battle of him against Katsuki alone. It was never just a game, but now he has to choose how to lose.

He could escape with his life and survive.

He could stay in defiance and die.

Neither are the endings he’s fought so hard for. Neither give him his true end goal to save humanity, but only one choice will bring him peace. There is only one that will allow him to leave without regret.

He knows what he has to do.

Izuku sits with his notebook and pulls out what he’s been using as his bookmark. He takes Mei’s note and presses the words against his face. **“CHAMP.”** The letters are enormous against his head, but they wrap around his eye sockets and he can still read the shapes. He pulls the best smile he can manage across his face, but the next time Izuku closes his eyes, the tears squeeze free and dampen the note. His entire composure crumbles in an instant.

His nails dig into the paper and his shoulders heave as he begins to sob. “I couldn’t do it,” he gasps. “I’m not coming back. *Mom, Yagi, Mei… I’m so sorry. I’m sorry everyone. I tried. I really tried,*” he whimpers. “I gave it my best, but I couldn’t win.”
It feels stupid to talk to people who can’t hear him, but he doesn’t care. With the storm blocking
the reception of any and all devices, it’s better than not speaking out to his loved ones at all.

Izuku lets his cries rack throughout his body until he’s resting completely on his thighs, but even
that isn’t enough. He falls forward and lies curled in on his body in the dirt. Izuku’s sobs subside to
hiccups and he wipes away the tears and snot from his face. He breathes shakily as he thinks of
how Katsuki will react to the loss of his equipment.

Izuku gets up and takes his notebook in his hands. He turns to the notes he’s taken from the walls
of the ruins and studies the symbols he’d managed to scribble down.

He puts down the pen and swaps it for the flask. He raises it to his mouth but stops himself. If
there was ever a time to drink, it’s going to be tomorrow night.

If he dares to hope, there is a chance. It’s there, but it’s slim. He can only think of one way to
continue his work and save his life.

“Please, God. PLEASE. Let me be right.”

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FIGHT 13

Izuku can’t keep his spoon from trembling as he eats his oatmeal.

He’s revisited the equipment after an hour’s worth of restless sleep, but he still hasn’t been able to
get it going. Fighting Katsuki without the tech is suicide and he knows it. His only true chance of
survival is to pack up and leave the island now. But he knows that isn’t an option. It never was.

If Katsuki is so determined to see the deal all the way through, so will he.

It’s strange to have no exercises to practice. Nothing to prepare for. Rather than let himself idle and
despair, Izuku rips pages from his notebook, separating his notes for his work into some kind of
time capsule. Should anyone arrive after him, he hopes they will find his work and the warning. If
he can’t bring his research home, maybe they could.

When that’s done, all that’s left in the notebook are the drawings he’s made and the notes from the
ruins. He pages through what he has, and grabs a pen, adding some finishing touches. He works in
it until it’s time for the fight.

Were things any different from the day when the gauntlet was thrown? Could there be another way
to live? Was there a different ending to the fate he’d chosen? He’ll know soon.

The only machine Izuku wears to the beach is the wristwatch. Katsuki notices the tech’s absence
immediately.

“Where’s your equipment?”

“Broken,” Izuku answers. “I’ll have to make do without it.”

“You can’t fix it?”

“Uh, that’s what broken means, so no.”

Katsuki glares and studies Izuku carefully. “You’ll never win without it.”
“Sure, that’s a possibility. But we won’t know until we go at it, right?”

“DON’T FUCK WITH ME!” Katsuki screams. “This is a waste of time! I should just eat you now and get this over with.”

Izuku feels himself start to tremble, but he takes a deep breath. He’d been expecting a reaction like this. Katsuki might be a pompous ass, but his honor would never allow him to break a promise. Izuku remembers the words of his mentor. “Keep walking forward, no matter how tattered you become.”

“You won’t. We had a deal. I’m still fighting for my life, the victims of the Zaba virus, for humanity’s worth, and to salvage what I can of your culture.”

“I will actually kill you.” Katsuki deadpans.

“Yep, we agreed that could be one of the outcomes. I lose, look in your eyes, and you swallow me up. If it’s actually going to be a repeat of our first encounter, it shouldn’t be that bad. Relaxing, even. How many dead people can brag about that?”

Katsuki’s face twitches in disbelief and irritation. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Can we fight now? I’m about to set the timer.”

They spar. Katsuki catches Izuku within the first minute and slams him down. Katsuki bares his fangs with a hiss and looks down. Izuku looks back beneath him but says nothing.

The timer goes off and Izuku pushes the button on his wrist.

“You won again. Congrats.”

“STOP MESSING AROUND! You had three hits yesterday. It didn’t count as your win but it was close! But now that it’s gone, to keep going is pointless!”

Izuku snorts. “Dumbass. My equipment was never part of the original deal. When we fought and made the terms, I had nothing, but agreed to follow through matter the outcome. If I lose completely, can you follow through your end of the deal?”

“What???”

“Wow, what’s up with that response?” Izuku says as he forces a laugh. “I’m dead in the water. The you from Day One would have loved this, but once you found out about my equipment, everything changed. These fights became less about humiliating me and more about proving yourself for your people.”

Katsuki blinks at him, but he doesn’t move, so Izuku continues.

“You’re right to be wary of humans and our technology. If I return, there’s a chance more of us will follow. You have every right to strike me down.”

“And I will.”

“I know,” Izuku nods. “You’re a good alpha. You love your people and I love mine.”

“Don’t compare yourself to them! We aren’t equals.”

“I can’t deny there’s a huge gap in our abilities. But I’m not weak. In these two weeks, I proved
I’m stronger than you ever imagined, and now you can’t stand to see me lose. So right now, I’m taking what I can of my win.”

“Win?” Katsuki snarls, "There's no win for you here. You’ll die tomorrow with nothing.”

Izuku shakes his head slowly as tears begin to form. “Yesterday, I was someone worth apologizing to. If anything, I can say I’ve won that. I can’t give you the battle you need, and I won’t break for you. I’ll still be here tomorrow, so don’t ever say I was a coward.” Katsuki’s face is so close that when Izuku exhales his breath tickles the naga’s blonde hair. “And I have a small request, if you’ll allow it.”

Katsuki’s claws dig into the sand around Izuku’s wrists he forms his hands into fists. “You idiot…”

“You can’t go changing the rules of the game as you play it,” Izuku continues. “but whatever happens tomorrow, the loser should keep their dignity.”

Izuku slightly lifts his head and places a gentle kiss on Katsuki’s lips. He then rests and settles back in the sand. Tears glaze the boy’s eyes and his vision swims, but he sincerely smiles back to the monster pining him down.

“Back at the campsite tomorrow you’ll find a notebook. I only had enough time to figure out how your language is written. Inside you’ll find instructions for the brushstrokes. You’ll also find a list of plants that were used to paint the murals.” Izuku’s voice threatens to crack but he fights it. “And that’s all. I’ll give you another farewell kiss now if you want. Just don’t ask me for one tomorrow, okay?”

Katsuki flushes and uncoils from the human. He looks at him with horror as gnashes the air with his teeth and grinds them together. He pulls the hair at his temples as his powerful chest heaves in the air.

“GODDAMMIT! GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!!”

Katsuki sets off an explosion with a roar and Izuku jerks into a fetal position. He clings to himself as Katsuki sets them off again and again. The beach erupts into a minefield and the human feels every explosion and Katsuki’s screams through his chest.

The blasts steal away all of Izuku’s hearing, and all he’s left with is ringing. When the explosions stop and he finds himself alone, Izuku breaks. The world turns blurry and he convulses on the beach gasping for air. As the tears spill from the corners of his eyes, and his terror meshes with happiness, Izuku isn’t sure if he’s laughing or crying.

He’s delivered the final blow. He can’t do anything else. The remainder of the day is nothing but filler. Hours will tick by, bringing about the final tomorrow, and the boy will not win.

Chapter End Notes

Au’s Note: I'm so sorry to leave ya'll hanging. Originally this chapter was going to include the Final Fight, but when it started pushing over 10,000 words I had to cut it off.
I'll upload the next chapter soon, I promise! ƛ(■_■)>

(Also, FYI, I went back and removed any unnecessary epithets in the previous chapters. Shout out to: http://fandom-grammar.livejournal.com/1062.html Apologies if anyone’s eyes were bleeding before the update.)
"I can melt your brain now
I melt your brain
I can melt your brain yeah
Na na nanana"

So, I suck at deadlines and predicting chapter length and wound up splitting this one into two parts.

Sorry! Here’s Part 1.

THE FINAL DAY

Midoriya Izuku is absolutely terrified.

It could be his last day on Earth and God couldn’t even bless him with a good night’s rest. As he covers his mouth and massages the corners of his eyes with his fingers, he isn’t sure if he’s slept at all. He’s been lying in bed with eyes closed, and hours have ticked by, but he certainly doesn’t feel rested.

He could live or die. This afternoon things could go either way. Based on Katsuki’s reaction, Izuku’s confession more than hit the mark. He has a chance of surviving, which is better than nothing. However, he’s still feeling sick to his stomach, and he’s regretting every passing second.

How does he want to spend his limited time? Is he making the most of it? Has he truly done all he can? Absently, he glances at the equipment.

No, it’s not worth it, he decides. But honestly, is anything?

Eating, sleeping, exercising, packing; in a few hours none of it will matter. The sun rises and Izuku forces himself to eat. The action feels mechanical. He tries to connect real thought into his food, to savor how his jaw mashes his oatmeal and how the juices flow. Most people who face death savor their last meals, right?

If he remembers correctly, the idea of arranging a final meal was based on a superstition. Supposedly, honoring those on death’s row with a last meal was arranged so that the damned could have some kind of peace in the afterlife. If it were up to him, Izuku would choose a piping hot bowl of udon noodles and pork cutlet. The oatmeal is a poor substitution.

Izuku detachedly wonders if he should pack up his tent. It would be less work for Katsuki and his
pack, but leaving it standing could also attract any humans who survive the onslaught of the storm. However, leaving his things scattered about could guide their attention to his time capsule. This brings about another thought.

How long it will take his friends and family to realize he’s not coming back?

How long will they wait and lie to themselves? Would anyone come to rescue him; the lone scientist with a gamble to save humanity? If the next humans made it to land safely, would they fall to Katsuki? Could they fight him off? Would they have any reason to be armed? Was there any possible way he could leave a message for the next humans to leave as soon as possible?

Izuku shakes his head. The only person insane enough to attempt a rescue mission would be Mei herself. But without feedback from Izuku, she’d never know whether the ship she designed even survived the trip. Without Izuku’s data, she’d be insane to try reaching him herself. All his loved ones were still on standby; holding their breath and waiting for the day he returned.

He hates letting his mind wander like this, but isn’t like there’s anything else to distract him. He entertains the idea of visiting the ruins once more, but dismisses the idea. Knowing what he does now, of the genocide and loss of language, the visit would only depress him.

As he goes through his things he notices a sizeable number of pages have been ripped from one of his blank notebooks. Tearing the pages from notebooks so he could pin them to the wall and study them before bed used to be a bad habit in his early childhood. He’d like to think he’s kicked the habit by now, and he can’t for the life of him remember slipping back into it during his trip.

*Does it really matter, though?*

He tenses and goes outside to check the marked notebook he’s left for Katsuki. Izuku leafs through it one final time, making sure he hasn’t forgotten anything. Satisfied, he then leaves it on the log he’s been using as a bench.

And then at the final hour, he goes to the beach with the flask in hand. As he clutches the bottle the tips of his fingers go white, his eyes begin to water. Adamantly, Izuku tilts his head up at the sky to steady himself.

**NO CRYING. No crying, dammit. No matter what happens, I’m not crying for his enjoyment.**

He remembers the time he spent on the beach right after he’d agreed to the terms of Katsuki’s deal. He’d nearly imploded on himself back then too. He’d managed to save himself with his own words of self-encouragement.

*Being afraid is surrender and I’m not letting him win. I’m taking what I can of my victory and there’s nothing he can do about it.*

Izuku checks his watch and at exactly 2:30 he drains the flask of all it has left. He feels the effect and welcomes it, grateful to have one final moment of peace. Izuku sighs. It’s been quite an adventure. Even if he made it back to tell the tale, one would ever believe him.

But as time passes, the buzz fades, and he’s back to sobriety. He waits, and then he has to pee. He tries his best to ignore it, but decides he doesn’t want to die with piss in his pants. He relieves himself in the ocean, and after he’s done, he starts to get hungry. Even more time passes, and Izuku begins to sweat under the sun. He starts to wonder if Katsuki is stalling.

*Is he too proud to admit he can’t kill me?*
Izuku doesn’t want to give himself false hope, but he feels like this isn’t far from the truth. On the other hand, Katsuki’s absence could be for an entirely different reason. He has a clan to protect, after all. Exasperated, Izuku collapses in the sand and sits with his knees pulled to his chest. His eyes shut in random intervals and suddenly, he catches himself napping. Izuku jerks awake to a string of drool collecting on his thigh and he sluggishly wipes it off. He checks his watch and sees it’s been over an hour.

*Where the fuck is he? Did he wimp out? Is he giving me extra time to fix the equipment?*

The boy waits for his reaper until nearly sunset. His rage builds until he can’t take it any longer.

*DID HE JUST FUCKING STAND ME UP?*

Izuku grinds his teeth and pulls himself to his feet. “Unbelievable. **UN-BE-FUCKING-LEAVEABLE!”**

With his pride burning in his chest, Izuku’s eyes fall upon a curving line that trails in the earth, and he observes how it follows the direction Katsuki usually goes when they finish their spars. *Fine* then. If Katsuki won’t meet with him, he’ll just bring the confrontation to the alpha naga instead.

The trail takes him deeper in the heart of the jungle, where the vegetation is at its thickest. Insects buzz around his ears, and Izuku swats at them absentely. He does his best to find the areas where the vines are less frequent as he ducks and twists through.

Pushing away some low hanging vines reveals the remains of a small private plane. Izuku recognizes it as a Cessna model; a craft for personal trips that can accommodate four people. Judging by the grime and vines hanging around the air craft, it had crashed there quite some time ago. One of the wings has been completely ripped away and a good amount of dirt has been shoveled under the plane’s nose as it finally skidded to a stop. The boy can only guess what led to the crash.

Izuku walks over and climbs the body to peek through the gaping hole of the windshield, and isn’t surprised to find the plane empty of corpses. He’s certain that these adventurers, whoever they were, are long dead. They could have died instantly in the impact and then been carried off and eaten, which is likely. Or, they could have survived the crash, which was unlikely, but not impossible. If they had, they would have had nowhere to run, and been picked off by the island’s nagas.

Knowing Katsuki’s hatred of humanity, Izuku guesses their remains are probably scattered about the island. Thinking of the alpha naga agitates him, and he hops inside, searching around the seats for anything useful. He nearly gives up when Izuku spots the double barreled shotgun poking out from under the passenger seat.

*JACKPOT.*

He snatches it without a second thought and counts the slugs as he unloads them from the magazine. Thirteen rounds. That’s more than enough to defend himself from any danger he might find; especially now that he’s aware that one of the island’s primary residents are giant boar. He reloads it, and slings the weapon over his shoulder.

Izuku doesn’t plan on using it on Katsuki, but he does briefly fantasize about startling the naga with a couple warning shots and then smacking his stupid face with the barrel. He takes a breath, feeling a bit braver, and stumbles out of the aircraft to continue his journey. Izuku has always been good at tracking, but he feels very proud of himself when the trail finally stops at the foot of a large
tree with thick purple vines.

Well, if Katsuki has decided to hide, then Izuku will drag him out using the only language the alpha naga seems to understand. With a mix of satisfaction and rage, Izuku cocks the gun, and fires straight at the sky. Birds burst from the surrounding trees into the air in surprised squawks and flutter away in confusion.

“HEY, KATUSKI! Nice hiding spot, fucker! Good to know you’re a coward who can’t even see your way through the deal YOU MADE! Am I just not worth it now? Is that it? Am I not even good enough to destroy? Am I not good enough to slay and stroke your ego?”

The gun is still smoking in his hands when Izuku fires the next blast.

“Do you have any idea how nerve wracking it is wait for your own death? Let me tell you, IT FUCKING SUCKS. And then you have the nerve, the AUDACITY to leave me waiting until sunset? ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?”

Izuku fires two more shots and the rant continues.

“Or is that you can’t stand to be beaten at your own game? I guess all that talk of proving yourself and your clan was nothing but bullshit! I was right back when I caught you cheating! You’re only interested in playing games when you have the upper hand!”

He waits, panting slightly as he catches his breath. Despite himself, tears have begun forming in his eyes but he wills them to keep from falling. Suddenly, the thick vines around the tree come to life and slide with a whisper as they’re pulled further into the branches. A fluffy head of purple hair belonging to an unfamiliar naga pokes out of the tree. Izuku quickly re-positions the shotgun.

“What in Creator’s NAME DO YOU-“ The stranger’s begins with a snarl as he unravels and lowers himself from the branches. However, when he spots the human, he stops. His sleepy eyes size Izuku up, before he greets the boy with an easy going smirk.

“Well, this is a surprise.”

OH FUCK.

“Oh! I mistook you for someone else! I apologize for the disturbance! Excuse me!”

Izuku stumbles backwards, but watches in horror as the stranger’s coils continue to advance. His skin crawls. It’s become painfully obvious that if he runs, this new naga will give chase.

“This is BAD. Without the gear, I don’t stand a chance on my own. He’s probably faster, and I also have no idea what his ability is.

Izuku keeps the shotgun pointed at the naga’s chest, making sure not to meet his eyes. The naga seems unimpressed and rubs his chin thoughtfully. “You seem lost. Didn’t anyone warn you about traveling alone?”

Izuku grits his teeth and fires the shotgun straight in the air. The blast echoes across the jungle, and the naga freezes as Izuku reloads and aims the barrel back at the stranger’s torso. “Please let me go on my way. I mean you no harm.”

“Set the weapon on the ground and hold still.”

Izuku’s body freezes. He orders himself to start running, but nothing happens. Instead, he
obediently places the gun down in front of himself and waits.

*What the hell... NO.*

He’s powerless to do anything as the naga’s tail slides around his hips and arms and lifts him up in the tree.

**NO. No no no no no.**

Izuku’s torso is nearly completely coiled and he’s a foot away from the naga’s face before his body returns to his control. The first thing he notices is how the coils are different from Katuki’s. The alpha’s build screams of power and authority. The body of this naga is long and lithe and can wrap around him nearly twice as much. Izuku trembles as he keeps his eyes on the naga’s necklace of bird skulls, talons, and feathers.

**SHIT. Shit, I’m dead. I’m so, so dead.**

“Fiesty, aren’t you? And rude. Don’t you know it’s impolite not to look someone in the eye when they’re speaking to you?”

Izuku bites his lip and says nothing, unsure of what to do next. He’d just been disarmed and captured in a matter of seconds and couldn’t do a thing to save himself. He has no doubt that the naga will use whatever trick he has on him again.

The coils tighten to a squeeze and Izuku gasps.

“I don’t recommend staying quiet. There’s plenty of ways for me to get you to talk. I’ll let you choose the method.”

The coils relax around him and Izuku gives a defeated sigh. “What do you want?”

“That’s better. Let’s start with names. Who do I have the honor of speaking to?”

“I-Izuku. Midoriya Izuku.”

“Shinsou Hitoshi,” he nods. “A pleasure. It’s not every day I find humans wandering in my jungle.”

“What? No, this is Katsuki’s jungle,” Izuku argues with a squirm.

“Ah, not quite. The island is divided into territories for each of us. Bakugo rules all of it, but he has his niche areas.” His eyes glide over Izuku’s frame and his forked tongue flicks in the air. “However, this one is definitely mine.”

The conversation gives Izuku chills and he gulps.

*I need to leave. NOW.*

“G-Good to know!” Izuku exclaims. “I’m very sorry for bothering you. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m on my way to find-“

“Has he claimed you?”

The question takes him completely off guard and he balks. “Claimed?”

“With the Lover’s Kiss? You’d know it if you’ve had it.”
Izuku feels his brain short circuit. “L-Lovers? Katsuki and me? Together, romantically? N-No, no! It’s nothing like that! We’re KIND OF FRIENDS, well, no. That’s-maybe…no. I’m not sure. Honestly, he might not even like me.”

Izuku knows he’s babbling, but he can’t seem to stop.

“He really likes scaring me and fighting, but he’s not a bully! I can tell it’s not really malicious. He’s emotionally stunted, but he loves his pack and would do anything to protect them! He’s genuinely a good guy!”

Shinsou raises an eyebrow. “You’re telling me Bakugo let you live.”

“Well, no. He’s supposed to eat me today.”

There’s a pause as Shinsou looks at him doubtfully. “What, so you’re just waiting for him? You’re okay with this?”

“Not exactly…” Izuku mutters. “It’s complicated, okay?”

“Mmm. Well, it doesn’t have to be.”

Izuku doesn’t have time to react before the naga places a kiss on his lips. The boy pulls back instantly and sputters. “W-Whoa! Hey! Hold on! I-Isn’t this moving kind of fast? We just met, and-“

Shinsou smirks and clenches his jaw, catching Izuku mid word with his mouth, this time kissing longer and deeper. Izuku attempts to raise his arms to push him away, but he tastes something sweet like blueberry pie. Puzzled, he cautiously deepens the kiss and feels Shinsou’s tongue roll against his own. The blueberry pie flavor becomes overwhelming and he sees stars.

He’s dimly aware that the coils around him have loosened and he’s freer than he once was. Izuku feels his arms drape against Shinsou’s shoulders and his hands drag lazily through his purple hair. The naga’s soft lips press firmly against his own, and he swears he can smell it now, piping hot and steaming from the oven.

Shinsou breaks to kiss to nibble and pull at Izuku’s lower lip. Tingles shoot up Izuku’s spine and the naga laughs as the human sits completely dazed. The warmth spreads in Izuku's stomach and he blinks as the world seems to slow. Shinsou’s claws brush his cheek and he feels himself leaning into it, closer to the naga’s face. It’s so full and beautiful. It reminds him of the moon.

Shinsou’s eyes twinkle with amusement. “What an innocent and lovely reaction. Well, I think it’s safe to say you’re free game. Bakugo’s loss.”

Izuku tries to focus, but his head is spinning. Shinsou’s words are slow like syrup, and fall on his ears like honey. It’s as if he’s sitting on a gently tilting carousel.

“Unlike our alpha, I’m not one for playing with my food. I’ll spare you that fate, at least for now,” he says as he fluffs Izuku’s hair. “How’d you like your first taste of venom?”

Izuku tries his best to answer, but it’s like his own words are floating away from him. “It’s sweet, like…blueberry pie.”

“Well, it won’t be your last.” Shinsou’s smile spreads and Izuku’s mind empties. “Put your arms back against your sides.”
Izuku’s body obeys and the coils around his waist travel higher and ride up his shirt. The smooth muscle slides against his bare stomach and he arches to the touch, with the hint of a moan escaping his throat.

*Did it always feel so good to be wrapped up like this?*

“Hmm, all of your limbs fold together so snugly when you’re coiled. It’s almost as if you were made for it,” Shinsou muses. "I could get some real shit for this later, but you’re so adorable, I don’t even mind. In fact, why don’t we take this a little higher up? We wouldn’t want to be interrupted, would we, pet?”

The coils continue their ascent and wrap around Izuku’s shoulders and over his mouth.

*Pet.*

The word is there and he knows the meaning, but the situation doesn’t register in Izuku’s head. It sounds like a fitting nickname. One he’s had all his life. It feels so nice to hear Shinsou speak and bestow it to him and the boy hums quietly as he begins to rise.

Suddenly, an explosion brings everything to a halt.

“HEY, YOU BAGGY EYED PIECE OF SHIT!”

Shinsou stops. “Oh God no…”

“YOU’VE GOT THREE SECONDS TO BRING DOWN THE HUMAN BEFORE I BLOW YOUR ASS TO THE MOON!”


“ONE! TWO-“

“Yeah, fine! I heard! Give me a second!” Shinsou shouts to the alpha naga below. He mutters darkly, but lowers his tail and gently places Izuku on the ground before unwinding from the tree and joining him on the forest floor.

“Yes, my alpha?”

Katsuki is so angry his face is red and the veins are popping on his face. The air smells like smoke. Explosions crackle in his palms he hisses through bared fangs. Shinsou flinches as Izuku fights back a giggle. He manages to cover it with a cough. Even coughing seems interesting and more vivid now. Izuku clears his throat, swallows blueberry juice, and sways. Katsuki takes one look at the human and begins a new torrent of swearing.

“You motherfucker. You knew he was looking for me too. I know it!”

“Bakugo.” Shinsou’s tone is low and calm. “How long has this human been freely wandering the island?”

“Fuck off,” Katsuki snaps “I’m taking care of it, alright?”

“An unclaimed human armed with a weapon wandered into my territory under your watch. That hardly sounds taken care of.”

“I’ve been watching him. He has a restricted schedule to obey.”
“And yet, here we are. Sounds to me like you gave him freedom to do as he pleased.”

“I was hunting!” Katsuki growls. “He had his orders. If nothing else, I thought dipshit over here had the instincts to stay put.”

“Yes, it’s unfortunate.” Shinsou says mildly. “If you truly had plans for him, I apologize for giving him the first mark.”

Izuku burps and feels bubbles rise from his stomach. He murmurs to himself in wonder and giggles. He then stops, realizing the nagas are both staring at him. Katsuki looks sick and has a hand clenching his hair while Shinsou grins, appearing all too pleased with himself.

“Well, it’s too late now,” Shinsou says with a shrug. "What do you want for him?"

“HE’S NOT FOR FUCKING SALE!”

“You know the legends of humans and venom,” Shinsou argues. “There’s not much point in giving him away now that he’s marked.”

“I DON’T GIVE A DAMN. He’s coming back with me!” Katsuki extends all the claws on his hands with a snarl and sets off several medium sized blasts at his sides. With a challenging snarl, Shinsou bears his fangs and extends the claws of his own.

“YOU…” Katsuki spits with the offense growing in his throat. “You DARE extend you claws to me?”

“I’m not in the wrong here,” Shinsou argues with a hiss. “I could say the same to you. You’ve neither killed nor marked him for yourself, and now you’re threatening a pack mate? For what? Over the fate of some prey? How curious, Bakugo. I never took you as a human sympathizer. What did he do to get under your skin?”

“None of your FUCKING BUISNESS. This is between me and him.”

Katsuki’s expression goes blank and he freezes as Shinsou continues with a glare.

“Oh, I think it’s the entire pack’s business,” he says icily. “This should have been an easy one for you, yet, somehow this human made it all the way to me on your watch. Our storm wasn’t enough to stop him, which leaves you as our last line of defense. If you can’t do it, then maybe you were never cut out for being alpha in the first place.”

Shinsou lets go and Katsuki snaps back in control of his body. His chest heaves as he screams. “I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!”

“DID YOU FORGET OUR GAURDIAN IS DEAD? That something out there is picking us off? You’re getting sloppy and we don’t have room for your stupid mistakes! I’ll take back my words when you do your damn job.”

This shuts Katsuki up, but he’s fuming and he tenses his coils, ready to pounce. Shinsou tenses as well, staring down his alpha. Both their eyes have taken a slitted, animalistic shape and their snarling crescendos.

“I AM YOUR ALPHA.” Katsuki spits. “If that has ever meant anything to you, you’ll show me your throat this instant, and let the human go.”

“PISS OFF! My claim has been made, and you missed out.”
Izuku closes his eyes for only a second when Katuski suddenly brings forward a barrage of explosions and he jerks back to attention

“FUCK YOU,” he screams. “HE’S MINE!”

“HOLY FUCK, this is absurd!” Shinsou draws back, letting the tips of his claws nervously dance on his thumbs. “I don’t want to fight you, Bakugo. GOOD GOD. If you’re so serious about taking him back, mark him yourself and see who he chooses.”

When the noise has settled, once more Izuku closes his eyes but opens them to see Katsuki trembling with rage right in front of his face. Izuku jolts into reality pushing the sensation of bubbles and pie away for the moment.

“K-Katsuki! Sorry, I was-“

“LISTEN,” he begins to snarl, but stops. “Please. Listen to me, stupid, fucking Deku. You’re in a heap of shit right now, and only you can save yourself. You need to make a choice. What you choose will determine whether or not you’ll ever enjoy your victory from our deal.”

Izuku blinks, trying to take it all in before Katsuki speaks again.

Victory? Did he say victory? As in mine?

“DO NOT fuck this up.”

Izuku has so many questions, but they disappear when Katsuki bends and pecks him on the lips. Izuku’s mouth drops, and Katsuki grits his teeth before kissing him again, forcefully mashing their lips and tongues together. Katsuki’s long tongue slides in and coils around the base of his own, and the titillating sensation briefly snaps the boy back to sobriety.

SWEET JESUS, IT’S PREHENSILE.

It’s his final coherent thought.

Izuku tenses and for a moment, the blueberries are gone and he’s overwhelmed with warm slickness, the taste of gingerbread, and spicy chai tea. He’s hit with a wave of calm, and suddenly feels like he has all he’s ever wanted. He kisses Katsuki back with a sigh and feels the heavenly liquid swirl around, giving way to light cream. His hands cup and pull Katsuki closer, fingers brushing over his cheeks, and tucking behind his ears. He doesn’t want the moment to end, but Katsuki’s tongue uncurls and he pulls away. Izuku licks his lips in a haze thinking for a moment that he shouldn’t make a mess and spill the drink on his clothes.

The blueberries return and meld with the cloves and cinnamon. Izuku gasps and tastes instead a spicy blue berry pie with ice cream. It’s practically melting in his mouth, and he swoons. He nearly loses his balance but corrects himself in time.

A small awareness scratches the back of his mind. He’s being watched. He looks up to see the two nagas, each an equal distance apart. The earth is crust and the sky is berries. Whipped cream floats around him. He tries shaking his head, but when he stops it takes a minute for the world to catch up. He looks at one, then the other.

His mouth is dry and he recalls the fear he felt seconds before. Katsuki’s words echo through his head and he understands. He raises his hand and points to Katsuki. The relief on the blonde’s face glows like sunshine. Izuku smiles and raises his other arm.
Instead of picking him up, Katsuki pulls the backpack off the human’s back, and rummages through it until he finds the water bottle. He shoves it in one of the human’s hands before barking an order.

“Rinse out your mouth, right the fuck now!”

Katsuki turns and he’s attacking Shinsou’s throat. A few explosions erupt and the monsters snarl. There’s a brief struggle, but Katsuki forces the purple naga’s torso to the ground, and gnashes his teeth against the other’s neck. Shocked, Izuku’s hand loosens and the water bottle bounces to the earth. Shinsou bares his teeth with a growl, but eventually relaxes into Katsuki’s hold, letting his head hang. Venom drips from Katsuki’s fangs to the ground, but his teeth don’t break the skin of his pack mate.

He holds him there for a good minute growling and snarling at any movement the other naga makes. After what seems like ages, he lets go, dismissing the other with a forceful warning blast. Shinsou slithers away and Katsuki spits after him, muttering a torrent of expletives. When he sees the water bottle splayed in front of the human on the ground, the alpha’s anger rekindles tenfold.

“DID YOU RINSE LIKE I TOLD YOU TO?”

Izuku blinks at him stupidly. “Huh?”

“MOTHERFUCKER...”

Katsuki opens the bottle, and pinches Izuku’s nose shut. Izuku opens his mouth in protest, but it fills with water and Katsuki slams it shut. He practically forces the human to swish it around before letting go. Izuku sputters and chokes, spraying it everywhere. He coughs and wheezes, feeling like he won’t ever breathe again. Katsuki smacks his back a few times as he finally stabilizes.

“That’ll have to be good enough,” Katsuki grumbles. “We can’t do anything else about the venom now.”

Katsuki puts one arm under his knees and the other behind Izuku’s back and has him held, princess style in an instant. Izuku feels the alpha rumble aftershocks of anger towards Shinsou and he giggles, nuzzling his face against his chest.

“Is it really venom?” Izuku asks dreamily. “It feels so nice.”

“It’s supposed to. Venom is expelled when we grind or gnash our teeth. When mixed with saliva, our venom acts as an aphrodisiac, but if it’s injected directly in the blood it can paralyze and kill.”

“Wow, really? Are there any side effects? Can you record this for me? Oh, and teeth grinding!” Izuku babbles. “You do that a lot.”

Katsuki sighs. “If I wasn’t king of ‘Dumbass Island,’ maybe I’d do it less. You’ll be fine. It’ll wear off in a couple days.”

“It was so tasty though. Yours was waaaaay better. After you kissed me the flavors all kinda blended. It was the most amazing pie I’ve ever had in my life. Do you like pie? Would you try it?”

“If I can hunt and kill it, I’ll enjoy eating it.”

“I think pies are more dead than they are alive.”

“Do I look like a scavenger to you?” Katsuki snaps. “Also, what part of ‘forbidden from leaving...”
Izuku frowns and ponders the answer. “I waited…you took too long.”

“And? You had fucking orders. Fucking shit. I am so goddamned mad at you right now.”

“Oh, buddy, you think you’re mad?” Izuku slurs. “I was mad first! Like, as soon as I get out of this fantastic, wonderful dream, it’s goin’ dowwwwn, like, KA-Boooooom!” He gestures, throwing his hands out in opposite directions. “Bigger than any explosion you’ve ever made.”

“You are the luckiest fuck I know,” Katsuki mutters. “Where’d you find the gun, anyway?”

“It was in a plane! Do you know airplanes? This one crashed, but when they’re in the air they go, Whooooosh!”

“I know what they fucking do.”

“Pffft,” Izuku snickers against Katsuki’s stomach.

It’s nice being carried like this. It’s like floating along in a movie of the jungle and sky as he’s gently rocked on his back. Izuku supposes he’ll have to show Katsuki movies once he returns him back to camp. He blinks and focuses his thoughts. But it would be really nice to confirm that he’s not going to be eaten.

“So, you were hunting, huh?”

“Yeah, I do that so I can eat.”

“Hunting to eat things that aren’t me?”

A growl vibrates in Katsuki’s chest and Izuku feels it rumble against his cheek. “…Yes.”

Izuku giggles. “You like me. I knew it.”

“Oh, shut up.”

“So I won?”

“In the shittiest way possible,” Katsuki mutters. “And when you get better, I’m ripping you a new one.”

Izuku playfully nudges Katsuki in the ribs. “Aww, ya can’t win ‘em all, slick.”

“Keep it up and you’re walking back,” Katsuki snaps.

“You wouldn’t. I’m super fucked up from the lover’s kiss, right? And you claimed me. What does that make us?”

“Nothing,” Katsuki spits. “We aren’t anything, GOT IT?”

“Well, if we aren’t anything, can we start over? Let’s redo our introductions. Ready? You start.”

Katsuki tries ignoring him, but Izuku pokes at the naga’s chest until he answers. “Heyyyyy! Katsuki! Hey, c’mon!”

Katsuki, the alpha of this island.”

Izuku erupts in a fit of giggles, but after a couple false starts, manages to sputter his response. “Hi, Katsuki, lord-of-explosions-and-assholery. Nice to meet you! I’m D-Deku. Deku, the human!”

“Deku isn’t your name. You know that, right? I was just making fun of you.”

“S’better than bein’ called human all the time,” Izuku slurs. “I’ll take it.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

“Sure! There’s lots of humans in the world, but I’m your Deku.”

Katuski opens his mouth to protest, but grimaces instead as he accepts the situation. He sighs miserably. “Yeah,” he numbly agrees. “I guess you are.”

“Useless. Th’s a good name,” Izuku snickers as he beams at his rescuer. “Did you choose it so I can defy it, too?” Before Katsuki can respond, Izuku suddenly changes the subject. “Well, hold on a sec. if I get a nickname, so do you! Let me see….And you’re now, Kacchan!”

Izuku waits for a reaction, but when he doesn’t get one, he blows a raspberry on Katsuki’s chest. Katsuki drops him immediately. He circles the human as his body becomes taught, like a viper ready to strike. His palms smoke and he bares his fangs.

“LISTEN YOU LITTLE-“

But he’s interrupted by Izuku’s gasp and giggles. “WOW, KACCHAN. You are scary. Jesus. Everything about you screams death. I mean, look at these things,” he says as he reaches out for Katsuki’s claws with eyes wide. “They’re ridiculous. I know I should be scared, but I have absolutely no fear right now. But like you said, that’s the idea. Amazing. Sure makes things convenient for your guys, right?”

Katsuki is frozen in place, awash with conflicting emotions as the oblivious human manhandles one of his outstretched hands. His aggressive stance begins to melt away, but Izuku is hardly paying attention.

“They’re like a cat’s. Maybe they’re similar in length to a lion’s or a tiger’s?” Izuku murmurs as he experimentally squeezes the digits and runs a finger along the curve. He gasps suddenly. “Ooh! Or a velociraptor! That would be so cool! Can I measure them?”

Katsuki retracts the claws back to his fingers and snatches his hand out of Izuku’s grasp. “No!”

“What about your palms? Could I get a sample of your sweat for research? I wanna see how you explode stuff! I’ll only need a swab! It’ll take two seconds, tops!”

“Hell, no! Stop asking stupid questions!”

“Or your fangs? I’d LOVE to get a closer look and measure those too! Even better, could I get a sample? Can you fill a vial of your venom for me?”

Katsuki turns bright red and stammers, claws flexing in front of his face trying to hide away his obvious blush from the human. “W-Wha-WHAT. WHAT THE FUCK. Y-You can’t just ask that!” he squawks. “Don’t EVER ask any of us to do that!”

Izku bursts into another fit of giggles and leans back into the coil behind him. “Wow, have you
always been this comfy? You’ve got a couple ways to immobilize prey. Which do you use more?”

“Venom is reserved for lovers,” Katsuki states in a muffled voice through the hand on his face. “Eyes are for prey.”

“Ohhh. You used your eyes on me when we first met.”

“Yeah, and you chose to go with me anyway. Nice survival instincts, dipshit.”

Izuku laughs. “Maybe I chose you because you kissed me first.”

“Not because I fucking liked you. Back then it was just to mess with your head,” Katsuki says hotly. He then pauses. “Do you seriously still think about that?”

“Sometimes.” Izuku raises an eyebrow with a shit eating grin and seductively runs his fingers along Katsuki’s scales. “Do youuuu?”

Katsuki turns red for the second time in the span of two minutes and seizes Izuku’s head. His eyes glow and pulse hypnotically right in the boy’s face.

“GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP.”

Izuku’s green eyes widen in surprise. He can only hold Katsuki’s stare for seconds until he starts to melt. Izuku’s eyes cloud and droop before his dark lashes flutter shut against freckled cheeks. Once Izuku’s body goes limp in his hands, the naga scoops him up and throws the unconscious human over his shoulder. Katsuki grits his teeth and spits venom and swears incomprehensibly under his breath.

“GoddamnDekupieceofmotherfuckingbullshit...”

Chapter End Notes

(***I am not your mother, but I still worry. I do not encourage trying any drugs harder than weed! Don’t be stupid, and stay the fuck AWAY from heroin. ***)

Also, FYI: I fucking love Shinsou. He’s a good boy, I promise. He’s just living under an outdated protocol of a ruined society and management has been emotionally compromised.

~ To be continued!
THE FINAL DAY

Bakugo Katsuki has never been angrier in his life.

He’s milked all the venom from his fangs. He clenches his jaw, but his mouth is dry. He’s fucking losing it.

Was there an achievement for setting fire to your reputation and disgracing your entire clan in a single day? If there is, he’s definitely earned it. The human was by far the most annoying creature he’d ever encountered. It’s a fucking disaster. What had he done to deserve this? What the fuck was even going on?

Somehow, this “Deku” had soundly defeated him by strength of will alone and a single kiss. If there was a hell, Katsuki was in it. The hours leading up to their fight were tortuous, but this was absolutely the peak. Truthfully, Katsuki himself doesn’t know what he would have done if he met Izuku at the beach on time. His predatory instincts had spared him the torment of that encounter entirely.
He doesn’t remember the animal’s struggle. He usually does. It’s part of the fun. But he had waited too long for his meal, and Izuku pissed him the hell off. When he heard the animals snorting in the dirt and sensed the calm warmth resonating from their bodies, he couldn’t help himself. The next thing he knew, he was drunk on pig’s blood and crushing out what breath the creature had left in his coils.

As the afterglow of the kill faded away, his anguish returned. It was like the night before all over again. He had arranged a deal in which he couldn’t lose, yet, somehow, he had lost in every possible way.

**BUT WHEN?**

The human was *meat* and it should have stayed that way. When he first captured Izuku in the cave and felt his warmth and frantic heartbeat, Katsuki told himself he wanted the human dead. Even as Katsuki used his spell to coax Izuku’s delicious panic to compliant acceptance, he was prey. Even as he locked lips against the other’s and stole his breath away, Izuku was meat.

But then Izuku saved his life. He saved him from the most horrible, *disgraceful death* an alpha could ever have. Unintentional suicide.

Katsuki had been spared by a lowly creature of prey, and so he honored him with mercy. He offered Izuku absolute freedom, but the little shit *spat* right on that gracious offer. It was completely unacceptable. Not even Katsuki’s threats or the display of power that followed did anything to change his mind.

Then Izuku bled and Katsuki’s senses were blasted by the scent of righteous anger and unshakable courage that spilled forth. *This came from a human.* It was exhilarating, and it had to be his.

Katsuki didn’t just want to destroy the life and spirit that pumped through those veins; he wanted to consume every last drop.

And so the deal was arranged. The human lives. The human dies. Never would Katsuki be afraid of losing. The gap between them was too great. In this gamble, he was untouchable. He was already terrified and Katsuki mentally decided he’d last three days *at most.* Even if Izuku fled out of fear and was never eaten, Katsuki still got what he wanted.

At first it was fine. In the first few days of their skirmishes Izuku reeked of nervous energy and fear. But then the human used his technology against a boar, and he was faster, more nimble, and daring. He was nearly killed until Katsuki interfered. Of course the only reason Katsuki saved him because he had to win against his gear. That was all. He was only being rational. Katsuki wanted the boy and the humanity he symbolized *crushed.* To fight Izuku without it would bring about an incomplete victory.

And then the human stuck his nose where it didn’t belong. Izuku discovered the ruins and saw more than he should have. Katsuki found him and was forced to save the fuckwit from death again. Things became complicated. Once Izuku discovered the sorrowful past of Katsuki’s people, he reaffirmed his vow to win. Katsuki’s thoughts of the boy consumed him and not just for their battles. Izuku tended his wounds, kept him warm, taught him new games, and willingly spent the night in his coils. After another game, things felt suddenly different. Something had changed, and he didn’t like it. Whatever was happening, Katsuki was losing.

When Izuku landed legitimate a hit on his body in the cave *like that,* Katsuki knew he was fucked. Izuku was an opponent to be squarely faced and defeated. Katsuki was a fool to underestimate him. He was in too deep. He was obsessed enough already. The human was never supposed to stick around this long.
He even tried to switch the battle back to what it was. Predator and prey. His gambling proposition spooked Izuku well enough, but what he didn’t expect was Izuku to fearlessly counter and get in his face. It wasn’t prey behavior. They were past it and there was no going back.

From then on, Izuku became a warrior in his eyes; albeit a vulnerable one, susceptible to all of Katsuki’s tricks and charm. How could a spirit so magnificent reside in a body so weak? It wasn’t that Izuku deserved to die, he had to. Katsuki’s pack depended on the island’s secret with their lives.

The final gauntlet was thrown in the second cave battle. Izuku landed three hits but hadn’t won. Never had Katsuki expected Izuku to be such a worthy challenger. The shock of it all thrilled him like nothing else. He looked forward to the final day; to seeing Izuku’s passion finally ignite. There were still two days; two glorious, frantic battles that would push Izuku to his limit. How much further could he go? What was the climax of the human spirit? How could human ingenuity compare to the naga birthright?

No matter the outcome, their fight was a battle between warriors. If Izuku truly succeeded and won, it would be an honorable defeat for Katsuki. If Izuku tried his best and lost, the boy would have the honor of being the most satisfying hunt and meal Katsuki ever had. The last two days couldn’t arrive soon enough. The alpha naga was practically bursting with excitement.

But the two battles he hungered for never came. The 13th fight was a travesty. Never had Katsuki expected to be robbed of these last battles of glory. There would be no real fight. That damn idiot Deku faced him down like he had when they started; weak, trembling, defiant, meat. He was staring death in the face and refused to run. Katsuki was paralyzed and then Izuku kissed him.

Suddenly Katsuki was no longer in control. He could spare the human or kill him on the final day. He could respectfully withdraw or slice Izuku’s throat and consume him like the prey Katsuki once thought he was. Katsuki had been caught in his own trap. He now knew the radiant spirit that lay hidden in that mask of meat. Deku tricked him and Katsuki had been hopelessly strung along.

Mercy or Loyalty. Spare the human or protect his pack. No matter his choice, Katsuki would lose.

Katsuki wasn’t supposed to question himself. This was not supposed to happen. Deku defied the very nature of the deal. Not even killing the boy out of spite would bring him peace. If anything, it would triple his anguish. No matter whether Katsuki allowed the human to live or die, Deku had Katsuki destined for regret and shame on the final day.

It was MADDENING.

And then things got worse. Never at any point did Katsuki think Izuku would run off looking for him while he hunted. How could he have known the boy would stupidly charge into the jungle with the full understanding that other nagas resided on the island? And all this time Katsuki thought he was clever.

Izuku’s stupidity was rewarded with capture. Leaving Izuku in Shinsou’s coils could have been Katuki’s salvation. All he had to do was look the other way.

Izuku would still be the victor, Katsuki would have technically withdrawn, and he would never need to bother Izuku again. The deal would have ended on the agreed terms on the promised day. Izuku would be Shinsou’s slave until the naga grew bored and killed him. Katsuki’s clan would be safe, and that could have been the end of things.

Nice and neat.
But it wasn’t. Katsuki fought for Izuku’s freedom. He couldn’t stop himself or even think straight. And now Izuku was alive, claimed, drugged, and had chosen to leave his fate entirely in Katsuki’s hands. The nightmare continues and it’s his own damn fault.

The entire thing reeks and the reason behind it all terrifies him. It would be one thing if he allowed Izuku to live on the island under his protection, but Katsuki knows it goes deeper. Much deeper. Their relationship is on the edge of transforming again and Katsuki’s heart pounds. He can’t be bothered to think of it now. It’s too much.

He clenches his free hand while the other holds Izuku in place over his shoulder. The human’s breathing is deep and slow against his back. It feels as though if he’s been sleeping soundly for hours instead of minutes. Katsuki’s mind races as he ponders his next move.

Thanks to their combined idiocy, the secret is out. The whole island would soon know of the human’s presence. There’s no need to hide Izuku away any longer.

He changes his direction and flicks his tongue until he finds a fresh trail. The sun is rapidly setting, but Katsuki’s sharp vision spot his pack mate immediately on top of a large boulder. A red naga with a mop of jagged red hair greets him with an enthusiastic, pointy toothed smile.

“Hey, Bakugo! Here to blow off some steam?”

“LATER. Get Denki and meet me back in the valley,” Katsuki barks. “You’ll find a human campsite.”

“Eh? A what now?” His companion tilts his head at the body hanging limply on Katsuki’s shoulder. He’s about to say something when Izuku lets out a long snore against Katsuki’s back. The redhead jolts in shock.

“WHOA, it’s alive!” he exclaims in surprise. “They’re never alive!”

Katsuki ignores him and reiterates the command. “Kirishima. Meet me there as soon as you can.”

Katsuki returns to Izuku’s camp and enters the tent to place the sleeping human on his cot. He watches quietly as Izuku breathes. The nerve of that fucking bastard. Sleeping soundly while Katsuki cleaned up the entirety of the mess. Katsuki’s palms dampen with sweat and start to smoke. He flexes them closed. Even if Izuku woke up, he couldn’t even yell at him and demand an explanation. Izuku would answer him, but not in the way Katsuki needed him to. Not with the toxins in his blood. They probably wouldn’t have the chance to work things until the venom ran its course days later.

FUCK THAT.

Katsuki thinks about blowing Deku up, but the thought pisses him off. He thinks about blowing up Shinsou instead and feels a bit better even though he knows he shouldn’t. Shinsou is pack. Deku is not.

He remembers the notebook Deku had left behind. Katsuki tears his attention from the human and pokes his head out the tent to see it resting on a nearby log, just as promised. He fetches it and flicks on the lantern on Izuku’s desk. He flips through, scanning Izuku’s work. He stops when he sees sketches of naga. They’re rough and lack detail, but Katsuki can see the action captured in each sketch. After studying them for a moment, he realizes they’re drawings of his battles with Denki. He flips more pages, and finds action sketches of his battle with Kirishima. In all his time training with his comrades, Katsuki never thought about how the fights looked to an observer. It’s
flattering, if not a slightly creepy.

No, he decides with a scowl as he shoots Izuku a look. *It's definitely creepy as fuck. Gross ass shit-nerd...*

Mildly disgusted, Katsuki turns the page and focuses on the notes from the ruins. Izuku has copied the artwork from the walls nearly perfectly. Arrows point to the different parts of the art, and a symbol appears next to each one. Puzzled, Katsuki turns the page and sees an illustration of a plant with one of the symbols next to it. The realization hits him and Katsuki looks up to observe the impressive collection of plants Izuku took the time to collect and tie on the ceiling.

It appears Izuku went about sorting them by how closely they resembled each other. Katsuki hardly gave the plants much thought himself, studying only which plants his prey preferred. But Izuku had determined which ones could have been used to make art. If nothing else, he can say the human was dedicated.

When the scent of Kirishima and Denki’s reach his nostrils, Katsuki closes the notebook and slithers outside the tent to greet them. He’d rather not have to explain why he’s messing with Deku’s things. He has plenty to explain as it is already.

Denki is slightly smaller in stature than his companion, but he seems smaller still when he crouches to the ground to inspect the human’s belongings scattered about the remains of the fire pit. His golden scales shimmer as he moves, even against the dull twilight. Both of them move about the campsite with hushed concern.

“What’s really been living here, huh?” Kirishima says as he peers around the campsite. “Looks like it’s been a while too. Did you just notice?”

Again, Katsuki ignores the question. He turns his attention to the other pack mate. “Denki, when’s the last time you’ve eaten?”

“Couple days ago, why?”

“Keep watch over the human and make sure he stays put.” Katsuki orders as he jerks a finger to the tent. “He should stay asleep until we get back, but the induction was rushed. Also, if Baggy Eyes shows up while we’re gone, kill him on sight.”

Denki snickers. “HA. Good one.”

Katsuki pulls his face into a demonic snarl that shows off all his teeth. “Does it look like I’m *fucking joking*?”

“N-No, boss!” Denki stammers. “I’ll get right to it.”

“Good. I need to cool off. Kirishima, let’s go.”

The two travel together in silence. Katsuki stops when they’re a good distance from the campsite. They can still see the light from the lantern in the distance. If anything happens, they can still charge the camp and defend Denki and Deku if necessary.

Kirishima had made it abundantly clear in his youth from the day Katsuki wanted to be alpha that he would live as his beta and service all Katsuki’s advances and needs. They’ve done this often enough that Kirishima should know what to expect. The musk from Katsuki’s pheromones should
have been enough to clue him in.

Katsuki runs his nose against the bridge of Kirishima’s and lets his lips linger along his mouth. The red naga seals the kiss and Katsuki rumbles approvingly. It’s all the communication they need. Katsuki pulls him to the ground and they tangle, tails wrapping endlessly around the other. Katsuki clenches his teeth and Kirishima mirrors the gesture. The next kiss they share is slick with saliva and venom.

It only takes seconds for the euphoria to wash over them both, and they shiver as they bask in the sensation of the other. To Katsuki, Kirishima’s venom tastes like the blood of his first kill; the sea turtle he’d tracked himself. From the moment he tasted its warm blood in his mouth and tore open its life, Katsuki knew what he was.

*Alpha.*

It was as though the Creator had spoken his destiny. Everything he did aligned with his instincts, his fate. Every desire, every battle, and every mating ritual. If he saw something he wanted, he’d pursue it and didn’t stop until it was his. It’s a familiar and comforting feeling, of passion and promise.

Katsuki inhales and the details of his world sharpen, and everything feels more real and vibrant. A tingling sensation runs from his head to the tip of his tail. He’s in the most pleasant high as he rolls his hips into Kirishima. They let the electricity build between with attentive kisses and roaming mouths. Katsuki traces brushes his claws from Kirishima’s ear to his breastbone. With a groan, Katsuki snaps his hips forward and grinds them down.

He’s eager to get started, and his pack mate knows it. Kirishima’s claws close around tufts of Katsuki’s hair and he pulls. He could smell the need of his alpha the moment he arrived in his territory. Kirishima flips him with ease and teasingly bites trails along Katsuki’s neck. They’re little and methodical leaving behind a pattern of pinpricks. He’s careful not to push hard enough for the fangs to mark or puncture. There’s no need for bruising or blood. At least not yet.

Katsuki on the other hand shows no restraint. There’s no need for it. His palms smoke and he seizes Kirishima’s wrists with a snarl. An explosion rips to life, and Katsuki uses its force to slam his beta’s back into the dirt. He’s given his lover no warning. If Kirishima doesn’t know how to predict his alpha by now, he deserves to have his fucking limbs blown off. Smoke trails from Kirishima’s undamaged and hardened body.

He opens his mouth to speak, but Katsuki’s hackles rise and he attacks his throat. Katsuki grips Kirishima’s neck with all his teeth and growls, guttural and commanding. This was not his fuck. It was his. It was all Katsuki’s. He was the one in control. He needed this *his way.* It had to be fiery and intense. No words, no thought, just venom, thrashing, and fucking with their quirks for all to see. Tonight they’ll share a night like only nagas can.

Kirishima relaxes in submission and Katsuki lets go. He’s always enjoyed spending time with his beta. Kirishima is one of his most loyal and closest friends. If it weren’t for his beta’s patience and positive energy, Katsuki is certain he would have lost his mind ages ago. Of course, having gorgeously sharp teeth, perfectly toned arms, and abs certainly succeeded in winning Katsuki’s favor.

However, as Katsuki’s hands wander along the ribs and chest of his pack mate, he’s not thinking of his loyalty. He’s thinking instead of the human. The defiant and helpless Deku; lying unconscious back in the tent. He’s thinking about the fire that blazes behind those green eyes.
Katsuki lets his claws slash against the earth and they tumble. Sweat collects in his palms and explodes as he grinds Kirishima into arousal. They’re animalistic and wild. Katsuki doesn’t hold anything back. They thrash and bite as explosions rip into the earth and pulverize the edge of the Shinsou’s jungle. Katsuki is going to ravage the land and he hopes that baggy eyed bastard can feel the shocks of every single blast.

The next time Katsuki’s hands brush his lover’s groin, two soaked cocks twitch against his calloused fingers in anticipation. Katsuki lowers himself and strokes the bottom one, tongue flicking out in time to catch the precum falling from the one above. He works Kirishima to the sounds of his gasps and moans, feeling the members twitch and pulsate closer and closer to release.

The next sound Kirishima makes is high and needy, setting Katsuki off. He’s already soaked in sweat, and the next barrage detonates with an earthshattering boom. Kirishima braces himself for the explosions in time, but the grip in his coils loosen enough for Katsuki to free his tail.

When they hit the ground, he winds it around Kirishima’s arms, pinning them to his sides. The tail continues its descent until it reaches their cocks and curls around the base of all four, encasing them in a tight, wet prison. Katsuki holds him tight as the smooth muscle slides deliciously along their lengths in a pattern that echoes Katsuki’s thrusting hips. Kirishima whimpers and tilts his head back to the dirt.

Katsuki’s claws puncture the dirt and he swallows Kirishima’s cries with his mouth and lips. He quickens the pace, until they’re both breathless and gasping. Kirishima goes rigid and snaps beneath him. Hot tension builds in Katsuki’s stomach and it coils, until it lashes out and pushes him over the edge. Katsuki’s vision goes white. His hips snap and he roars in the night as he comes. He collapses on his partner’s chest, rolling off once he’s able to breathe almost normally.

He rides out the orgasm and leftover heat as he slowly sobers from the venom. His anger and energy evaporate in the night and he’s left with the shame and sorrow that swim underneath. Katsuki’s feelings for Izuku resurface to haunt him.

In this moment, he’s grateful for his alpha musk and the ability to erase the scent of his emotions from his pack mates. He would hate to dampen his partner’s climax with his own frigging problems.

Katsuki had won everything in his life. The deal and the battles between himself and Izuku were only a single defeat. What was one loss? What was a single blemish on his record? But that way of thinking is naïve and he knows it.

Katsuki had lost in another way; one that he never expected or even saw coming. Izuku had to start kicking him. It was amazing and Katsuki had never seen anything like it.

Creator have mercy. Those legs. Those fucking LEGS.

Ever since the first cave battle and getting a whiff of Izuku’s pheromones, he can’t stop thinking about those damned things. What other ways could Izuku’s legs twist and bend? How would they feel curled around his body? How else could the human stretch and balance himself while his legs spread like wings in the air?

Even now, he’s desperately trying to push them from his mind. The power behind them was startling. Each blow contained the human’s entire strength, and Izuku dealt out their punishment effortlessly. Those thighs, calves, knees, heels, and feet. Katsuki was all too fascinated with their
anatomy, but Izuku was so much more than his legs.

When he saw Shinsou had marked Izuku, Katsuki didn’t want to punish his pack mate. He wanted to *eviscerate* him. And that was before the dickhole questioned his viability as alpha. That kind of raw malevolence doesn’t come from a random lay; it comes from defending a chosen *mate*. A life partner.

He can’t afford to slip.

And yet.

There was the feeling after the Lover’s Kiss. The taste, scent, touch, and *holy fuck*. Katsuki had the taste of Izuku’s raw lust in his mouth and he wanted to drown in it. If he had it his way; he’d be drenched in that flavor every night. Katsuki might even understand why his ancestors tolerated humans. He doesn’t blame Shinsou for standing up to him, but it sure as hell doesn’t excuse him. If the human is sleeping with anyone, it’s going to be Katsuki; and the alpha naga *hates* himself for even processing the thought.

If it’s only sex, it would be fine. It’s natural to be curious. That he could manage. But he wants to keep Izuku. It goes against every instinct he has. He wants the human. He wants him pleased in his coils, moaning his name, and worshiping his scales. Katsuki wants the *entire* pack to know who Izuku belongs to so he’ll never be claimed again.

Katsuki knows if he’s to make it out of this mess with even a shred of dignity, a line needs to be drawn. He can admit to himself that he has complicated feelings for Deku. It would be stupid and a waste of energy to deny it any longer. He mustn’t allow things escalate further. He had already lost all he could afford. If Izuku is to live, they can’t get any closer. As alpha, Katsuki cannot accept taking a human as a mate. He cannot disgrace his kind any more than he already has.

Katsuki has to trust Izuku to never reveal the secret of his pack to the rest of the world. This right here, he reminds himself as he nuzzles into Kirishima’s shoulder, this love and unwavering loyalty to his kind is all he’s had. He has his loyal warriors, his mates, and his pups. They’re all he’s ever known and fought to protect. But the deal is done. He’s chosen to forfeit the match. Izuku will live. He will work on medicine to cure his kind and return home. Humanity will heal and continue to prosper beyond the storm.

Whether or not Izuku keeps the promise is irrelevant. Katsuki reminds himself that this loss is bigger than just the two of them. He had failed, just as their guardian, and just as the alpha before him. He’s chosen to leave a weakness open to fester and has no one to consult. He has no elders, no language, no writing or stories of the past to reflect upon. Katsuki clenches his jaw and looks to the sky. Stars that once shone brightly for his ancestors, their human companions, and the ones who slew them look silently back down upon him. Katsuki takes a shaking breath as he battles back a wave of sorrow.

He’s so tired. All he can do is pray for his clan’s forgiveness.

“*Holy fuck,*" Kirishima pants. “*What’s the occasion?*”

Katsuki snaps back to reality. He doesn’t know where to start, so he simply says, “I nearly killed Baggy Eyes today.”

There’s a beat before Kirishima throws his head back in uproarious laughter. “*Yeah?* Well, I greatly prefer *this* to you murdering our pack. That’s some nice self-control. I approve.”
“Like I had a choice. Those fucking extras in the ocean would be at each other’s throats for his territory.”

“Right, and we can’t have Monoma getting his hopes up.”

Katsuki growls in agreement. “The day that shit head procreates is the day I’m pulverized and rotting in the ground.”

Kirishima hums and runs a finger along Katsuki’s chin and down in between the beads of his necklaces. “So what happened?”

“Baggy eyes claimed the human for himself and doubted my abilities as alpha.”

His companion raises his brows. “He tried to claim what was already yours? Ballsy.”

“As if I would willingly mark a shitty human. No, I’ve been hunting him. The shithead knew I was on the trail but went for him anyway. I was forced to make a claim to get back my prey.”

“Ah, yeah. I mean with Shinsou’s collection of human artifacts that doesn’t come as a surprise. Tough that he’s the one the human ran into. Still, it’s kind of a big deal that you marked him at all.”

“It won’t be. After the human gets better he’ll finish his work and leave. He’s proven himself enough for that.”

“Wait, so you’re not killing him? Is it worth that chance? I mean, is it good for the pack?”

Katsuki’s eyes narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Er, well. Not that I don’t trust you, but are you sure it’s okay to just leave him be and let him go? Things have been tense ever since Ibara disappeared and it’s almost been three weeks,” Kirishima says slowly as he rubs the back of his neck. “Like, we’ve had our suspicions something was out beyond the reef. It’s never targeted the adults, but now that it finally has, I dunno. I’ve got a bad feeling.”

“We’ll find her. She couldn’t have gone far. I’ve been working with Momo to carry out the search. She’s been meticulous in planning it out”.

“Oh yeah, I believe it. But if something’s eating us, we won’t find a thing.”

“Nothing eats us.” Katsuki growls. “Nothing. Even island guardians will leave our bodies untouched. We’ve all seen it.”

Kirishima gives a noncommittal grunt and shakes his head. “I guess we’ll have the full report at tomorrow night’s full moon. You’re going right?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“I’m guessing you’ll want to watch over the human. ‘Cause I mean, there’s not a chance the venom will have worn off by then. If anything, it’ll be worse. Way worse. If he got hits from you and Shinsou, I don’t think he’s gonna make it, dude.”

“The stories said a human will die from venom if it comes from three different naga,” Katsuki says carefully as he furrows his brow. “There were only two of us.”

“Yeah, but venom from an alpha is different. Yours is stronger. He may as well have been bitten
There’s a pause as Kirishima searches his eyes. His concern is palpable and Katsuki hates himself for making his friend worry. It has to be this way. They’ll get through this somehow. The sounds of chirping insects fill the silence, and Kirishima gives Katsuki a slow nod.

“Whatever happens, you should go tomorrow. Emiko needs you. It’ll be the first moon without Ibara.”

Katsuki chews the inside of his mouth, mulling it over. “I know.”

“She’s latched onto Momo and Jirou in the meantime.” Kirishima says as he scratches behind an ear. “Poor kid. It’s gotta be tough to lose a parent. I can’t imagine.”

“The hell are you talking about? We made it without ours just fine,” Katsuki growls.

“It’s different though,” Kirishima argues. “All the other pups have theirs. Right now, Emiko’s the only one without a mom. When they’re at that age, those little guys can get real mean.”

When Katsuki doesn’t reply, Kirishima changes the subject. “Listen, I could keep watch in your stead. If the human makes it through to tomorrow night, you can hold me to it. No worries.”


“It’ll be the end of you,” Katsuki mutters. “Go fishing or catch a piglet.”

“Ah, yeah, speaking of pigs. That reminds me. I haven’t seen Mangemane around for a while. I have high hopes for him, ya know. Might be the biggest Alpha Boar in years. Give him time and he’ll be one of the best hunts you’ve ever had.”

Katsuki snorts. “That was your best? He lasted about two seconds.”

Kirishima’s jaw drops. “C’mon, are you serious? He wasn’t even fully grown! Jeeze, I hope he at least tasted good.” He takes a breath and clicks his tongue in annoyance. “I can’t believe you already went and killed him. You didn’t blow him up right? ‘Cause ya know, raising them that big for the sake of hunts is a waste if ya did.”

Katsuki is silent.

“Goddammit, Bakugo. We’ve talked about this.”

***

When they return, they see Denki curled at the bedside as Izuku audibly babbles. Both nagas slither halfway into the tent to peer over at Izuku.

“He’s awake?” Katsuki asks.

“Oh, yeah,” Denki replies. “He woke up like a couple minutes after you left. Like, as soon as you started blowing stuff up. I didn’t know what to do, so I’ve just been handing him stuff. He’ll talk about whatever I give him. Watch.”

Denki hands Izuku a spoon and Izuku hones in on the metal utensil immediately.
“Ohh, do you know what this is? It’s a *spoooon*! I use it as a tool to eat. The shape allows me to eat liquids! See, it’s concave AND convex. The reflection of the metal warps your appearance so you look different on each side! Front, back, font, back…” he mutters as he turns it from side to side. “Did you know that?”

“I *did* know that! That’s super interesting, though.”

“Here, i’z for you,” Izuku slurs as he hands it back to Denki.

“Thanks, man.”

Izuku brightens immediately when he spots Katsuki. “Oh! Hi, Kacchan!”

Katsuki’s pack mates exchange glances before bursting into laughter.

“*Kacchan*?” Denki wheezes. “Aww, that’s so cute!”

Kirishima guffaws and nudges Katsuki in the ribs. “Oh, I’m so using that from now on!”

“BOTH OF YOU OUTSIDE!” Katsuki roars.

Still snickering, his pack mates obey, and slowly recover under Katsuki’s trembling glare.

“Ha! Oh yeah,” Denki says as twirls the spoon between his fingers. “Speaking of nicknames, he called me ‘Sparky’. Weird, right? I didn’t show him my quirk or anything.”

“Eh?” Kirishima raises an eyebrow. “Did he see you before?”

“Dunno. Didn’t ask.”

“Well, that’s *kind of important*. How long has the human been here?” Kirishima asks. “Bakugo, what’s going on?”

Katsuki sighs. It looks like he’ll have to tell them everything. He’d been expecting to do this eventually, but it still sours his mood. “Two weeks ago I nearly killed myself.”

“Wha-DUDE.” Kirishima interrupts. “If you ever need to talk to us, you know we’re here for you!”

“SHUT UP, I’m not suicidal!” Katsuki snaps. “It would have been an accident, but the human stopped me in time. He’s not a threat and has proven himself worthy to stay here. He’ll leave after his plants are grown. That’s all.”

“But you marked him,” Kirishima interjects.

Denki looks back and forth between them both. “Wait, *seriously*?”

“Just to get him away from shitty Baggy Eyes.”

“Okay,” Denki says cautiously. “But claiming him is still a big deal.’

“It fucking won’t be. Tonight I want both of you guarding the valley. If that purple fuck appears, fight him off by any means necessary. I’ll explain everything to the pack tomorrow night.” Katsuki snarls as he turns away, dismissing them both. “This conversation is over.”

It looks bad and he knows it. Really, there’s no good way to explain himself. He’ll have to deal with the consequences of his actions tomorrow night under the full moon. But for now, there’s
nothing more he can do.

In the tent Izuku is lying on his back, staring at his fingertips as if he’s never seen them before. He tentatively taps them against each other and then slowly picks at the space beneath his thumbnail. Katsuki rolls his eyes and glides over to the bedside. He’s about to say something when he stops himself. He has his doubts, but he has to be sure.

“Hey shit-nerd,” he barks. “How long have you been here?”

“Here?” Izuku asks cocking his head to the side. “What is here?”

“The island. When did you first hit the beach?”

“Hrmm. ’Bout three weeks ago? Maybe?”

*Ibara disappeared in over two.* Katsuki thinks carefully.

It’s tempting to think there could be some kind of connection, but it’s a stretch. He doesn’t have enough information and Deku isn’t coherent enough to be of any real help. Besides, Katsuki was the first of his kind that Deku had ever seen. If his pack mates had spotted a live human, rumors would have spread to him by now. He shakes his head and dismisses the thought.

As he looks down at Izuku his anger rises. Katsuki recalls what the fuckwad said as he was pinned on the sand, and he bristles. For Izuku to desperately want to remain on the island to complete his research makes sense. What doesn’t is the way he delivered his confession and the farewell kiss.

“Why’d you do it?” he mutters at last. “Why’d you stay? Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“Ehh? You wanna talk about that now? When I’m like this? You’re so mean, Kacchan.”

“Did you think you could help me?” Katsuki asks with a snarl as he looms over his face. “I don’t need you. I never asked for this.”

“Such an angry noodle.” Izuku says as he holds back a giggle. He uses the opportunity to reach out and poke Katsuki on the nose. “*Boop!*”

Katsuki’s face twitches in annoyance. If it were any other time Katsuki would extend his claws and threaten the human, but in his current state Izuku is fearless. He would probably just grab them again and ask for their measurements. The *freak.*

Katsuki groans. “Alright, bed time.”

“But I just woke up!” Izuku protests. “*Oh!* Can I sleep in your coils instead?”

“Hell the fuck no. You are forbidden to touch me until the venom wears off.”

“But why?” Izuku whines. “You were so comfy in the ruins.”

Katsuki smirks. “If you thought you liked them before, you’ll like them a whole lot more now.”

Izuku scrunches his face in confusion. “So then why-ow!” He yelps suddenly as Katsuki flicks his forehead.

“Because you didn’t consent to it, idiot. Get better and maybe then we’ll talk. That is, if you’re ever brave enough to ask again.”
“Get better? More like *get worse*! This is astonishing. Easily the best high I’ve ever had, and I’m a bit wise in this area myself. Kind of an expert, if you know what I mean.”

Izuku raises his eyebrows but Katsuki doesn’t engage him. The boy giggles and pushes forward with another attempt to continue the conversation. “I’ve *experimented* a bit myself.”

“The fuck are yo-”

But Izuku interrupts him. “That’s right, baby. I’ve made my own drugs! I’m a bad-boy biochemist. I even *worked as my own dealer*. Hell, I was the *source at school*. Yeah, I said it.”

Katsuki looks at him skeptically. “You made your own venom?”

“Nothing dangerous or addictive, but kind of.” Izuku leans back into the bed and smiles lazily. “Man, I was good at it too. Helped pay for girlfriend expenses freshmen year. Lemme tell you those can really *stack*; ‘specially when she’s making robots n’ shit.”

Katsuki sneers at him. “Selling your venom would make you a whore.”

“I’m a *reformed* whore, thank you very much,” Izuku says with a giggle as he stretches his legs. “And never again. Been clean for ‘bout a year.”

“Glad to hear it,” Katsuki mutters as he quickly turns around. “Now shut up and stay put. I don’t want you going on any other stupid adventures while I’m sleeping.”

Izuku gasps softly. “You’re staying overnight?”

“Don’t give me that,” Katsuki spits. “You think I want to be here? Who’s the one who ran off against my orders and got pumped full of venom? Right now you’re vulnerable as hell. It’s not like I have a fucking choice.”

Izuku says nothing and regards Katsuki for a moment before he rolls out of the bed and crashes to the ground. When the human makes no effort to pick himself up, Katsuki swears and picks him up and places him back in the bed. Once Katsuki’s back is turned Izuku rolls out again.

“What are you doing? Stay put, *dammit.*”

“I don’t wanna. I wanna be on the grass with you! It could be like a sleepover!”

“TOUGH,” Katsuki snaps. “You have a bed and you’re sleeping in it.”

When Izuku rolls out of bed a third time, Katsuki loses his patience. “STOP DOING THAT!”

“Let me stay!” Izuku pouts, giving Katsuki puppy eyes. “Please? I’ll be good.”

The innocence in those sparkling eyes and the quivering lip takes Katsuki off guard. Something inside his chest stutters and he mentally swears as he composes himself. He glowers down at Izuku with as much authority he can muster. “If I let you sleep on the ground, you’re going to treat it like any other night, *got it*? No touching.”

Izuku beams and nods enthusiastically. “Yaaay, sleepover! This’ll be *fun*! Can you hand me my pillow? It’s the poofy thing on the bed.”

Katsuki snatches it from the cot and drops the pillow unceremoniously on Izuku’s head. He then settles to the earth and curls in on himself. He winds his tail around his torso in circles creating a barrier between himself and his companion. He gives a deep sigh and closes his eyes.
“Why are you lying like that?” Izuku asks suddenly. “Are you a doughnut?”

“A what?”

“A deep fried pastry with a hole in the center,” Izuku explains. “They’re really good. Are you trying to hide?”

“NO.”

“Liar.”

Something soft hits the outside of Katsuki’s coils and he tenses. He waits, and then a balled up piece of fabric sails in the center, landing right near his face. It reeks of Deku’s scent and he quickly unravels.

“YES! Score!”

“What the hell did you throw at me?”

“A sock!” Izuku says triumphantly.

Katsuki growls, and is about to stuff the damn thing in the human’s mouth when the pillow smacks his face.

“PILLLOW FIGHT!”

“GIMME THAT!” Katsuki snaps tearing it out of his hands. “What did I fucking say about touching me?”

“Oooh,” Izuku says with mock fear. “Somebody’s grouchy!”

Katsuki winds back with the pillow and smacks Izuku with it over and over. Izuku shrieks in fits of laughter as he defensively curls against the attack. Katsuki hits him until his face burns a dark red and he can take the noises coming from the human no longer. He collapses on the ground face first.

“Oh my god, everything is SO FUCKED.” Katsuki groans. "I’ll fucking kill you. I swear.”

“Hmm…evidence says otherwise.”

“I HATE YOU.”

“Nope! That’s not true either.”

“I wish you were never born. I wish you didn’t exist so I wouldn’t be babysitting you right now.”

Izuku raises and index finger and lazily waves his hand. “Ahhh, okay. Now that one is very specific and semi-believable! I’ll buy it.”

Katsuki lies still and does his best to ignore him. He feels Izuku’s eyes on him for a good minute before the human speaks again. “Hey, Kacchan? If you could choose to only have one ability to hunt with, what would it be?”

“Fuck you.” Katsuki says in a muffled voice against the earth. “I love everything I have. It’s what I am, and who we are.”
“But if you had to choose….”

“I WOULDN’T,” he says as he lifts his head in a snarl. “Shut up and go to sleep.”

“Okay, okay. One more question and I’ll stop. Promise. So, about you becoming a giant guardian thingy. That is SO crazy. What’s up with that? Will it really happen?”

“When you’re middle aged, in about 100 years or so, you’ll see it.”

“WOW. I only get 100 years before I’m middle aged?” Izuku giggles. “Stingy, bastard.”

“Like I know how long your shitty race lives. You would live stupidly long, wouldn’t you?” Katsuki growls. “Tormenting my pups long after I’m gone, like a parasite. Anyway, after honoring the pack for 100 years I’ll have amassed enough gratitude for the ritual. They’ll drive a spear through my heart, and if I live, I’ll reach my apotheosis and be reborn as guardian.”

Izuku looks at him with eyes as big as saucers. “What? Reborn?”

“I’ll survive it too. If shitty Half and Half’s sire was good enough, I’ll be just fine.”

“Holy shit. THEY’RE GOING TO STAB YOU!” he says with a yelp. “And you’ll let them! No no no…That’s terrible!”

“It’s the highest honor of our kind,” Katsuki snaps. “I wouldn’t expect you to fucking get it.”

Izuku’s grabs at his hair. His breathing becomes unsteady and Katsuki smells the rising panic. “What’s your problem?”

“I-It’s just a lot, y’know? Oh, no. Oh, shit.” He squeezes his eyes shut and breathes. “I’m moving. I know I’m not, but I am. This is a bad place. Can you hand me my MP3 player?”

“I have no idea what that is.”

“I’za rectangular box with a long, thin rope,” Izuku slurs. “Check the bed.”

Katsuki finds it easily and Izuku hastily grabs the MP3 player from his hand. He puts one earbud in his ear, but pinches the other and offers it to Katuski. The naga cautiously holds it to his face as music plays through it. He squints and examines it carefully.

“How’s it doing that? I’ve messed with these from ships before and have never gotten them to work.”

“Wet from the ocean?” Izuku asks groggily.

“Yeah, probably.”

“That’s why.”

Katsuki narrows his eyes. “Water is fucking everywhere. That’s a terrible flaw.”

“We’re…working on it.”

Katsuki lays still on his back with the headphones hanging in one ear. The sounds flowing from the tiny device are alien, but Katsuki is able to follow the beat and harmony with ease. If he had to describe what he hears, he’d say it was like listening to a self-aware jungle that shared a single soul. The frogs and birds harmonized and persevered through the clashing bass of the thunderclaps,
the insects would carry them all through with their gentle chirping, and the mermaids’ melody rose to dance with all of it.

The assorted plants hanging above Katsuki give the illusion that he’s hovering above the ground. It’s distracting, and he closes his eyes trying to completely absorb every note from the music. He’s nearly escaped his current situation entirely when he feels Izuku’s dull nails scratch and run through his hair.

Katsuki’s eyes snap open and his claws dig into the dirt. Anger rises first, but it subsides when he considers Shinsou and how big his mouth could be. If his hunch is correct, this could be the last affection he would be seeing for a while.

If he’s honest with himself, having Izuku run his hands through his hair isn’t terrible. In fact it’s quite the opposite. Among naga and mermaids, running claws through the hair of a lover is an art. Adding too much pressure could slice and draw blood. Too little, and it isn’t felt. Yet, somehow the human is a master at it. Izuku presses harder and the soft pads of his fingers and his knuckles grind against his head. Katsuki suppresses a groan.

How the fuck is he doing that?

Okay, FINE. This was the new line. Deku could have this. He could scratch his head but that was it. He won’t allow him to get any closer. Katsuki relaxes and doesn’t fuss when Izuku’s other hand joins it. He melts into it, treasuring every sensation as it washes over him. A part of him wishes the hands would travel lower to the crook of his neck, and maybe behind his ears. He imagines those dull claws running down his neck and shoulders and tracing the line of his collarbone. Katsuki’s throat gently rumbles and Izuku freezes.

“Oh my god. Did you just purr?”

Katsuki explodes. “SHUT THE HELL UP!”

He gives Izuku a look like he wants strangle him and for a second he seriously considers it. Instead he shoves his head back against Izuku’s fingers. Katsuki flashes his teeth against his darkening face in an effort to appear threatening.

“Did I say you could fucking stop?”

Izuku bites his lip in a failed attempt to control his laughter. The giggles sneak out through the corners of his mouth, but he manages to resume scratching the blonde’s head through his snickers. The panic that once clung to the air is beginning to fade. Katsuki has nearly lost himself back in the massage when the human asks another question.

“Is the guardian really dead?”

Izuku’s voice sounds small and brittle. It reminds Katsuki of his pups and for a moment he wants to comfort him. He wants assure him that as alpha he will meet every threat himself. Nothing will ever slip through to endanger them as long as he lives. But as Izuku’s foreign hands roam freely over his scalp, Katsuki stops. Shinsou’s accusations ring in his ears, and the words he wants to promise; the rehearsed truth he’s told his pack so many times could be nothing more than lies.

“Don’t bring it up.” He says as he bears his fangs, but his voice cracks. “You can ask me anything; anything but that.”

But more questions never come. Izuku falls asleep with his arms outstretched in what looks like an attempted hug around Katsuki’s head. His expression is serene but flushed in the cheeks and
slightly pale. His lips part slightly as his breath gently blows against the grass. The words he had spoken the day before return to Katsuki’s head.

“You’re a good alpha. You love your people and I love mine.”

Katsuki clenches his teeth and lets his venom wash over his tongue. *A good alpha.* What a fucking joke. And Deku said that line with a smile too. If anything, Katsuki was the useless one. Why did the human have to mock him?

Deku better survive and beat the toxins coursing through his body. For ruining Katsuki’s life, the damned bastard *fucking better.* He owed Katsuki that much.

Izuku didn’t stop, would never stop; even when all was lost and when fate spat in his face. Katsuki now knows that the grit and determination behind those emerald eyes will never yield, certainly not to his hand, and perhaps not even to death itself when it snatches him away at last.

For the first time Katsuki isn’t completely in control. The instincts that carried him throughout his life have left him blinded and senseless to the approaching future he had worked so hard to prevent. It’s the tomorrow on the island Deku was never supposed to have.

Once Deku’s better, Katsuki promises he’ll fucking kill him.

*Fuck everything. Fuck the world. But mostly, *F*uck DEKU.*

Chapter End Notes

(I witnessed this fic reach 6969 hits. I even saved the screenshot. I’m so happy.)

*Bakugo Emiko is a character I made up for this story. The only OC’s will be the mer-babies, I promise! (And maybe some dead people.)*

Arc 1 Complete ~ (／сол － ヽ)]/*:・°✧
Fever

Chapter Summary

“You are my sweetest downfall.
I loved you first, I loved you first.
Beneath the stars came fallin’ on our heads
But they're just old light, they're just old light.”

Chapter Notes

Katsuki chapters are hard, but they're so much fun to write.

The water stinks of blood. It’s lukewarm against his scales. The metallic taste overwhelms his nose and tongue. The scent of fear and anguish pollutes the ocean and clouds the water. It’s all he’s swimming in. Any residual rage from his clan has been sliced away. There’s only the wind and the waves.

Katsuki sees their guardian. The enormous headless torso bobs in the water next to him. Their once mighty protector has been reduced to a floating carcass of leaking fluids. He gawks at the yawning tubes that lead down to the creature’s lungs and stomach as his own bile threatens to spew.

Beyond the body he spots the hulking goliath responsible for the carnage. The creature moves smoothly towards the open water, unperturbed by the fresh burns splattered across its dark translucent body. Not a single one of the wounds are fatal and Katsuki knows with sinking dread that the creature will survive. His clan was weaker and lost. It won. It’s nature’s way. But still, he can’t accept it.

There’s no one to comfort him and no one to rescue. The deadly quiet taunts him. It confirms that Katsuki and the rest of the pups are the sole survivors. He’s never felt so small and angry and afraid.

He did as he was told. He believed in his pack. He’d hidden and waited until the fighting stopped. He’d waited, and waited. No one arrived to relieve them and they were abandoned. From now on they only had themselves.

He can’t understand. How dare it leave? How could that goliath just leave him alive when the rest of his clan had fought and died? How dare it kill everyone but leave him behind?

Katsuki roars. He screeches after the leviathan until his underdeveloped lungs scream fire and tears stream down his cheeks. He screams and screams but the creature doesn’t stop. It disappears into the blackness beyond the fog. Katsuki is left with nothing but blood and the bodies in the tide.

Katsuki wakes on his back with a start. His claws scrape the dirt into his palms as he sucks the air
with furious puffs in between his teeth. He locks his jaw and lets the venom flow in his mouth as tears threaten to form in the rims of his eyes.

*Again with this bullshit.*

He retracts his claws and traces one hand along the vestigial creases behind his jaw. They’re all that remain of his gills. The memory is so far away, but it feels as fresh as the day before.

*It’s over,* he reminds himself. *There’s nothing you could do then, and nothing you can do now.*

Katsuki growls softly. Witnessing the monster responsible for the massacre retreat without acknowledging him wasn’t even the worst part of the day. If the dream continued, he knows he would have relived the events that followed as well. If anything, he can take some solace in that.

No. The real horror of the day was in cleaning up the aftermath. The true nightmare was working with the rest of the pups; collecting the bodies and identifying their parents. He’s been spared of that memory this time and he’s grateful.

Still. It’s never a good day when it starts with that dream. He realizes he’s snarling at nothing and he breathes, watching the plants that Deku collected gently sway above him.

*Deku.*

Katsuki takes another breath. The human’s scent had faded. He’s up in a start. Izuku isn’t in his bed.

What happened? How the fuck had he not noticed? Did Shinsou manage to slip through Denki and Kirishima? Did Deku wander away and get picked off again? Was he really that fucking stupid? Katsuki swears as he rips open the tent.

Damn it all to hell.

He’s about to charge forward when he spots Izuku staring at him from across the campsite. Izuku stands in the grass limply holding a pan and a spatula in each hand. His impossibly large green eyes are wild and unfocused with tears shining on the edges.

“I wanted to have breakfast. I t-tried, but I don’t know how,” he stammers in a watery voice. “My head’s all mixed up. I can’t do it. I-I think I forgot.”

Katsuki exhales and releases the weight of anxiety from his chest. He remembers why Deku rubs him the wrong way. The human cuts to the absolute core of him. All the walls he’s built to steel himself over the years are useless against this creature’s words and actions.

“You forgot?” Katsuki says sarcastically as he slithers up to the frazzled human. “You don’t forget how to eat.”

Katsuki assesses him quickly. Izuku is sweaty, pale, and having difficulty forming cognitive thoughts. Deku was always sweaty to some degree, but the other symptoms are worrying. Incompetence and memory loss isn’t a good sign. Deku definitely isn’t out of the woods. Neither of them are. Katsuki guesses he’ll need at least another day until the venom is out of his system.

If Deku gets feverish, he could die. Katsuki knows this. It’s problematic, but so is the other half of the legend. The stories said that venom could act as an aphrodisiac in humans. Those affected could be triggered by the touch of the one who marked them. Deku wasn’t showing any signs of heat, so the effect appeared inactive for now. As long as Katsuki was careful, it would be
completely avoidable.

So far, so good. He just had to take this little by little. It was going to be an absolute twat of a day, just as he had anticipated. Katsuki had to watch over Deku until nightfall. Then Kirishima would take over and Katsuki would explain the entire situation to his pack. Somehow.

“No, not the eating part. Just the cooking part. I wanna cook oatmeal.”

“HA,” Katsuki snorts. “You’re not going anywhere near an open flame.”

“I mean…I guess I could stick with trail mix instead, but I really want oatmeal,” Izuku says with a pout. “But what about my other meals? I’d like to have those hot.”

MEALS. The word echoes in Katsuki’s head. As in plural.

In all of Izuku’s reports, the human ate three separate meals three times every goddamned day. Good fucking God. Come to think of it, Deku probably hadn’t had his third meal the night before. Katsuki certainly hadn’t fed him, and if Deku believed he was about to die, he might not have bothered to eat at all.

With a creeping horror, Katsuki realizes he’ll have to learn how to cook for Deku until his puny human brain could function. Katsuki’s eye twitches. How difficult could it be? Katsuki crosses his arms and juts out his chin. He sets off a small explosion in his palms and sneers through the smoke as Izuku startles.

“All right, look, you fucking piece of shit. It’s your lucky goddamned day. Because your tiny Deku brain can’t handle a bit of venom, I’m sticking around to make sure you don’t burn down the whole fucking jungle. And if I do that, I’m setting some ground rules. ONE,” Katsuki barks. “I’m in charge. You don’t get to tell me what to do. TWO. Stay in camp. You are not to leave my line of sight. THREE. Under no circumstances are you to touch me. We aren’t friends. Got it?”

“Sure, okay.”

Katsuki snatches the spatula and pan from Izuku’s hand. “Tell me every ingredient that goes into oatmeal and I’ll cook it.”

“Oh, um, that’s easy. Oats, water, sugar, salt, almonds, and raisins.”

Katsuki feels his frustration start to build. Did Deku seriously expect him to find them on the island? “I know what some of those are,” he growls.

“It’s not that complicated. C’mon. I’ll show you my food closet.”

As it turns out, Deku has an entire storage unit stashed with cans, containers, sacks, and bags of food in the other corner of the tent. It’s so incredibly easy for Katsuki to compare him to a rodent. Deku has a fuck-ton of everything. At least rodents weren’t picky about their meals and the variety of what they had stored away. Katsuki’s sour mood must have been palpable, because Deku turns his head to the side in confusion.

“What’re you mad for?”

“Why can’t you eat simple food like every other living thing?” Katsuki snarls as he picks up a red can with an illustration of a smiling woman sitting in front of a sun. “What’s in this one?”

Izuku squints as if the can is at the other end of the tent. “Raisins?”
“Are you asking me or telling me?”

“Both?”

Katsuki growls and shoves the can in his face. “Read it and tell me.”

“Hold it still,” Izuku snaps.

“I AM.”

Izuku takes it from his hands and places it on the ground. He squats and looks straight at the can. A minute ticks by and his hands clench fistfuls of his hair. His breathing becomes unsteady and he looks at Katsuki with tears running down his cheeks.

“I-I can’t read.”

The sudden epiphany wrecks him, and Katsuki watches in disbelief as Izuku starts to hyperventilate and fall apart in front of his eyes. “This is awful. THIS IS SO BAAAAD,” Izuku wails. “What am I gonna do? What would my job prospects be? I couldn’t even work in science! All those years of studying and mentoring, WASTED. GONE. I CAN’T GO ON LIKE THIS.”

Izuku collapses on the ground in front of Katsuki. “You might as well eat me. C’mon. I’m ready.”

“STOP IT. We already decided I wouldn’t.”

“I’m totally useless! I can’t work, I can’t write, I can’t understand or read anything!”

“Yeah,” Katsuki mutters bitterly. “Can’t imagine what that’s like.”

Izuku sniffs and looks at Katsuki as if seeing him for the first time. He cups his hands over his mouth and contains his breath. He smears a mixture of snot and tears across his pale face and manages to calm himself to distressed sniffling. “You can’t read?”

“We’ve been over this,” Katsuki grumbles.

“You can speak my language, but you can’t read it?” Izuku asks as he wipes the bottom his nose with his wrist.

“I can’t,” Katsuki snarls. “Thanks for rubbing it in.”

“Heh,” Izuku says with a wobbly smile growing on his face. “So I guess we’re both ‘Deku’ now, huh?”

It’s the most infuriating thing Katsuki has ever seen. He sees red and seizes Izuku in a headlock. Izuku yelps and squirms but to no avail. Katsuki has him held like a vice.

“DEKU?” Katsuki growls. “Who’s DEKU, here?”

“Ow ow ow ow ow! Okay, alright! Sorry! It’s me! I take it back! LEMME GO!”

The desperation in his tone is enough to convince Katsuki of the sincerity of his apology, and the naga lets go. Izuku collapses and smiles at him sheepishly. “It’ll wear off, right?”

“It’s temporary,” Katsuki confirms with a grumble.

“Then I’ll teach you to read our language too, okay?”
“Sure, whatever,” Katsuki snaps. “Can you still figure out what everything is?”

“Probably. Ooooh!” Izuku cries as he pops open the lid and holds up a container excitedly to Katsuki’s face. “This is sugar! It’s good! I know you’ll like it.”

Katsuki inspects the white substance. Cautiously, he taps a finger and gives it a sniff. It looks like sand, but smells organic. He licks the grains from his claws and the coarseness dissolves into something indescribably abhorrent. He spits it out along with a torrent of expletives.

“LIAR!” He shrieks. “That shit is fucking disgusting.”

“Pshh, you’re the liar, you faker. I know you’ve got sugar in your mouth! It’s a spicy chai latte with whipped cream, dummy.”

“What? What the hell is that supposed to be?”

“Oh man, it’s the most amazing drink I’d get at the shop near campus,” Izuku gushes. “They would season the cream with ghost pepper for this amazing bite; so warm and tasty. It was the best pick me up everrr. Perfect for long study sessions!”

“We can’t taste our own venom, dumbass. Just the venom of others,” Katsuki mutters. “Mine will always be that spicy whatever to you. The flavor is unique to the naga and the person. Usually it’s tied with the memory of a meaningful meal.”

Izuku nods. “Ah, okay. So to me, you’ll always be spicy chai lattes, Shinsou will be blueberry pie, and the venom of any other nagas will be something different.” He then gives Katsuki a sly smile and waggles his eyebrows. “How many of you are there?”

Katsuki smacks his face and drags his hand down to his neck. “I knew you would fucking ask that,” he says with a snarl. “Slut.”

“Kidding,” Izuku giggles. “You’re no fun.”

Katsuki turns his attention back to the little jars and containers. He picks up each one and carefully turns it in his fingers. He sniffs one and places it back down.

“Are they all disgusting?”

Izuku makes a non-committal sound and shrugs. “Maybe to you. Do you experience sweet, sour, spicy and all those tastes? We like all of them and use different seasonings for a dish. You’ve also gotta consider different cuts of meat, how long something cooks, the temperature, and how much oil or fat is in the dish. A lot of it’s judging the scents and calculating what compliments the flavors.”

“My tongue’s not so wrecked that I need all that extra effort to get a decent flavor from a meal.”

“Scuse you, my tongue’s totally normal,” Izuku snickers. “It’s okay, don’t worry about it. Cooking’s really complex and we’re super different from each other.”

Anger rises in Katsuki’s chest. “OH. So you don’t think I can do it?”

“That’s not what I-“

“My sense of smell is better than yours, nerd.” Katsuki snarls as he jabs a finger at Izuku’s nose. “Our kind could cook better than any stupid human.”
Izuku’s eyes cross to focus on Katsuki’s finger hovering in his face and he lurches forward, pretending to snap it in his mouth. Katsuki snatches it back in time as Izuku’s teeth click on air.

“HEY!”

“You eat raw, dead things, mister,” Izuku snickers. “So I don’t wanna hear it. ‘Betcha don’t even clean ‘em up before and gulping down all the dirt and old sweat.”

Katsuki rolls his eyes. “The flavor isn’t in the body, it’s in the blood, you fuckhead. You get everything at once that way. The warmth, life, emotion, and that delicious bonus layer of complacency from our enchantment.”

He’s satisfied to see Izuku has paled slightly and he smirks. It’s refreshing to have this sort of interaction. It’s the way their dynamic is supposed to be. “I’m not a scavenger, remember?”

Izuku closes his eyes and flops to the ground once again. “Ugh, I’m starving,” he groans, seemingly ignoring Katsuki’s comment.

“Then gather the fucking stuff already. I’m waiting on you.”

Once they have everything Deku explains how to make the food. He then takes a black metallic container and douses with fire pit with a foul smelling liquid. The unnatural stench leaves Katsuki gagging. According to Deku, the substance is ‘lighter fluid’. To Katsuki’s amusement, it proves to be extremely flammable, and the flames leap forward immediately. He picks it up curiously and studies the look and markings. It isn’t nearly as heavy as he expected. He gives it a shake and listens to the liquid slosh inside. It would be fun to play with, but for now he makes a mental note to avoid using his quirk anywhere near it.

“It’s half empty.”

“It’s fine. I’ve got more in the ship.”

Katsuki shoos him away and takes prepping the meal from there. While the water starts to boil, Izuku walks out to the field but stops and stays put. He stands perfectly rigid, seemingly staring at nothing. Katsuki looks back and forth between the pot of water and Izuku, but when the water shows little progression in heating up he slithers over to investigate.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m a picket fence,” Izuku says plainly, as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. He doesn’t even turn towards the naga when he says it.

Katsuki blinks and wonders if he should do something. He flicks his tongue in the air, but doesn’t sense any distress emanating from Deku’s body. It isn’t the fever, but the hallucinations could be a hint it’s on the way. He’ll be fine for now. If anything, this new development is a moment of peace, and Deku has proven to be nothing but trouble. There’s far worse he could be doing.

“For how long?” Katsuki mutters.

“For as long as I’m needed.”

The answer is cryptic, but Katsuki is content to let the idiot be. He lets him stand in the field as he adds the ingredients to the pot. Deku snaps out of it when Katsuki waves the finished bowl of steaming food under his face.
Izuku blinks at the bowl in front of him. “Whuzz’is?”

“The oatmeal food. I put everything together and now you’re going to stop being a freak and eat it.”

“Ew.”

“You’re fucking welcome. You should be grateful I made anything at all.”

Deku makes his way back to camp and plops on the fallen tree. Katsuki watches with growing impatience as Deku spoons the goop and jiggles it in the spoon. He gives it a sniff and puts it in his mouth.

“Well?”

“Yeah, ‘salright, just needs a couple’a things.”

Izuku stumbles to his feet and to the tent where he keeps his food supplies. Katsuki listens as he rummages about and watches as Izuku carefully balances an assortment of boxes, cans, and clear bags in his arms. He sits, and one of the bags slide off the box and lands on the ground.

Izuku opens one box and removes something brittle, long, and flat. He breaks it in equal halves and crumbles one over the bowl. He twists open a jar and plops some sort of sticky goop into the bowl. He sprinkles something multicolored in the bowl, and then some yellow flakes.

When Izuku takes the first bite, his eyes roll up to the sky. “Aw, hell yes. That’s amazing.”


“There, there, buddy,” Izuku says patting Katsuki’s hand. “There’s always next time.”

Katsuki quickly yanks his hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

Katsuki watches as Izuku finishes everything in the bowl and is relieved to see some of the color has returned to his skin. The relief soon turns to frustration, as Deku’s full stomach gives him a burst of energy and bravery. It starts harmlessly enough. At first Deku is content to frolic and roll around in the grass. After a while, he lies still on his back and simply watches the clouds.

After some time, Deku disappears in the tent. When he returns he has an armful of paper and bottles full of different colored liquids. Once the bottles are on the ground, he tosses all of the blank paper in the air and gleefully watches as they settle on the grass. He looks at Katsuki and spreads his hands dramatically.

“BY THE POWER OF ART! I might not be able to read or write, but I can still paint!”

Painting turns out to be a very messy ordeal, especially when Izuku insists on using his fingers. Katsuki watches him work with a mix of curiosity and revulsion. Deku smears the colors and lets the paint drip from his fingertips. Other times he flicks open his hands, and lets the splatter marks decorate the paper. Katsuki would have been content to observe, but Deku shoves a blank piece of paper in his direction. He ignores it at first, but Deku inches it closer and closer until it’s practically under his nose.

“Try it!”

“Fuck off.”
“C’mon, express yourself!” Izuku pleads. “I know you want to.”

“NO.”

Eventually, Deku gives up, and Katsuki adamantly waits as Deku completes his work. When he’s finished, Deku proudly holds up a mess of warm colors and half-moon shapes blooming all along the edges. The moons become more frequent and dense as they move further away from the center. “Lookit this one! It looks like one of your explosions.”

“Are you shitting me? It does not,” Katsuki bristles. “It’s too orderly. Your shapes are too basic, the colors clash, and the point of action is all wrong.”

Izuku scowls. “Well, how would you do it, Mr. Expert?”

He’s playing into Deku’s hand, but he doesn’t care. Honestly, he’s a bit curious if he can pull it off himself. Once he gets started, it’s hard to stop. The colors sing, and he understands which should be blended and which should be left alone. He feels Deku’s breath against his right arm, but does his best to ignore it as he goes. At least Deku is here and isn’t running off. At least Katsuki can focus. When he finally stops to appreciate his work, it’s done. He just knows it is.

“Wooow,” Izuku breathes. “You’re a natural! I wish I was that good when I first started.”

Normally, Deku putting himself down would have stroked his ego and brightened Katsuki’s spirits, but not this time. The defiled sheet of paper looks back at him. He scans it, following the lines of energy, and splotches of color thrown about by his own hand, and tries to decipher the meaning.

“What’s even the point?” Katsuki mutters as he curls his upper lip. “It’s meaningless. I just made a mess.”

“Art doesn’t need a point, you silly noodle.”

“I don’t like it. It’s too human.”

“Hrm?” Deku turns his head to the side and lifts Katsuki’s painting as he turns it around in his hands. “What about this is human? This is abstract expressionism! It’s all about emotion. See?” He exclaims as he traces each expanding shape. “These are your non-human emotions!”

Katsuki purses his lips together. He wants to tear the paper to shreds and burn it to cinders. Why was he wasting his time painting an explosion when he could make real ones whenever he wanted?

“No,” Katsuki says flatly. “It isn’t right. Anything that doesn’t come from our birthright isn’t ours. There’s a reason that our ruins are still ruins.”

“Is that so?”

Katsuki hangs his head. Before, anything related to humanity made his stomach turn, and here he was painting with one. Anything human is disgraceful. They’re the reason for his shame.

There’s a beat before Izuku giggles and Katsuki’s eyes snap up. “That’s bullshit,” Izuku continues with a gentle smile. “If you believed that, then why’d you get so angry that you couldn’t read the writing underground? You really think only humans were responsible for all those carvings and murals?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Katsuki growls. “Those days are over.”
“I dunno, Mister Alpha. Sounds like something you can decide for yourself.”

Katsuki says nothing and a blanket of silence covers them both. He’s thought of this as well, but there’s no way of knowing which of their kind was responsible for the art and writing first. Izuku grabs a second blank piece of paper and Katsuki goes back to watching him work. Absently, he uses his claws to pick the drying paint off his skin. It’s strange. He doesn’t totally hate making art. He might even feel less stressed. After the exercise, Katsuki feels a bit lighter in his chest. He can breathe a little easier.

The stress returns in full force only minutes later. Deku gets bored of painting and he’s up and spinning in circles until he trips, and rolls to the ground in a fit of laughter that leaves him wheezing and breathless. Katsuki feels what little respect he had towards the human dwindle. It’s annoying, sure, but as long as he isn’t running out of sight, and his attention isn’t focused on Katsuki, he can bear it.

However, when Deku starts climbing trees, there’s officially a problem. He’s impressively nimble, as he uses his arms to pull himself up, and his ankles to hook onto foot holds. Suddenly Katsuki understands that humans were built for climbing and running. Katsuki winds himself around the tree and climbs after him. Deku doesn’t cooperate, and thinks it’s a game, because of course he fucking does. He’s acting like a disobedient pup, and Katsuki has to catch him if he wants this to end.

“I am the highest human in the tree!” He declares proudly. “Get it?”

Katsuki seethes. *IF HE CLIMBED UP HERE JUST TO MAKE THAT SUPID JOKE, I’M GONNA FUCKING LOSE IT.*

“GET OVER HERE, RIGHT NOW.”

Deku ignores him, but Katsuki sees an opportunity when he’s on the outer edge of the branch. He sets off an explosion near the trunk. It snaps and bows to the ground, and Deku goes down along with it. Katsuki winces when he hits the ground, but the boy rolls and sits up in a fit of giggles. Katsuki drops to to meet him in a fit of rage.

“WILL YOU FUCK OFF? STAY OUT OF THE TREES. YOU COULDN’T BE MORE IRRITATING IF YOU TRIED!”

“I AM INVINCIBLE!” Izuku declares as he flexes his biceps. “Hey, hey! Seriously, I feel great! Did you see how far I fell? What would happen if you used one of your explosions on me?”

“You’d die,” Katsuki deadpans.

“Let’s test it for science.”

“NO.”

Katsuki has half a mind to put Deku on a leash and tether him to the tent. Of course, that would involve holding him down, and he’d rather not risk manhandling him and triggering the venom. Instead, he drags him back to camp by his shirt and watches as Deku picks apart pieces of grass and blows away the remnants from his hand.

“I’m bored.” Izuku whines. “There’s nothing to do.”

“What do you do besides read? Just do what you normally do.”
Deku strums his fingers against his cheeks before getting up and staggering to the tent. He returns with a soft cylindrical object. He rolls it out in front of his feet and steps on top bringing his hands together at his heart.

“‘The fuck are you doing?’”

“Sun salutations.”

“Why?”

“Cause it’s relaxing, and doesn’t require reading.”

At first the poses are strange and simple. The poses that have Deku on all fours are especially perplexing. Katsuki supposes they must do something to help his back. But once Deku's done with the ritual, he moves on to more advanced exercises that put him upside-down. He’s forced to use his legs to keep balance.

Katsuki turns away as fast as he can, hoping he’s hidden his reddening face from Deku. He needed that weakness on display like he needed a hole in his head. Instead he keeps his back turned and occupies himself with stretches of his own, flexing his arms and tail. He peeks over at Deku occasionally, making sure he doesn’t decide to do something stupid. His eyes linger a little longer than he should, and Deku meets his eyes. Katsuki whips around back to his own training, heart thrumming in his ribs.

A minute passes and he hears Deku get up, but he doesn’t expect the human to reach out for him. He smells the blast of pheromones immediately, and instinctively catches Izuku’s hand before it closes on him. He should have dodged and he curses himself.

Damn him. Damn this unpredictable bastard.

He’d been wondering when the aphrodisiac in the venom would kick in. So it didn’t need contact after all. He should have made Kirishima and Denki watch him until it wore off. Katsuki knows he shouldn’t have risked letting himself anywhere near Deku, but the human was his problem, not theirs. Handling this should have been easy. If only Deku stayed the fuck put like he was supposed to.

So the legends were partly true. The head scratches from the night before weren’t enough, and the moment he had Deku in a headlock had no effect, but somehow this casual touch was all it took? The venom’s effect had to be purely time based. Izuku’s face is flushed and his pupils are nearly blown to black. The venom from both nagas must have finally kicked in at the same time.

“Are you jealous?” Izuku murmurs with a knowing smile.

“Of what?” Katsuku snaps as he tries to keep calm. “There’s nothing to be jealous of.”

“Then why were you staring?” His tone is low and dangerous. Katsuki’s chest seizes and Izuku snickers. “Do you like my legs, Kacchan?”

He steps forward and lets the front of his knee brush against Katsuki’s torso. His thighs run against the naga’s scaly body and Katsuki freezes.

“That’s a yes,” Izuku giggles and snakes his arms around Katsuki’s neck. “And to think you’d allow me to cocktease you without saying a word. Jeeeeeze...” Izuku drawls. “You’re somethin’ else.”
Katsuki tries to speak, but all he produces are sputters. When Deku’s thighs wrap around his torso, he actually wheezes. He has to get free but he doesn’t trust his own strength on Izuku’s body. He doesn’t trust himself even placing his hands on the human PERIOD. Not the way he is now. The scent of Katsuki’s own venom pushing Deku over the edge is suffocating. It’s a trap for them both. The closeness and friction is creating a rising cocktail of desire in Katsuki’s own blood he’s barely holding back as it is.

“DEKU,” Katsuki growls as he wills his eyes to glow red. “Let go. RIGHT NOW.”

Seeing the eyes, Izuku quickly ducks his face against Katsuki’s shoulder. “Don’t knock me out, please,” he says with a sigh. “This feels amazing, and I just got here.”

SHIT. SHIT. SHIT.

“You’re so tense. Do I scare you?” Izuku runs the tip of his nose along Katsuki’s neck and stops when he reaches the shell of his ear. “I would never hurt you,” he breathes and Katsuki’s skin prickles with goosebumps at the touch. One of Deku’s hands grips the necklace, and he idly pulls each bead through his fingers, one at a time. “Speechless? Or are you cold? If you’re sluggish again you always have me to keep you warm. All you ever need to do is ask.”

OH HELL.

Katsuki mentally gropes for words again, when Izuku’s warm lips close around his earlobe and his dull teeth nibble the soft flesh. Katsuiki’s chest tightens and he chokes. He can’t breathe. Every one of his muscles are and rigid and hot. His vision begins to swim as his lungs burn. Deku’s thighs squeeze right below Katsuki’s ribs and he swallows thickly. He forces himself to think through the sea of pheromones.

Holy fuck, this is it. I’M DYING. This human is going to fucking kill me.

Katsuki grinds his teeth in defiance. He’s never lost a stare down with his pack. Never once had he fallen to the spell of another of his naga pack mates. He’ll be damned if Izuku breaks his self-control and pulls through with yet another victory.

He concentrates, calling upon his power and letting his energy swirl in his eyes.

“Look at me,” Katsuki murmurs in a low voice, trying his best to stay calm. “Show me your eyes, Deku. I want to see you and take all of it in.”

He’s relieved when Deku obeys, but his stomach flips when his flushed, freckled takes up his entire line of sight. He’s so close, so warm, needy, and ready. Katsuki’s hind brain has utterly betrayed him and is urging him forward to complete what he’s started. Kiss him. Seal the claim and imprint on Izuku.

NOT LIKE THIS. NOT LIKE FUCKING THIS. Katsuki thinks frantically to himself as he steadies his hypnosis. DO NOT KISS HIM. DO NOT TOUCH HIM. DON’T EVEN BREATHE NEAR HIS MOUTH. WIN, DAMMIT.

Deku’s forest green eyes sparkle and glaze over. His soft lips part and his hot breath ghosts along Katsuki’s mouth. A dreamy and pleasing smile is starting to spread and Katsuki knows he’s absorbing the full effect of the spell. Katsuki’s spine tingles. It would be so satisfying to kiss Deku and push him over the edge, but he can’t. There was a line, dammit, and he shouldn’t be long now.

“Good, you’re doing so well. You’re doing perfectly,” Katsuki whispers through his teeth. “Just
stare.”

“Mmmn.”

“Now relax,” Katsuki wheezes, “and fall.”

Izuku loses consciousness, but he stubbornly holds onto Katsuki’s back for a good minute until his body relaxes in sleep and he slides off onto his back. Katsuki tears away as soon as he’s free, red faced and panting. His palms smoke and the grass melts to fiery embers. He spits venom and stubbornly digs his hands into the dirt. No explosions. CONTROL. He has to control himself.

He can’t risk waking Deku up.

Katsuki deflates on the ground letting a string of expletives burst from his mouth. He swears until his claws rip up the plants and he runs out of breath. He can’t remember which words he’s already spat, but he keeps going. His palms scorch the earth as he writhes under his coils in fierce primal hissing.

WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT.

He wants to blow up the whole campsite. No, blow up the whole island. NO. THE WHOLE OCEAN. He’s certainly perspired enough sweat on his skin to detonate most of the jungle. But even that wouldn’t be enough.


He enjoyed Deku’s attempt at seduction way more that he should have. Katsuki takes a peek at Izuku from underneath his coils and gives him the most withering glare he can muster. Katsuki, the alpha and future guardian of the island, had nearly lost to his libido for a miserable, filthy, weak bodied human. The Creator must be laughing at him. This couldn’t be happening.

He’d especially come close to losing it at the end. He’d seen Deku slip under his control before, but now there was something far more intimate and rewarding to coaxing him into a trance. Especially now that he was acquainted with the mind that ticked beyond his eyes. It shouldn’t have happened. It wasn’t like Katsuki was touch starved. He could get action anytime, anywhere. He had his lay the night before, and he’ll get laid again tonight. There’s absolutely no goddamned reason for this.

Deku wasn’t so great, with his stupid face, nosy questions, and overactive sweat glands. He was kind of an idiot. He might have his clever moments, but he had no sense self-preservation or survival instincts.

Fall for him? YEAH, RIGHT.

Katsuki’s reaction was due to the venom from the Lover’s Kiss. It was all instinct. That’s all. Katsuki smelled it activate in Deku’s blood and his body just responded naturally, the way it was supposed to. He never wanted to mark Izuku in the first place. That was never his idea.

And yet, he’s still caring for the human. WHY?

I’m a masochist. Katsuki realizes. This sick fuck pulled it out of me. He’s wrecked me. I’m totally sick in the head, and it’s all his fault.

Once Katsuki has mostly settled, another thought crosses his mind. How long will that shit-stain stay knocked out?
Katsuki frantically searches the tent and digs through Izuku’s things until he finds the rope. He snatches it and hurriedly scoops Izuku from the ground. Katsuki and holds him as far from his body as he possibly can, as if the human were an abhorrent beast that could wake up at any moment and bite him.

As quickly as he can, Katsuki ties Deku’s body upright to the nearest tree to camp. He stops to test the hold around his legs, torso, and shoulders, but it seems to be enough. Katsuki relaxes. He’s safe. He pauses for a moment and puts a hand to his forehead. It’s the fever alright. Sleep is probably good for him, and Katsuki decides he can ignore Deku until he finally sobered up. Then Katsuki remembers the human needs his next meal and curses the Creator’s name.

There’s no way \textit{in hell} Katsuki’s getting near Deku unless he absolutely has to. But he has to monitor his condition every so often to make sure he isn’t dead. He grabs a stick and cautiously pokes his cheek. Deku winces and stirs, which is all the confirmation Katsuki needs. It’ll have to do. He does this for a couple intervals, and after about an hour or so, Deku wakes up.

“Kacchan?”

Katsuki ignores him the best he can. The human’s voice sounds warbled and distressed, if not dry. \textit{He has to be thirsty.}

“Yeah, I’m here,” he replies begrudgingly. “Keep quiet. This is for your own good.”

If Deku’s feverish, he’s probably dehydrated. The problem is solved easily enough. Katsuki ties a water bottle to a stick. He lets the droplets fall on Deku’s face before sticking it in his mouth. Deku coughs on it, but Katsuki couldn’t care less.

He’s still cooking when Kirishima and Denki arrive to check in on him. Katsuki closes his eyes and mentally counts to five. He didn’t ask for any of this. The campsite looks like a mess. An entire tree branch has been blown apart. Most of the grass is scorched. There’s paper and paint everywhere. Food containers, and all sorts of utensils are scattered about. Deku is tied to a tree and here Katsuki was looming over a fire, stirring a pot of bubbling human food.

Why had his pack mates insisted on sticking their noses where they didn’t belong? Why couldn’t they stay put until it was time to leave for the meeting that night? The least they could do was allow him some dignity.

“Hey, so um,” Kirishima says as he looks between Izuku and Katsuki. “What’s going on here?”

“He annoyed the fuck out of me, so I tied him up.”

“And now you’re cooking for him?”

“Humans have to eat three times a day. Would you trust him around fire?” Katsuki growls. “Because I fucking wouldn’t.”

“Three times?” Denki repeats as he raises an eyebrow. “Yikes, that’s kind of a lot.”

Katsuki’s eye catches a gleam of metal hanging on Denki’s necklace. It’s been curled around the beads in a short spiral. He almost hates to ask, but his curiosity gets the best of him and he starts speaking before he can stop himself.

“Is that…?”
“Yeah!” Denki beams. “It’s the spoon! Like it? It’s shiny and super malleable, so I figured, why not?”

Katsuki glares but Denki’s bright smile doesn’t waver. “Hey, don’t worry! He has more.” His eyes search for the human, and when Denki spots Izuku across the field and his forehead creases in concern. “Aw, dude. I think he’s crying. Can I let him go?”

“HELL NO.”

“Oh, c’mon!” Denki cries gesturing to Izuku in an exasperated shrug. “What could he have possibly done? He’s just a little guy.”

“If you let him go, he’s your problem,” Katsuki snaps.

“Yeah, okay. I can deal with that.” Denki beams. “We’ve bonded.”

Katsuki snarls as Izuku is untied. Deku flexes and massages the places he was bound. Katsuki hopes that if he looks intimidating enough, Deku will ignore him. His luck is shot when Denki leads him back to camp. He could make oatmeal again, but he sort of feels like experimenting with all the extra ingredients Deku added. He wonders what would happen if he cooked with those first.

At first, they’re just picking up the cans around camp. Then Deku drops one. He tosses it to Kaminari, and a game of catch develops. When Denki misses Izuku’s hands and clobbers him in the head with a can full of food, Katsuki shuts it down.

“If you’re going to play, do it with something lighter.”

“Ehh, yeah that’s okay. I think we’re done. We’ll clean up.”

As it turns out, they aren’t done. Clean up doesn’t last long. Izuku picks up a stick, and uses it as a club to smash empty cans up in the air. Denki excitedly takes to collecting them around camp and throwing them for Deku to hit. Kirishima gets roped into it as well, and grabs anything that is knocked too far away.

“Is that garbage?”

“Well yeah, you told us to be careful, and these aren’t heavy,” Denki explains. “Should we stop?”

“Nevermind, I don’t care.”

Katsuki watches as the next pitch carries over some electricity. It lights the can with a blue burst of sparks. Izuku’s laughter reaches him and Katsuki stirs the pot a bit more thoroughly. At least they’re having fun. When he looks up again, the two have swapped roles of pitcher and batter. Izuku throws the next can, and Denki knocks it sailing past Katsuki’s shoulder.

“OI DUMBASS!” Katsuki barks. “WATCH WHERE YOU’RE THRO-“

The next item to go flying is the lighter fluid container. Katsuki recognizes it too late. Denki smacks it with the stick and a burst of electricity. It ignites into a fireball immediately and Denki screams. Katsuki watches in disbelief as the fireball goes sailing into the greenhouse and explodes. It doesn’t take long for the plants inside to combust.

Of course Denki found the lighter fluid. And the liquid interacted with Denki’s electricity. Because of fucking course. Why wouldn’t it?
When Katsuki sees a thick cloud of gray smoke billow from the roof he wants to murder them all.

“KRISHIMA, GET OVER HERE!”

Katsuki abandons his cooking to dig up a handful of dirt. He directs Kirishima to make use of his hardening quirk to remove the smoldering ball of fire. Once it’s out, he takes the dirt and smothers out the flames.

Deku being the idiot that he is doesn’t even understand the scene unfolding before him. He even cheers them on and raises his arms and welcomes the warmth as his research goes up in flames. If he were sober, Katsuki is positive Deku would launch himself right into the fire. Things couldn’t possibly get any worse.

“BOTH OF YOU,” Katsuki says as he does his best to hold back the brunt of his temper. “TAKE HIM FAR AWAY FROM HERE UNTIL I CALL FOR YOU.”

The expression on Katsuki’s face must have been his scariest one yet, because neither Denki nor Kirishima can meet his eyes for longer than a couple seconds before they hastily retreat with Deku to the other side of the valley. When Katsuki is finished cooking the meal, it’s too soon. He’s still beyond irritated. As much as he would like to delay in calling Deku and his pack mates back, the human likes his food warm.

When he finds them at last, all of them are wearing some sort of shiny material as hats. Deku is proudly perched atop a fallen tree and has a roll of paper raised dramatically above his head.

“My fellow cadets! You must never despair! Even in your darkest hour, believe you can twist fate and GO BEYOND PLUS ULTRAAAA!”

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s ship captain!” Kirishima explains. “We’re his sailors, but sometimes when we take off the hats, we become the sea monsters. We’re short of players, so he keeps switching it up.”

“He’s really fun!” Denki chimes in. “No idea why you had him bound up like that.”

“Dinner time. Let’s go.”

Katsuki goes to approach the log, but Izuku shoos him away. “Back! BACK, YOU RAPSCALLION! This is an exclusive vessel! We do not tolerate stowaways! You must first be cleared for entry!”

“What’s his problem?”

“Ah, he’s the captain remember?” Kirishima replies. “You gotta ask for permission to come abroad.”

“Are you fucking serious?”

Denki shrugs. “It’s his ship. You gotta.”

Katsuki rolls his eyes but decides to humor Deku. In this state, it’s probably best not to upset him. “Permission to come aboa-” He doesn’t get the chance to finish when Izuku smacks his face with the rolled up piece of paper.

“DENIED!”
Katsuki pounces with a snarl and scruffs Izuku by the shirt on his neck. He drags the wailing human back to the campsite and drops him in front of his dinner. Izuku acknowledges the food with a nod. His body sags, and Katsuki catches him before he slides off the side.

Izuku flops backwards against Katsuki’s arm and looks up at him pitifully. “I’m dizzy.”

Katsuki places a hand on his forehead and swears. He doesn’t know much about humans, but Deku is boiling hot. He’s certain humans aren’t supposed to turn this color. He’s about to pick him up when Izuku leans forwards and vomits. Katsuki has to grab him by the arms to prevent him from slouching forward and falling into it.

Dinner isn’t happening anytime soon. Katsuki places Izuku back in his cot, and keeps him on his side. Deku cooperates and doesn’t fuss, but he starts to shiver. His condition doesn’t improve as the sky darkens and the stars come out. Katsuki does his best to encourage Izuku to eat, but the human has no appetite. At the very least, he can hold down water, one gulp at a time.

“You’re so pretty,” Izuku sighs as Katsuki closes the water bottle. “Not just your face and body. I mean all of you. Your heart too.”

“Shut up.”

“I like your soft hair, the way you carry yourself in battle, how you plan your strategy in games, and the patterns on your scales,” Izuku says airily. “They’re absolutely gorgeous when they’re in the sun.”

Katsuki feels a blush rising and quickly karate chops Deku’s nose earning a yip from the human. “Fucking stop talking. You’re annoying. None of this means a damn thing.”

“But…I mean it though.”

“If you mean it, say it when you’re sober,” Katsuki counters. “I dare you.”

“Challenge accepted,” Izuku says with a breathy giggle. “Prepare to lose, jerkface.” He then closes his eyes and drifts back to his dreamy state. “When you smile, I bet it’s the most beautiful thing in the world.”

“Yeah, I’m the goddamned sun god of happiness,” Katsuki mutters. “If you die, I’ll kill you,” Izuku laughs weakly and smiles at Katsuki as if he’s in a fog. “Okay, that’s fair.”

“Hey,” Kirishima says as he enters the tent and nudges Katsuki in the ribs. “My offer to watch him tonight still stands.”

Katsuki acknowledges him with a nod and rubs the back of his neck.

“Wow, he looks terrible,” Denki says as he peers between his two pack mates. He nervously tugs on the warped spoon on his necklace. “He’s definitely not gonna make it.”

Kirishima cocks his head to the side and hums. “It’s a venom fever right? You know I think I heard of a plant that can help. If it’s eaten, it can be used to lessen the effects of venom in humans. Let’s see…it was a part of a song…something, something, orange leaves and red berries of three.”

“Then fucking find it.” Katsuki growls.

“I wouldn’t even know where to start!” Kirishima exclaims. “It could grow in caves, be exclusive
to rainy season, grow up in the trees, by the sea—oh hey. He’s got some hanging up over there.”

Katsuki snatches it down from the ceiling in a heartbeat.

“How do I know?”

“Well, it doesn’t look like you can get him to eat it. That would require effort on his end.”

“Oh!” Denki exclaims and grabs a pestle and mortar from the ground. “You can use this! It’s for making medicine.”

Kirishima raises an eyebrow. “Um, and you know this…how?”

“I handed them to him yesterday,” Denki says as Katsuki takes both from his hands and inspects the tools. “He explained everything. If you mash the leaves and grind ‘em down, he should be able to eat it, right?”

Katsuki takes this as well and uses the tools to prepare the medicine. Once the paste is formed, he puts it in Izuku’s mouth. He pinches his nose shut and closes his mouth until he swallows.

Kirishima crosses his arms as he admires the hanging plants. “Wow, he went a little crazy in his collection. What’s all this for, anyway?”

“He collects and studies plants,” Katsuki mutters. “It’s all he’s here for.”

Katsuki intently watches Deku’s sweaty face, searching for any kind of relief from the medicine. He’s aware that his packmates are watching him closely, but he can’t bring himself to worry about how this looks. As time passes, he realizes Denki and Kirishima have left the tent, and he can’t stay any longer. His entire pack is waiting for him. His pups are waiting for all of them to see all of their fathers’ at once. As their alpha, Katsuki wants to make them proud more than anything else in the world.

He shifts his coils in a motion to leave, when Izuku’s soft fingers curl around his hand. It’s a gentle motion and the tender touch reminds him of the goodbye kiss Izuku gave him on the beach. Izuku looks awful. He’s noticeably shivering. His eyes look dark and unfocused and his forehead is damp with sweat. If Katsuki thought he was sweaty before, he was practically drenched now. Even more worrying is watching Izuku take shallow breaths and mumble unintelligibly under his breath as he stares at nothing.

Katsuki cringes as he watches Izuku’s suffering. An emptiness grows in his stomach, and Katsuki feels like he’s falling.

He’s dying.

When Katsuki meets his pack mates outside he speaks the words that have haunted his mind and rotted his stomach.

“I’m not going,” He says, and the words of betrayal are truer than anything he’s felt.

Kirishima balks. “Uh, what? You’re our alpha! You kind of have to.”

“Not tonight,” Katsuki says with a sigh. “Go in my stead.”

Kirishima flexes his claws as his tail curls in around himself. It’s a defensive motion, one that Katsuki’s only seen his packmate make when they were small. “But you’ve never missed one
before! Emiko needs you, man. You’re the only parent she has left! What should I tell everyone?”

Katsuki growls. It’s stupid. It’s beyond stupid but he can’t bring himself to leave Deku behind. Not while he’s dying of Katsuki’s own venom. It doesn’t feel right. He hates to admit it, but right now, Katsuki the closest thing to a friend the human has.

“Tell ‘em I have responsibilities as alpha” he says slowly. He forces himself to look his pack mates in the eyes. “This is my fault, and I’m seeing it through to the end. Reach out to Emiko, and tell her…I’m sorry. I’ll meet her again after this. Whenever she wants.”

Denki and Kirishima nod, looking distraught and it stings. Katsuki had decided long ago, that as alpha, he would do everything in his power to prevent his pack from knowing and accepting weakness. His shoulders sag. Would things ever stop getting worse? He supposes he should feel anger and frustration for willingly accepting this humiliation, but he doesn’t. He’s too exhausted.

He returns to Deku’s bedside and studies his face. The next few hours will be critical. Katsuki shifts uncomfortably. He can only hope that the medicine Kirishima remembered will be enough to help Deku pull through. Every passing second is stifling, and he finds himself speaking to Deku despite his unconscious state.

“If you die now, I’m gonna look like a fucking idiot. I’ll never live this down, you know,” he says as he grips the metal frame. “I can’t explain this. Not a goddamned one of them would get it.”

Deku doesn’t answer him, and Katsuki doesn’t expect him to. He can only dare to imagine his words reach him at all. Maybe on some level they’ll permeate his dream.

“You aren’t prey,” Katsuki spits, “So don’t you dare accept this death like you are.”

Prey fought back. Prey ran in fear. Prey didn’t offer compassion or trust.

“We aren’t done yet, ya hear? Don’t go taking the easy way out!”

Katsuki bows his head and rests it on the cold steel and synthetic fibers. He listens to every breath Deku takes and closes his eyes. He isn’t sure when Deku’s breathing goes back to normal. He’s not sure when the human squeezes his hand and rolls over on his side to face him.

Katsuki’s eyes aren’t open, but he can feel Deku’s sweet breath wash over him. Birds sing in the distance and he thinks he can see the dull orange of dawn rising against the pale tent fabric. Katsuki is too tired to put it all together. Is it another dream?

He isn’t sure. But somehow as Katsuki drifts back into unconsciousness he knows a couple things are absolutely certain. The medicine did its job. Deku will live to see yet another day. Second, their fates have become hopelessly intertwined. And lastly, everything in their lives is completely fucked.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait! My schedule might be more erratic now that we're in the holiday season, but I'll try my best.

EVERYONE. Go see 'The Shape of Water' when you can! It’s out in the US this December I am so unbelievably pumped.
Respite

Chapter Summary

"We were hoping for some romance
All we found was more despair
We must talk about our problems
We are in a state of Flux"

Chapter Notes

Consistent chapter length? What's that? ⚫⚪⚫

I'm absolutely floored by the amount of positive feedback this story has received. You guys are amazing. I love you too.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku is the first to wake up.

The sunlight shines through a crack in the tent and spills against his skin. He grumbles softly and crinkles his nose. Izuku smacks his lips. His mouth has the aftertastes of something leafy. He runs his tongue along his front teeth and pokes at something caught in-between his gums. He picks at it with a fingernail until it dislodges, and examines his find. It’s some kind of orange leaf. Possibly from one of the specimens he’s collected? He doesn’t remember eating it.

His head pounds, his mouth is dry, and his stomach feels fiery and sour. He hates being hungover. He’d love to try and sleep this off, but that doesn’t make sense. He recalls his last drink was over a day ago. Back when he was waiting for Katsuki to kill him.

And he hadn’t.

It’s then Izuku notices Katsuki at his bedside with his head resting on his side, right near Izuku’s chest. His long body is curled in loops around his torso at the foot of the bed. Izuku blinks uncomprehendingly at Katsuki’s sublime features as he peacefully dozes. He can’t help but notice the way Katsuki’s long and dark eyelashes stand out against his fair skin. The relaxed expression on Katsuki’s face is a stark contrast to the constant aggressive nature Izuku has become so used to.

Izuku would think he were still dreaming if it weren’t for his own nausea. This couldn’t be the same monster who threatened to kill him, and yet, somehow it was. Those high cheekbones were unmistakably Katsuki’s. His fluffy hair catches the morning sun in a halo and it looks almost like he’s glowing in angelic light. It’s the most beautiful thing Izuku’s ever seen and his heart flutters. It takes every ounce of Izuku’s self-control to not reach out and touch him.

I have to be high, Izuku thinks frantically as he drags a hand down his own face. All the colors look so saturated and pretty. There’s no way I’m falling for this jackass.
His thoughts are still foggy but he wills himself to think. Last night had been unpleasant. The delirium he experienced gives him hazy memories smeared with intense nausea and weakness. It was bad. He isn’t quite sure how he pulled through. He shouldn’t have. Yet somehow he did, and seeing Katsuki peacefully resting besides him feels like some kind of divine miracle.

*He saved me.* Izuku realizes in shock. *I should be dead. I should be dead in so many ways and for so many reasons, yet somehow, I’m not. I cheated death every single time.*

Izuku supposes he should feel some sort of gratitude towards Katsuki. And yet, his annoyance builds as he realizes that this entire damn mess is his fault. Would Katsuki really leave him be to complete his work? What would their relationship become from this point onward? There’s only one way to find out. Izuku huffs and with a swift motion, whips the pillow from behind his back and brings it down on Katsuki’s face.

The naga’s reaction is instantaneous. The coils around the bed jerk to life as Katsuki’s claws spring from his fingers and he rises with a snarl.

“What the fu-”

“Hi,” Izuku says simply.

Katsuki stops. “Are you?” he grumbles as he rubs the sleep from one of his eyes.

“Yeah, quite a bit,” Izuku admits with the hint of a smile sneaking in his grimace. He works to keep his face neutral, but he’s amused to see that the hair on Katsuki’s right side has been completely flattened. “Nowhere near as high as yesterday though.”

“Yeah? So I help you through it and you slap me awake with that thing? That’s a stupid way of showin’ gratitude.”

“Oh, fuck you,” Izuku growls. “If anything I should have hit you harder. My memories of the past two days might be jumbled, but I clearly remember you stood me up, you asshat. I was furious, you know.”

“Yeah, for sparing your life? You’re fucking welcome.”

“Fuck off,” Izuku mutters. “I ought to smack you. You have no idea how awful that was. If you wanted to be friends, you should have said so.”

“I’m not friends with humans,” Katsuki growls.

“Well, maybe not before, but you are now.”

“NO, FUCK YOU!” Katsuki snarls suddenly. “We are not FRIENDS.”

Izuku throws his arms up to his temples in frustration. “OKAY, SURE. ’Cause you went against the laws of your own clan, rescued me, and kept me under your protection all on a whim?”

“I’m the alpha of this island,” Katsuki growls. “Anything I decide becomes law. That’s the way it is. You only won because I accepted the loss. I realized I wanted you alive, and now you’re mine.”

Izuku clenches his jaw in frustration. *So I can belong to him but we can’t be friends.*

“I don’t belong to anyone,” Izuku argues hotly. “That wasn’t part of the deal.”

Katsuki snorts. “Neither was running away and being captured. Claiming you was the only way to
get you back.”

“I didn’t want to be claimed!”

“Then you shouldn’t’ve gotten caught! If anything, you should be thanking me for even getting involved.”

“THANKING YOU? Why would I be thanking you? This entire thing was y-” but Izuku stops himself. A breeze wafts a strange scent to Izuku’s nose. It smells a bit like smoke and burnt hay. He sniffs it cautiously and frowns. “Hold on. Something smells funny. Burnt, actually.”

Katsuki tenses as Izuku narrows his eyes and processes the events from the day before.

“AH! That’s right!” Izuku exclaims. “You made me breakfast yesterday. What happened? Did you try cooking again and mess up dinner?”

Katsuki says nothing and thoughtfully chews his bottom lip. He stretches and shuffles off the bed to pick something off the ground. When he returns, he hands Izuku an aluminum can with an illustration of a pile of beans in a cooking pan on the wrapper.

“What does it say?”

“Um,” Izuku mutters as he squints at the seemingly unfamiliar characters.

He stares and moves his eyes over each symbol over and over, but nothing registers. He smacks his forehead and drags his hand down to his chin. He remembers this as well. It’s the whole reason Katsuki was even cooking in the first place. So he’s still feverish from the venom. Fantastic.

“Goddammit. Well, I know it’s a can of baked beans.”

Katsuki tosses it aside and places a hand on Izuku’s forehead. Izuku freezes. Katsuki’s palm lightly rests against his skin. Katsuki acts as if it’s the most ordinary contact in the world, and Izuku glances at back at Katsuki in bewilderment. After a moment Katsuki pulls away with a huff.

“What does it say?”

“What the hell was THAT?”

“I’ll give you another full day to finally sober up.”

Izuku groans as the words sink in. A whole day of not being able to read. He uses the opportunity to cover his face in what he hopes looks like frustration as he hides the blush forming beneath his hands.

“Ugh, I can deal with being sick, but I really need to get back to work. It’s not like the plants stopped growing for me,” Izuku says in a muffled voice. “I didn’t bother working on the day of our last fight. So that’s one goddamned day wasted.”

“Right,” Izuku nods as he slides his hands to his lap. “FUCK. And if I can’t read at all, today will be the third. Maybe I could leave signs behind for myself around camp for once I’m-”

Katsuki suddenly seizes Izuku by the shoulders and rolls him out of bed. Izuku squawks in surprise as Katsuki effortlessly throws the human over his back. He bends and scoops the backpack on his other arm. Then after a moment of seemingly changing his mind, flips Izuku around the other way.
Izuku yelps in protest and squirms in his grasp, but Katsuki’s hold is firm, and he’s unable to free himself. The world spins and the ground passes by in streaks of colors as Katsuki carries him outside. He tries raising his head to make sense of his surroundings, but Katsuki is moving too fast, and his vision blurs everything together.

“HEY! WHAT THE-What are you doing?”

“Like hell you’re spending an entire day stressing over something you can’t do,” Katsuki snarls. “A day’s worth of time by the sea ought to get you through the last of this damn fever.”

“A whole day?” Izuku shrieks in alarm. “Kacchan, wait! What about the plants? What about food? I can’t just leave camp!”

“DEAL WITH IT! You’re not going back until you can read again.”

Izuku growls in protest and battles against Katsuki’s grip, but knows full well from experience that he’ll never outmuscle his captor. Being carried upside down in his current state is unpleasant. He tries scrunching his eyes shut, but being blind and jostled around only amplifies his nausea. Katsuki carries him for what seems like ages, until he finally lets go. Izuku and the backpack unceremoniously hit the soft earth.

Frustrated and mildly dizzy, Izuku staggers to his feet. They’re at the entrance of a large cave at the very edge of the beach. He recognizes the tunnel’s mouth as the one he dashed into the night he was first captured by Katsuki. He can even spot the rock inside where his things were once left to dry.

“Back at the cave again?”

“Yeah, it’s mine,” Katsuki says nonchalantly. “This is one of the best places to rest on the island.”

Izuku sighs and scans the rest of their surroundings. There’s absolutely nothing for him to do here. With the cave and his backpack, he reluctantly admits that all of his survival needs could be easily met for a day, but did Katsuki really expect him to do nothing and rest until the next morning?

“Somehow, I don’t see how being here will help me recover any faster,” Izuku argues. “Granted, some studies have proven that negative hydrogen ions released from sea spray can improve the body’s ability to absorb oxygen, but I’ve already been living outdoors for the past three weeks. I’ve been getting all the negative ions I need! I’m sure that whatever you cooked up back at camp can’t be *that* terrible.”

Katsuki ignores him and slithers off into the mouth of the cave. “Stay put. I want to show you something.”

While he’s gone, Izuku scans the area for a straight and slender stick. He finds a branch with smaller twigs poking out of it. He absentmindedly breaks them off one by one. Maybe if he’s patient, he can spearfish and catch some fresh breakfast. Even if he fails, he’s almost positive Katsuki will catch one himself in order to show off his prowess as a hunter.

When that’s done, he only thing left to do is smooth out the rest and sharpen the end of the stick into a point. He digs through the backpack, and is grateful for having the good sense to replenish his emergenc supplies after falling into the ruins. He nearly gives up hope when his fingers brush the metal of a small swiss army knife. He unfolds the blade and considers the size. It’ll do for the task ahead, but Katsuki had shown apprehension for human weapons before. Izuku’s stomach rumbles and decides that the risk of spooking Katsuki is worth keeping his mind off his groggy
state. He doubts he could even seriously injure the naga if he wanted to. He’s still whittling the
stick when Katsuki returns.

“Here.”

Izuku blinks in confusion as Katsuki thrusts a pile of papers in his face. The pages are all jagged
along the edges. Izuku recognizes the lined paper from his notebooks at once and puts the knife
and stick aside. So he was right. He hadn’t gone back to his old habits and ripped them out himself.
It was Katsuki all along.

Each page has been filled with writing, and Izuku curses his inability to process the characters.
However, even in his state, he can tell that the page is full of nonsense. The same characters have
been written over and over again, until the shapes have been more or less mastered. Despite being
unable to comprehend the scrawlings, Izuku leafs through each page in wonder.

“Whoa, wait, did you write this?”

Katsuki doesn’t answer, but Izuku doesn’t mind. He finds one page with an illustration on the
lower right corner. It looks as if Katsuki attempted to sketch a flowering vine. It’s far from an easy
subject. He also knows for a fact that the vine isn’t found on the island. There’s only one way
Katsuki could have seen it.

“You stole my book,” Izuku says with a scowl. “When my things started vanishing, I thought I was
going crazy, you know?”

“It’s just a book,” Katsuki huffs. “It can’t be that important.”

“Well it is to me. And if you went through the trouble of stealing from my camp, you thought so
too.”

“What was I supposed to do?” Katsuki snaps. “Just ask you for it?”

“YES. That’s exactly what you should have done,” Izuku seethes. “Your manners are atrocious.”

“I brought it back, didn’t I?”

Izuku shakes his head in disbelief and leafs through the next page. The next is an entire paper with
holes, scratches and furious markings. It seems that Katsuki devoted an entire page to copying the
ornate initial letter at the start of the chapter. The sketches at the top are rough and barely resemble
the letter. After about a couple failed sketches and a dozen false starts, progress is made. In the
later sketches, Katsuki has noticed more details, but has sacrificed proportions and accuracy. The
strokes look more like scratches, and in certain areas, Katsuki must have took the pen and violently
stabbed through his drawings. The paper looks like a sheet of swiss cheese.

Izuku holds the paper outstretched to Katsuki with a gentle smirk. “What happened here?”

He nearly turns it over again when Katsuki’s face suddenly reddens and he snatches the paper from
Izuku. He activates his power and it immediately combusts in flames and smokes into nothingness.
Izuku snorts and tries to hold it in, but the laughter bubbles out of him until he’s doubled over in
hysterics. He’s never felt so relieved.

Of course. Katsuki had envied him all this time. He always had, even as he mocked and belittled
him. It’s what lead him to picking up the gun and nearly shooting himself in the face in the first
place. All of this time had Katsuki truly wanted to learn? To discover all he could of the world
beyond his own? Had his pride been all that was keeping him back?
“What’s so funny?”

“Oh, no! I-It’s nothing!” Izuku gasps. “I’m not laughing at you, i-it’s just...this is the first time you’ve ever tried writing something, isn’t it? You’re being so hard on yourself! Look at what you’ve accomplished already! I’d say that’s especially impressive for someone who can’t read.”

“And you’ll teach me,” Katsuki says sternly.

“Yes, of course,” Izuku chuckles with an eye roll as he sorts through the pile. “You draw beautifully. There’s no sketchiness in the lines. Each one is precise and planned. It’s obvious art means a lot to you, but I’m noticing that was the only sheet with mistakes. Did you blow up the other pages that didn’t come out the way you wanted?”

“You’re looking at all I have,” Katsuki grumbles.

“Really? Well, I remember seeing how many pages were ripped from the notebook to begin with. I’d say this stack is about a third of what you took.”

“Why does it matter? They were just warm ups.”

“It’s fine to make mistakes, you know,” Izuku says as he strums the pages against his thumbs. “Well, that’s alright. I guess I’ll see for myself once our lessons begin. This is just a guess, but to start, I think your penmanship could use some guidance,” Izuku says thoughtfully. He then holds out the stick he’d been carving to Katsuki. “You don’t want to get used to holding your pen the wrong way. Can you show me how you were holding it?”

Katsuki wordlessly takes the stick and holds it out to Izuku, with his fingers curled all the way around, meeting his palm.

“Ah, there’s the problem. You’re holding the pen like you’re making a fist. What you’ll want to do is rest it in between your thumb, index finger and middle finger.”

Izuku watches as Katsuki shifts his grip, but the positions of his fingers don’t match the standard hold.

“No no, not quite. It’s more like this,” Izuku says as he gestures in the air.

Katsuki’s face scrunches as he studies Izuku’s hand. Katsuki does his best to mimic it, but the joints in his fingers still stick out in odd angles.

“Hrm. Hold on a second,” Izuku says as he places his hands over Katsuki’s hand and the pen. He cautiously runs the pad of his finger along the digits on Katsuki’s index finger. “Oh, wow,” he breathes. “Your digit proportions are different than mine. I didn’t consider that. But that’s probably to accommodate your claws. There has to be extra tendons in there as well. What works for me might not work for nagas, so we might need to find a new way for you to hold the pen. Let me see...”

He carefully works the fingers around the stick and Katsuki’s knuckles so that the hand takes a more streamlined form, and the pen rests against the joint connecting Katsuki’s thumb to his hand. Seconds tick by and Izuku is suddenly very aware of their closeness and Katsuki’s steady scowl. Izuku’s heart thuds.

“UM,” He yanks away feeling the blush crawl to his ears. “S-Sorry!” he stammers, as he hides his face away in his arms. “I wasn’t thinking! I’m still not myself! I didn’t realize I was making you uncomfortable.”
Maybe uncomfortable was the wrong word. If Katsuki were uncomfortable, he would have said something by now. The alpha naga he once knew would be snarling and swearing at him for even touching his skin. Katsuki does none of these things, and instead experiments keeping the new hold as he flexes his wrist. It’s a tame side Izuku had only seen once before in the belly of the deepest temple.

There’s a rustling sound in the jungle from the direction they came from. Katsuki straightens suddenly and tosses the stick aside. Izuku turns to see a vaguely familiar red naga emerge from the brush. They had met before, Izuku is sure of it. He thinks he remembers him at his bedside and out in the field? They spent time together in the past couple days, but doing what?

Izuku is still piecing his days together as the red naga approaches the two of them with a mixture of exasperation and relief. “There you are!” he cries as he slithers up to Katsuki. “I’ve been looking everywhere! You weren’t at the human camp, and I didn’t know where else he could have gone!”

“You just missed us,” Katsuki mutters.

“Well, whatever. I’m glad I got here first. Holy shit, we seriously need to talk.” He nearly dives right to the point when the red naga’s eyes settle Izuku’s. He brightens instantly. “Hey! You’re looking a lot better. I’m Kirishima Ejiro by the way.”

“Uh, hey. I’m Midoriya Izuku.”

“Nice to officially meet you.”

Izuku nods offering a small smile, relieved by his friendly disposition. “Yeah, likewise.”

“So?” Katsuki interrupts. “How did it go?”

“How do you think?” Kirishima snaps. “BADLY. Plans to rescue Ibara were never made. No one would stop talking about the human! We couldn’t focus on anything else! Also, did you know we were on Shinsou’s territory the other night? I didn’t notice because I was…um. Distracted. But you really did a number on some of his favorite trees.”

“Oh?” Katsuki says as a satisfied smile spreads on his face. “And what does he think of their new arrangement?”

Kirishima groans. “So it was on purpose. If you wanted to punish him, you should have done it by yourself on your own time, dammit. I felt real bad, y’know. I told him it was an accident. I even went and apologized for you. You’re welcome.”

Katsuki’s smile doesn’t fade. If anything, it appears more sinister. “You shouldn’t have.”

“Anyway, are you paying attention?” Kirishima snaps. “I just said last night was a disaster. Not a good look for you. Last night was supposed to be our battle plan for tracking Ibara down but we ended up talking about you and your human nearly the entire time! Emiko swam off at the very end and we haven’t seen her since. She waited until nearly dawn for you to show up.”

Katsuki’s hackles raise at that. “She left?”

“Well, yeah and I can’t say I blame her. Also, Todoroki is ultra pissed by the way. Kind of on the warpath. You might want to look out for him.”

“If that fucking coward has something to say he should say it to my face.”
“Yeah, well. About that.”

It’s then that a completely unfamiliar naga slithers out of the jungle to confront Katsuki. His hair is evenly split with white on his left and with a solid streak of red on his right, covering the scarred skin of his eye. His long tail is white, and against the sun the scales flash pearly reds and blues, like opals. His expression darkens the moment he locks eyes with Katsuki.

*This must be him,* Izuku assumes with a sinking feeling in his gut.

“Ah,” Kirishima says as the stranger approaches. “Here we go.”

“So Hitoshi was right,” Todoroki says coolly. His startling heterochromatic eyes briefly flicker to Izuku and sharpen to a reptilian shape. “You really *are* obsessed with him. He looks good for a creature that’s supposed to be dying.”

Katsuki acknowledges the newcomer with a twisted sneer. “That’s funny. I don’t remember granting you permission to leave your territory.”

“This is the reason you failed to show? What the hell are you doing?” the other naga bristles. “I was skeptical of the rumors at first. You, out of all of us, showing mercy to a human? It sounded like a joke.”

Katsuki pulls back his lips in a menacing snarl. “You got a bone to pick with me, princeling? Last I checked, I’m still your alpha and head of this pack.”

“Fighting a packmate and stealing prey from their own territory is one thing, but willfully missing the chance to comfort your daughter and plan a way to rescue her mother is something else entirely,” Todoroki bristles. “That’s hardly becoming of a pack leader.”

“Wait,” Izuku interrupts as he turns his attention to Katsuki. “You stayed with me instead of your daughter? Are you serious? You should have gone!”

“SHUT UP!” Katsuki roars. “I made my choice, and I’ll take all the consequences that come with it. You got something to say, halfie? You’re wasting my time.”

Todoroki doesn’t flinch. “If it were me, I would have killed him rather than turn away from my pack and my motherless daughter. A concubine should never have priority over family. And then on top of all of this, you ordered your packmates to lie? Last night Kaminari and Kirishima gave us some garbage explanation about how your other responsibilities lead you to miss our meeting. Have you lost your mind?”

Izuku hones in on the last word directed at him and balks. “Conc—CONCUBINE?”

Todoroki shoots Izuku a disdainful glare. “He’s not much to look at. He shouldn’t have survived. If you’re going to bow out of your duties at least do it for a good reason.”

“Get the hell on with it already,” Katsuki spits. “What did you come here for?”

“Your daughter and her mother are missing and you chose to watch over your pet instead. That’s unacceptable. We deserve better.”

“Sure. And someone from your bloodline is going to lecture me on what this pack deserves? I make one choice for one night, and you doubt my entire authority? YOU’RE PISSING ME OFF. Either get to the point or get out of my sight. I don’t have time for this. If you fight me now I won’t hold anything back.” Katsuki growls, baring his teeth in a long warning hiss. “I’ll tear you to bloody
“Whoa-kay. Alright guys, settle down.” Kirishima says as he quickly weaves between them and defensively raises his hands. “Bakugo missed one meeting. This isn’t something to fight over.”

“This goes beyond just missing one gathering,” Todoroki counters. “This is about honoring our vows and our future. Ever since that day we promised to be strong and never abandon our pups. Yet, you forget everything the moment a live human make it to the island.”

“HAAH? And what about that day? Whose fucking fault was it that we fell? WHOSE FLAMES FAILED TO PROTECT US?” Katsuki snaps. “You out of all our clan have no right to criticize what I decide. I don’t want to hear criticism from some half assed loser. Even if you disagree with me now, my choice is still deserving of respect.”

“NO. I can’t honor that,” Todoroki growls as the claws in his fingers fully extend. “Your loyalty to the pack is in question. Either kill the human now or stand down.”

Katsuki blinks.

“GUYS, ENOUGH! Take it easy,” Kirishima says with a subtle tremor in his voice. “Let’s not make this any more heated than it has to be. Having a live human on the island is something we’ve never seen before, and it’s fine to disagree over it. We’re all pack here. This isn’t worth it.”

“Oh, no. Loyalty is worth everything,” Kasuki snarls as he slithers past Kirishima towards the other naga. “STAND DOWN? You must be dreaming. KILL HIM OR WHAT? YOU’LL DO WHAT? No one give ultimatums to an alpha!”

The temperature drops suddenly.

Izuku’s breath appears in visible bursts of condensation before his eyes. Todoroki raises his arms. Ice apparaets on the right side of his chest encasing him in translucent armor. Izuku watches in alarm as ice grows and spreads across the entire half of the other naga’s torso, leaving his left eye as a glowing red orb.

Todoroki doesn’t budge. “As of now, you’re no alpha of mine. Make no mistake, this is an official challenge. If I beat you without my other half, I’m taking your title. And then as my first acting duty as alpha, I’m killing the human.”

“WHOA,” Izuku yelps in alarm. “Now hold on, just a second…”

“Those should be agreeable,” Todoroki continues. “I’m being more than fair so don’t engage me unless you’re serious.”

“NO,” Katsuki spits with growing rage. “I REFUSE.”

“Oh, thank fuck,” Kirishima breathes, his shoulders relaxing a little.

His relief is short lived when Katsuki suddenly faces Todoroki head on with his own claws fully extended and on display. “You think this is just some spot I’ve been saving for you?” he spits. “Something you can win half assed? YOU’RE NOT ENTITLED TO SHIT! Being alpha won’t be yours just because you think I don’t fucking deserve it.”

It’s brief, but one side of the Todoroki’s face catches fire. The flame flickers madly, before snuffing out.
“Haaa? What’s this? You got something else to say? Or am I finally going to fight you and your father’s flames? Come on, Two-Face.” Katsuki goads. “You came here to challenge me, yeah? Don’t tell me you’ve come all this way just to hold back!”

“QUIET,” Todoroki snarls as he bares all of his teeth. “I’ll give you the fight you rightly deserve.”

“DON’T LOOK DOWN ON ME! YOU THINK YOU’RE HOT SHIT? I WON’T loose. GUARDIANS DON’T loose,,” Katsuki roars as he raises his steadily smoking palms. “EVER!”

“Aw, CRAP.” Kirishima mutters as he grabs Izuku by the arm and the backpack in the other. The two rush away, and Kirishima leads the stumbling human far from the snarling monsters and behind a large boulder. Once he’s recovered his footing, Izuku squats and peeks out from behind the rock. In the corner of his eye, he sees Kirishima watching as well with the tips of his claws tapping an anxious rhythm on the stone.

The nagas have approached each other in a mirrored position with their fists guarding their heart. They lean in in tandem, neither of them breaking eye contact with the other. Each extends their left arm to brush their hands to the other’s elbow and back. When they pull away the right hand waves a circle in the air, and the battle begins with a BANG.

Ice erupts across the sand and forms an enormous wall of crystals. It glitters in the sun for only seconds before Katsuki blasts right through it in a barrage of explosions. The wall shatters in a storm of ice, and it collapses in the sand as ice and smoke blot out the roaring figures in the fray, battling for dominance.

Izuku watches the battle unfolding before him in awe. It’s like something from a dream. The height of an action movie; a collision between two forces of nature; a temper tantrum between demigods.

Is this really happening? Or am I just really high? Izuku wonders in amazement as the battle thunders in the distance. No, maybe I’m not high enough...

“Oh fuck, this is not good.” Kirishima mutters as he nervously grabs onto the strings of shark teeth around his neck. “I mean, at least they opened with the oath, which is something! So there might not be a murder. We’ve got that going for us, but I’ve never seen Todoroki this mad before.”

“I had no idea any of this was even happening.”

“This isn’t your fault.”

“It kind of is. But it also seems like they’ve never really gotten along,” Izuku admits. “They’ve fought before, right?”

“Sure, lots of times. Not like this though. Right now, there’s bloodlust on both sides. Usually it’s one or the other. We’ve been lucky so far. Talking them down usually works. I really try to keep them from getting a real rise out of each other, but it doesn’t take much to get ‘em going.”

“You’re a good friend.”

“Thanks,” Kirishima says as he flashes Izuku a weak half smile. “It’s kinda exhausting.”

“Kacchan will win, right?”

“I mean, maybe. For your sake, I hope so. Todoroki’s ice is a tough match for any of us. Bakugo will be able to give him a good thrashing if anything at least. This won’t last long.”
Izuku worriedly licks his bottom lip as a chilly wind clears the smoke away from Todoroki. The sand frosts under beneath his coils, and he strikes an arm out, directing a surging line of ice towards Katsuki. Izuku cringes.

_Not good. Kacchan’s a primarily close range fighter. Todoroki’s power is evenly offensive and defensive. Izuku thinks. He’ll need to somehow avoid all the attacks, and then still have enough power to break the walls and deal damage at the same time. It won’t be easy. He could lose, and I might actually die._

Instead of dodging, Katsuki curls in his body and propels himself in the air with rapid fire blasts. He uses one hand to change direction, behind an ice wall, and slashes with the other hand, aiming to take out Todoroki’s face. It’s not enough. Katsuki’s nearly grabbed him, when a protective ice wall springs to life and shatters at Katsuki’s touch.

The vibrations from explosions rumble between Izuku’s ribcage. The detonations are becoming more frequent. Katsuki is getting desperate. Even from his spot, Izuku can see blood running down the naga’s face and chest.

Izuku clenches his fists. “I have to do something.”

“What? NO! Are you crazy?” Kirishima yelps. “If I can’t get in the middle of a fight, no one can! This is a fight between them only. You stay put!”

Izuku turns back, feeling despair building in his chest. _It’ll be over soon. There’s no way Kacchan can get through._

Then Todoroki winces. Katsuki suddenly has Todoroki retreating. The left side of Todoroki’s face comes alight with flame. He nearly hits Katsuki with a flaming fist, but stops himself in time. He’s swiftly rewarded with an explosion to the chest.

The flames on his right side flicker intermittently but never burst beyond an occasional flare. Todoroki’s movements are slowing, and Izuku recalls Katsuki’s sluggish behavior back when they had fallen in the deep, cool underground. The rapid fluctuations of body temperature would take its toll on a human. But on a naga? On a creature that was predominately cold blooded?

_It’s hurting him. Izuku realizes. If he continues to rely on just the ice, his body will shut down. The flames could save him, but he’ll need much more than what he’s allowing to balance the cold._

It’s what Katsuki’s been waiting for. What he’s been expecting. Katsuki’s coils wind in on themselves; his body primed to deliver the final attack.

_“HOWITZER IMPACT!”_  

Katsuki spirals in the air and crashes down to the earth in a blinding flash of flames and a shattering detonation that sends embers and debris flying. Izuku squeezes his eyes shut as the blast roars past the boulder Izuku and Kirishima have used for cover. It’s the punishing blow. When the dust has settled, and Izuku peaks out, he sees Todoroki entirely knocked on his back. His armor is nowhere to be seen. Any nearby vegetation has been obliterated. His chest steadily works up and down as ice glitters like diamonds all over the earth.

Katsuki towers above him and Izuku knows what will come next. Katsuki will beat him down and hold Todoroki’s neck in his teeth until his submits, just like he did with Shinsou.

But he stops.
All the nagas perk up at once, their heads turning towards the water. Izuku’s head swivels, but he can’t see or hear anything. Katsuki and Todoroki glare at each other unmoving.

Izuku swallows nervously. “What happened?”

“Can you hear her?” Kirishima asks.

Izuku strains his ears but hears nothing but the crashing waves and the distant chatter of birds from the jungle. “Hear what?”

“Are you going?” Todoroki croaks as he pants and glares up at Katsuki. “Or do I have to challenge your role as father as well?”

Katsuki’s eyes shift from Todoroki to the beach. He spits blood in the sand and swears. He makes eye contact with Kirishima and jerks his head to the shore. Kirishima seems to understand immediately, and turns to Izuku. “Can you swim?”

“Uh, y-yeah?”

The answer isn’t a strong one and Kirishima nods. “Get your stuff. I’ll carry you.”

Once Izuku has his backpack securely fastened, Kirishima effortlessly hoists Izuku onto his back. Izuku clings to Kirishima’s neck and back as they slither to the sea. He looks back to see Todoroki openly catching his breath, clutching a bloodied shoulder as flames spread across his shivering body. For a brief moment, Izuku spots what looks like panic wash over the naga’s face, but once the two lock eyes, Todoroki vengefully glares after them with a stare colder than ice.

Worry claws in Izuku’s stomach. Is this really okay? Was it really okay to rely on Katsuki to protect him? Even at the expense of his clan’s trust?

No, Izuku decides. I never asked him to go this far. He’s doing all of this on his own volition. Besides, if I want to work here, what choice do I have? There’s nothing I can do. This is his choice and his clan.

Katsuki gives a low hiss when his wounds touch the water. His powerful body effortlessly slides him forward though the waves. When Kirishima follows him, the water goes up to Izuku’s knees. Judging from the direction they’ve taken, their target appears to be the beach at the other side of the cove. Izuku squints and hones his eyes, but he can neither hear nor see the distressed pup. He glares at Katsuki’s back as they swim.

“Hey, what was that?” Izuku snaps. “Why the hell were you egging him on? Did you forget I was here?”

“I didn’t forget.”

“So then why you were picking on him? My life depended on you winning back there.”

“Your life was never in danger,” Katsuki argues. “He wouldn’t have won.”

“If you made him mad enough, he might’ve. That was unnecessary.”

“NO. He forced my hand. There aren’t many of us left and I will not tolerate his fucking insolence,” Katsuki says firmly. “I had to end it. If he couldn’t bring himself to fully challenge me now, he never will.”
“Still, that was reckless,” Kirishima argues while taking Izuku’s side. “He still gave you a good fight. Todoroki’s always been skilled at using his ice.”

“It’s a such a fucking waste. Talent be damned.” Katsuki spits. “He’s never brought forth his full power. Until he does, he doesn’t deserve to even consider himself my equal, let alone alpha of this pack.”

Izuku mulls this over. It’s then he notices Katsuki is visibly shivering.

“Are you cold? If you want I could-”

“FUCK OFF!” Katsuki screeches without even turning around.

“Well, alright then,” Izuku mutters. “Nevermind.”

Izuku’s ears don’t register the screams until minutes later. On the sand at the edge of the waves is what looks like an eight year old girl with a long, dark green fishtail, tangled in a fishing net. Half of her blonde hair has been braided into cornrows. The rest her shaggy fringe drags along the sand and brushes her shoulders. The dark almond eyes that scowl up at them aren’t Katsuki’s but her wild blonde hair and fiery spirit behind them are unmistakably his.

“WHERE WERE YOU?” shrieks the tiny mermaid.

“WHERE WERE YOU?” Katsuki counters with a snarl as slashes the ropes that bind her up in one swing. “How dare you swim off like that! What were you thinking?”

“I was thinking that I’m the only one who cares that Mama is still missing!”

“OF COURSE I CARE!” Katsuki roars in her face. “All of us do! We won’t rest until she’s found.”

“Then what were you doing just now?” she challenges as her eyes scale his frame. “You’re all beat up! Were you fighting?”

“I have many duties as alpha, you know that! I can’t spread myself over all at once.”

“Yeah, duties. Like defending your job?” the pup growls as she rolls her eyes. “There’s frost in your hair. Uncle Shouto challenged you, didn’t he? He said he would.”

“And he lost! I’m still this pack’s alpha.”

“Well, maybe you shouldn’t be!” She bristles as she jabs a clawed finger towards Izuku. “What’s he have that’s so important? He’s not even pack! I needed you last night! I wanted to see you so much! I needed you to make things better!”

“I’M HERE NOW, AREN’T I?”

“ONLY AFTER YOUR FIGHT!” the mermaid screams. “I’m just not as important, am I? JUST ADMIT IT!”

“THE HELL YOU AREN’T! Nothing’s more important than my family!”

“Yeah, right! All my half siblings already know I’m the least favorite! And this proves it! You don’t care at all! I HATE YOU! You’re the worst alpha ever! I wish the monster took me instead!”

Katsuki lunges with a snarl and seizes the pup by the end of of her tail. He swings her around his
arm in the air and lets go, sending the tiny mermaid and flying. She sails screaming towards some nearby tidepools as her voice fades and abruptly cuts when her body contacts the surface of the tide pool with a great splash and sinks into the depths.

“Kacchan,” Izuku quietly murmurs as he works with considerable patience to keep the absolute panic and rage from bleeding into his voice. “I must still be hallucinating. Because otherwise, I just watched you pick your daughter up and throw her across the beach.”

“I did.”

“WHAT THE FUCK!” Izuku screams. “WHY?”

“She landed exactly where I wanted her to be! SHE’S COMPLETELY FINE.”

“You can’t just throw children like that!”

“That was nothing! Their lives are too cushy! If she can’t take it, then she’ll never make it to adulthood.”

It all seems very over the top, as if Katsuki is running some sort of militant toddler bootcamp. He’d even mentioned something along those lines when Izuku first used Mei’s equipment in battle. Katsuki had compared Izuku’s fighting abilities to those of babies. But was it really beneficial to be rough on them now? While they were so young? What the hell was Katsuki so afraid of? Was there really a monster that creatures of their might could fear?

Izuku stumbles over the buzzing anger in his head but can only settle on one thing to say. “You’re absolutely insane.”

Katsuki ignores him. “Kirishima, I’m going to alert Yaoyorozu she’s safe. Watch those two.”

Kirishima watches Katsuki’s long tail effortlessly slither and weave through the waves in the water. Kirishima leans closer to the sand and Izuku gingerly hops off.

“Unbelievable,” Izuku mutters.

Kirishima snorts. “Yeah, I know. He’s kind of rough with all of ‘em. Even the ones that aren’t his. We’ve just all gotten used to it. Guess we’d better check up on her.”

“Yeah,” Izuku numbly agrees as her flips his backpack around to search for some water.

“It’s been quite a morning, huh?” Kirishima says with a sympathetic smile. “So, why’d he bring you out here?”

“He says the air will make me feel better,” Izuku explains with a frown. “I’m not well enough to work anyway, so it doesn’t matter, but I think there was also some cooking disaster he wants to hide. I didn’t even have the chance to walk around. Kacchan pulled me out of camp immediately after I woke up.”

Kirishima raises an eyebrow. “Did he now?”

“Yeah,” Izuku says as he takes a swig from his water pouch. “I’m okay with being here, but I’d love a change of clothes. That and maybe some decent food instead of the emergency rations in my bag.”

The mermaid has propped herself up on the rocks with her elbows, so that her upper half is out of
the water. She doesn’t look injured, just mildly peeved.

“You alright, kid?”

“I’m fine, Uncle Eiji,” the mermaid mutters. Her dark eyes focus on Izuku. There’s growing tension, and Izuku suddenly realizes they’ve been intently staring at each other for nearly a minute without saying a word.

“H-hi!” Izuku says quickly. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced. What’s yo-”

“Silence, lowly creature!” The mermaid interrupts with a snarl. “You are in the company of your betters! I shall introduce myself in time at my own pace! I am Bakugo Emiko!”

“Oh, okay. Nice to meet you,” Izuku says as neutrally as possible. “I’m Midor-”

“Midorya Izuku, yeah. We all know who you are. We all do. You’re all anyone wants to talk about,” Emiko interrupts. “This is our island, y’hear?”

“Yeah, I never said it wasn’t! I don’t plan on taking it from you either.”

Emiko dismissively raises her nose in the air. “Like I’d stoop so low to believe the words of a simple concubine! And a human one at that!”

“What the-Is that what everyone thinks? Also, how old are you? Should you even know what that word means?”

Emiko ignores him and glares at his legs suspiciously. “But why though? What’s so great about humans? Do you even have scales on those things?”

“What? No, it’s all skin. See?” Izuku demonstrates as he rolls down the socks from one of his calves.

“EW!” Emiko squeals. “That’s so nasty! How can you attract mates without scales?”

“Humans don’t have scales! What’s your problem? Aren’t you a little young to be asking about that?”

Emiko dismisses him with her nose turned in the air. “I don’t need to tell you anything, ugly.”

*UGLY?*

“Well, hold on. He’d never actually considered where he fell in naga beauty standards. “C’mon, Kirishima. You don’t think human legs are ugly, right?”

“Er, uh,” Kirishima stammers and smiles nervously, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else in the world. He swiftly turns his head away from Izuku and curls his tail around his torso. “I’d rather not comment.”

“Oh, COME ON.”

Emiko covers her mouth and holds back a burst of giggles.

“Told ya.”

Izuku’s stomach rumbles loudly and his companions cock their heads at the sound.
“Hungry? I’ll bring you something if you do a trick for me.” Emiko says. “Is it true that humans can split their legs in entirely different directions? I wanna see.”

“I’m not a dog!” Izuku snaps as he swings off his backpack and sorts through it. “Forget it. I have my own food.”

“Then can you leave? It’s bad enough I’m being punished. I don’t want to spend it with you.”

“No one’s going anywhere! Everyone relax!” Kirishima bristles. “Leave Midoriya alone, you. He had no say in any of this. This is all on your Dad. He’s trying his best, but he’s getting stressed. He really is worried for your mom you know.”

“If he was, maybe he’d try harder,” Emiko retorts.

“We’re doing the best we can.”

“Oh yeah? So where does ‘it’ fit in with all of this trying and worrying?” she says as she jabs a thumb at Izuku.

“It?” Izuku squawks with a mouthful of lemon bar.

“Intercepting intruders is part of the job of alpha, you know that,” Kirishima says gruffly as he crosses his arms. “Enough, Emiko. Why don’t you show me the progress you’ve made on your quirk? I never got the chance to see it last night.”

“Oh yeah,” she says distractedly. “I guess I could. It’s nothing special.”

“Hey, hey,” Kirishima says disapprovingly. “None of that. Every quirk is special! You just need to figure out how to use it best. Soon it’ll be as natural as breathing.”

Quirk, Izuku thinks to himself. That must be the word they used for each of their abilities. Looks like I was right about them being unique. I guess all the mermaids have them too.

Alright. Give me a second.” Emiko dives into the tidepool and returns a minute later with a hand full of seaweed. She hands them over to Kirishima. “So arrange them like you’re starting a basket.”

“Me?” He asks pointing a finger to himself.

“Yeah, you.”

Kirishima does as she asks and delicately takes each strand and places one on top of the other.

“Okay perfect!” Emiko says as she claps her hands together. She places both of her hands against the seaweed and the leaves come to life, weaving one over and under the other until a patch has been formed. Emiko holds up the woven rectangle and beams, showing off her two front fangs.

“It’s a mini sea blanket!” she declares.

“Whoaaa!” Kirishima’s jaw drops. “That’s amazing! You weren’t even the one who started it.”

“I know, right?” Emiko gushes. “It doesn’t even have to be me anymore. I think I can repeat something anyone does as long as the action was performed in a five minute window.”

“So you can repeat actions? That’s your quirk?” Izuku asks.

“My quirk is ‘Echo’,” Emiko explains as she scrapes a line in the rock. She puts her hands together
and touches the rock again. Suddenly a barrage of scratches begin clawing similar markings along the surface, deepening the mark to a groove. “I can make anything happen more than once, but the effect fades as it repeats. If I stretch it longer than 15 seconds I get dizzy, but I’m working on it.”

Izuku beams and thoughtfully runs his hands along the curve of his chin. “Wow! And you’re just learning how versatile it can be. That’s pretty awesome.”

“And it’s only going to get better! What’s your quirk?” she asks eagerly as she throws Izuku the first somewhat positive expression he’s seen in his direction.

“Oh,” Izuku says dejectedly. “I uh, don’t have one.”

“Really?” Emiko asks with a doubtful pout. “Why? Were you the runt?”

“W-What? No!” Izuku stammers. “I’m an only child! Humans don’t have quirks.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Ah, no. He’s not,” Kirishima interjects. “Quirks are unique to our kind. That’s just the way things are.”

“Hrmm,” Emiko says looking Izuku over. “That’s pretty lame. So we really are the best, huh?”

Yep, Izuku thinks miserably as he tries not to facepalm in front of them. She’s Katsuki’s kid alright.

“That’s not nice,” Kirishima says disapprovingly as he crosses his arms in front of his chest. “Humans are different, sure, but that’s no reason to look down on them. All life deserves our respect. Our kind might not have the best relationship with humans, but your father saw something in Midoriya worth protecting.”

“Which is?”

Kirishima and Izuku exchange glances.

“Well…” Kirishima says awkwardly.

“I promised to help decipher the ruins.” Izuku explains. “We won’t know what your spoken language sounds like, but one day you might be able to reconnect with the stories your ancestors left behind.”

Kirishima raises his eyebrows. “You can do that?”

“I’m going to try.”

The answer seems to satisfy them both, but to Izuku the answer feels incomplete. Was that all? Was his relationship with Katsuki really that simple?

“I guess that’s useful, but I think he’s smart enough to figure it out on his own.” Emiko then grins impishly. “I’m much better at using my quirk than my song. Want to hear?”

Izuku doesn’t have a chance to reply before the song begins. The melody coming from her lungs sound off and out of tune. After the first few notes Izuku feels lightheaded. The world spins as he loses control of his balance. He suddenly finds himself collapsed on the sand and staring up at the sky.

Kirishima growls and Emiko plops in the sand next to him.
“KNOCK IT OFF!” He barks. “Stop bullying Midoriya!”

Izuku blinks and shakes his head. “What happened?”

“Siren’s song.” Emiko says smugly as she brushes off the sand from her scales without looking sorry at all. “Did you feel like drowning yourself?”

“No,” Izuku glowers. “Not even a little bit.”

“Yeah, see? Still needs practice.”

***

Kirishima keeps Emiko literally grounded on the sand until she gives Izuku an insincere apology, and lets her back in the tide pool. It’s where she stays for the remainder of the time they spend waiting for Katsuki to return. Both of them encourage Emiko to practice her quirk and take turns repeating basic actions for her to mimic. As time passes, Emiko has more or less accepted Izuku’s presence, and it’s soothing and fascinating to watch the small mermaid concentrate and make things repeat before their eyes.

After a while she insists that she can manage on her own, and Izuku takes to doing some stretches on the beach. It starts as a typical warm up, but then it morphs into the fighting style he used in his battle with Katsuki. He freezes when he catches Kirishima watching him carefully.

“These are some cool movements!”

“It’s Yoga and Caporiera. The gesture Todoroki and Kacchan made before they started fighting sort of reminded me of my stretches,” Izuku says as he does his best to imitate to arm motions that Todoroki and Katsuki performed earlier. “Today’s the first time I’ve seen it.

Kirishima guffaws. “The motions are right, but the gestures are backwards. Here, I’ll show you. You bring your fists to your chest to guard. It shows you’re ready to fight. One arm goes out to acknowledge the fire of the kin in front of you. A promise to go at your hardest. No matter the outcome, you’ll either win or fall with honor. And then, once that’s done, the fight can start.”

“Wow, yeah. That seems important.”

“Yep. Those movements have been passed down our pack for generations. Honestly, I think acknowledging your opponent keeps our number of casualties to a minimum. If any of us attack without it, there won’t be a fair fight. There’s no honor or recognition. You might as well be attacking prey.”

Izuku frowns. “If I started it, would Kacchan perform the full oath with me?”

“Why? You challenging him as alpha?”

“N-no, I was just…”

“Relax, I’m kidding.” Kirishima says as he smiles and flashes his teeth. “I doubt it would offend him if that’s what you’re thinking. It’s clear you mean something. He doesn’t take a shine to just anybody.”

When Katsuki finally returns, he’s flanked by two mermaids on either side. Both are adorned with breastplates, decorated with shells that shimmer in the sun. One has bobbed dark hair and a jet back body that tapers off into fins along the ridges like an eel. Her earlobes hang low to her shoulders
with pointed barbs at the end.

The other mermaid is breathtaking. Her long black hair flows freely and shines in the sun. Her lower half is flanked with magnificent fanlike fins. Their shape and the bold red stripes painted along her body reminds Izuku of a Lionfish, but her body is longer and more serpentine. The mermaids take turns giving Izuku a few nervous glances as they approach, but with considerable effort, focus their attention on Emiko instead.

“Hey, punk,” the eel like mermaid growls as she peers over the rocks. “Why’d you disappear on us? We were worried sick!”

Emiko glares. “You know why! I was looking for Mama.”

“We’re all looking, dear;” The finned mermaid chides. “It’s dangerous and irresponsible to go searching by yourself.”

“I would have been fine if it weren’t for that stupid net!”

“The net wasn’t the problem!” Katsuki growls. “Leaving the pack behind was the problem! You know better than that!”

“At least I did more than you last night! I had to do something!” Emiko forms her hands into fists. “It’s been over three weeks now. Mama’s really good at hiding. Her leaflike fins let her blend in with everything in the water. But she’s never left without telling me, and she’s never been gone for so long.”

*Three weeks?* Izuku thinks to himself. *That's about when I got here.*

He looks to meet Katsuki, whose eyes narrow and flick away.

“She’s out there,” Emiko says confidently. “I’ve been searching through all the kelp forests and seaweed. I know all her favorite hiding spots. Sometimes I think I’m getting close. I’ll see her hair or tail fins. But I wasn’t fast enough. Every time I dash forward, she’s not there. But I know she isn’t gone.”

“I’ve talked to Yaoyorozu,” Katsuki says gruffly as he points to the Lion fish mermaid. “And we’re rescheduling a meeting with everyone tonight. We’ll work out a plan and search together. I’ll make sure to keep you a part of it.”


It’s then the long haired mermaid turns to Izuku. “You must be Izuku Midorya. I am Yaoyorozu Momo, alpha of the sea. This is Kyoka Jirou, my attendant.”

“Y-yeah. Nice to meet you.” Izuku says sheepishly, not sure of what else to say. Fortunately, Momo’s curiosity spares him from the awkward silence.

“Oh.” Momo says eyeing Izuku’s wrist. “Is your device still functional?”

“You mean my watch? Yeah, looks like it. Want to see?”

She extends a hand, “May I?”

Izuku goes to the water’s edge and places it in her soft palm.

She examines it carefully, starting with the face of the watch, and running a fingertip along the
sides. Izuku decides it best for her to mess with it first before he points anything out. He can always undo any of the damage done to the programming. She presses the buttons on the side.

“Do you know what it does?” Izuku asks.

“It keeps time, correct?”

“Yep! There’s a few other things it can do since it’s digital. Can you read?”

“No,” she smiles sadly as she returns it to him. “I think I understand the necessary patterns required to navigate to a desired screen, but the letters are a mystery.”

“Do you want to learn? I already promised Kacchan I’d teach him.”

“Kacchan?” she repeats uncertainly.

“ME,” Katsuki says gruffly. “He’s been calling me that ever since his brain melted.”

Her eyes crinkle in amusement. “I’d like that.”

The mermaids take Emiko from the tide pool soon after and swim off in the ocean together.

Katsuki nods at Kirishima. “Kirishima, you’re relieved. I’ll take it from here. Spread the word. We’ll meet right after dusk.”

Before he leaves, Kirishima nuzzles against Katsuki’s neck. Katsuki returns the gesture, and his beta gently sighs against the touch before slithering away into the trees.

“I’m surprised you didn’t go with her,” Izuku says as he clings to Katsuki for the swim back to the cave.

“Trying to get rid of me?”

“Momo’s the alpha of the sea, right?” Izuku asks. “Wouldn’t you rather be with her and Emiko?”

Katsuki snorts. “We’re both alphas, but she’s not my chosen mate. She’s with Two Face.”

“Oh,” Izuku says awkwardly. “So who’s yours?”

“No one,” Katsuki barks. “I’ll mate with whoever the fuck I want.”

Izuku sighs and decides to change the topic. “Emiko said her mom disappeared about three weeks ago, right? That’s about when I got here.”

“Yeah, you told me a couple days ago.”

“You don’t think there’s a connection, do you?”

Katsuki shrugs. “You tell me.”

“I don’t know anything,” Izuku says truthfully. “You’re welcome to investigate my ship, but if I knew anything at all, I would have said something.”

When they return to the cave Izuku is anxious and on high alert, but Todoroki is long gone. Freshly upturned earth litters the area. The ice has melted completely and left damp spots behind. The vegetation around the area has been mostly destroyed. Izuku guesses it'll be a couple weeks before
“I really wish you’d let me stay in camp,” Izuku mutters as he tugs at his shirt collar. “A change of clothes would be nice.”

“And I really wish I didn’t need to keep babysitting you. For now, this is the best place to recover.”

“Is there at least somewhere I can clean up? All I need is some fresh water.”

Izuku’s clothes and dirt stained and reek of sweat. He can’t think of a time he’s ever worn a full outfit longer than two days. Camp was a close enough walk to a running stream. He’d kill for a hot bath and a real bed.

Eventually, Katsuki relents and leads him to a somewhat secluded area. Izuku is pleasantly surprised to see the same stream from camp runs all the way through this area as well. He’s also happy to discover the remains of some ruins at the very edge of the stream. The rubble forms an 'L shaped' wall that he can use for privacy. Izuku traces the weathered bricks with his eyes. Maybe it’s the remains of a shrine or some kind of cottage? He isn’t sure.

"Stay close.” Katsuki growls as he goes to leave. “I shouldn’t have to say it, but don’t run off. You might be claimed, but that won’t stop some of my pack from wanting you dead.”

The water is cold, and Izuku decides to wash his clothes first and slowly acclimate to the temperature with his hands and feet.

He uses the spare rag as a washcloth. The camp soap from his bag doesn’t lather, but it gives him a calming scent of citronella, chamomile, and lavender. He douses himself with water with his hands when a thought occurs to him.

He stops.

He’d forgotten to pack a spare change of clothes. Izuku swears. It’s a humid day out too. His boxers will dry first, but he hates the feeling of wet clothes on his body. He decides that he might just have to be a sunbathing nudist for the next half hour or so.

He’s still drying out in the sun when Katsuki returns without warning. Instead of averting his eyes, apologising, or turning away, Katsuki oggles his whole body and gives him a toothy sneer.

“Wow, so the murals were right. You really do have just the one. And it’s always out, huh? Does it grow, or is it always so small?”

“GET OUT!”

Izuku snatches the nearest things from his backpack and angrily chucks them at Katsuki, who cackles and raises his arms in a half hearted attempt to block the projectiles. He doesn’t look at all sorry for the intrusion, leaving Izuku to turn red all the way to his chest as he finishes dressing.

Oh my god. I HATE HIM.

Izuku had always known that human and naga anatomy differed from the waist down. And even before discovering the fertility temple, Izuku never doubted that Katsuki had the means to reproduce. The artwork in the ruins merely confirmed it. He had children. Izuku just met one. The only question was how they were made.

Katsuki and the rest of his clan had little regard for modesty. The only clothing he’d seen were the
decorated breastplate armor adorned by the mermaids. He supposes if Katsuki gets hot and bothered enough, his penises will emerge from wherever they’re hiding. Izuku violently shakes the thoughts out of his head.

*Why am I even thinking about this? I MEAN WHO CARES ABOUT HIS DICKS? I SURE DON’T. Get it together, Midoriya.*

**HONESTLY.** There was only so much he could take.

Izuku settles near the cave and hangs up his socks and the rags to dry. He collects sticks and firewood and is preparing the fire for the night in the cave when Katsuki stops him.

“Make the fire closer to the entrance. I want to rest near it when I get back in the morning.”

“Oh, okay? Why can’t you just sleep inside?”

“Our kind only spends the night in a cave with prey or our chosen mates.”

“Oh.” Izuku says quietly. “Well, you spent the night in my tent. What did that mean?”

**“NOTHING! I only stayed because you were supposed to die!”** Katsuki snarls.

From then on, Izuku does his best to ignore Katsuki completely. Once the fire is stable and happily crackling at the smaller sticks, Izuku digs through his backpack for dinner. Besides the emergency rations, his only other option is a lone can of beans, similar to the one he tried to read earlier that morning. He’d love to cook them up, but he’s lacking a proper pan and cooking utensils, and he’s heard terrible things about the toxins that could be released from heating the can alone. Instead, Izuku studies the label, hoping to re-acquaint himself with the writing.

“So? Can you read anything?”

Izuku sighs. “Nothing. I’m mostly down to myself, but venom’s some intense stuff. It knocked me all the way off the stoner scale, which stops at ten. I was maybe in the twenties! But you know, this whole thing could have been avoided if you just showed up when you were supposed to.”

He waits for something else from Katsuki. Maybe some sort of apology? That would be nice. But it doesn’t come.

“What do you remember?” Katsuki asks.

Izuku clicks his tongue rolls his eyes. “From the top? Well, after you stood me up, I decided to track you down. I found a gun in an old plane, shot off a few rounds, accidently pissed off one of your clan, he caught me, and then…” Izuku stops himself but his mind complete the rest of the sentence. ... *I was captured and my mind succumbed to the venom of the lover’s kiss.*

The LOVER’s kiss. Yeah, that happened. Izuku shuts his mouth feeling the heat collect on his cheeks. He swallows audibly.

*And then you passionately kissed me to win me back.*

“...and then you saved me.”

Izuku nibbles his lip as he shyly meets Katsuki’s eyes. The time after the kiss felt like a blissful dream and he held absolutely none of his feelings back. Somehow, his subconscious mind knew Katsuki wouldn't hurt him. In that state of euphoria, any sense of dread Izuku once had around the
alpha naga completely evaporated. And if the memories from the haze after the kiss were accurate, he maybe even got a little too comfortable. But the feeling was mutual. And when Katsuki told off Shinsou, he specifically said Izuku was “his.”

The implications of that action haven’t been lost on Izuku back then, and it weighed just as heavily on him now. Katsuki had insisted back then it was meaningless. He even said earlier that day that they weren’t friends. But here he was, still willingly watching over him, staying at Izuku’s side. There’s no way in hell Katsuki was disinterested in having some sort of relationship with him. Katsuki can try to play this off anyway he wants.

“Yeah,” Katsuki agrees. “And then?”

“And then, um. Y’know. You brought me back and tried cooking the next day.”

“That’s it?”

“Well, what I remember after explaining breakfast doesn’t make sense,” Izuku mutters as he bashfully rubs the back of his head. “I was back at my mom’s house, guarding her vegetables as a fence. But I mean, obviously, I wasn’t. That’s impossible. I never left the island. That was just the result of the fever. It’s a lot of work being fence. You wouldn’t think so, but it takes a lot of focus. You can’t move, even a little.”

“Yeah,” Katsuki snorts. “That was the best part of the whole damn day.”

“Alright, so that was a hallucination. What about scaling the giant beanstalk in the clouds? I survived the fall and rolled all the way down without getting hurt. And then I played baseball, or was it golf? Something with hitting shiny things? And here’s where things get really weird. Get this. There was this giant fireball like the sun, and then next thing I knew, I went back in time to the Age of Sails. Not in the golden age, maybe in the 17th century? I can’t remember the sails or the shape of the vessel exactly, which is a shame. Maybe it’ll come to me later. I had to navigate my crew through a raging storm and the wrath of ancient sea monsters. It felt so real.”

Izuku stops and studies Katsuki who looks a mix of frustrated and bewildered. “I think I may have annoyed you a little bit.”

“You annoyed the piss ‘outta me,” Katsuki confirms with a growl. “You don’t remember anything beyond that, do you?”

“I remember some stuff, but none of it was as fun. Everything after left me feeling horrible,” Izuku explains.

Katsuki looks irritated. He looks away and stares into the fire intensely and says nothing. It’s a heavy silence, and Izuku reflects on the events of the day. Something has been bothering him since that afternoon by the tide pool. There’s only one way to get to the bottom of it.

“Kacchan?” Izuku asks tentatively.

“What.”

“Um, can I ask you something? Am I...um? To you I’m not…”

“WHAT?”

“Do you think I’m ugly?” Izuku blurts.
Katsuki blinks at him with his mouth half open. “Wha…LIKE I FUCKING CARE. WHY ARE YOU ASKING ME?”

“AUGH, I DON’T KNOW OKAY? Emiko thinks so, Kirishima dodged the question, so I thought maybe it was a species thing and got kind of worried and I just wanted to…” Izuku stops to throws up his hands in frustration. “Nevermind, alright?”

Katsuki glares at him. “A species thing? Wha’dya mean, a species thing? Do you think nagas are ugly?”

“Huh? NO!” Izuku cries turning red. “Not at all! You guys are stunning!”

Katsuki’s eyes narrow dangerously. “Really. So you think I’m stunning too?”

“Hey, no. Not fair,” Izuku scolds as his heart starts to strum. “You don’t get to ask something until you answer me.”


“Not bad?” Izuku repeats dully. “Great. Well, that makes me feel a whole lot better, thanks.”

“I’m not trying to make you feel better. You had a question, and I answered it.”

“ALRIGHT, FINE.” Izuku says as he grinds his teeth. “Then let me try this again. Do you honestly find me attractive? Yes or no?”

He waits patiently as Katsuki gapes at him. “If you answer that, I’ll truthfully tell you how I feel.”

“I already know how you feel. You were very specific under your fever.”

Was I? Izuku asks himself with a sinking stomach. That does sound like something ‘High Midoriya’ would do.

“And yet you just asked me to say whether I thought you were stunning,” Izuku counters.

“That was a test to see if you remembered my challenge from yesterday,” Katsuki growls. “You could’ve proven you were brave enough to say it to my face sober, but you just admitted that you forgot.”

“Uh huh. Nice dodge. Yes or no? I’m still waiting.”

They lock eyes. Izuku straightens his back and raises his shoulders. He tries to imagine himself as something fierce and intimidating, like a cobra. He holds his breath, daring Katsuki to make a move.

“No.” Katsuki says flatly. “There’s nothing about you that is conventionally attractive. You’re physically weak, your teeth are dull, you have no venom to share, your claws serve no purpose, and you don’t even have scales to display a pattern of any complexity. You’re below the bar in every category.”

Wow. Okay then. Ugly it was. It stings more than it should, and Izuku can’t even begin to guess why. He’s still reeling from the bluntness of the answer when Katsuki continues.

“But I don’t fucking get it. Somehow, that doesn’t matter. I need to see more. You have a scent, warmth, and stupid stubborn bravery that keeps you going. There’s still a part of me that wants you
bare and all to myself. I want to explore your skin with my mouth and hands, and see all the ways you tick.”

Seconds tick by and Izuku isn’t sure he’s even breathing at this point. A smirk spreads across Katsuki’s lips as his tail slides around Izuku’s middle and pulls him forward against the sand. Izuku's legs fold instinctively as he digs in his heels, but he’s powerless to push himself away. Katsuki stops when Izuku’s knees are on either side of Katsuki’s torso. The naga leans forward and Izuku’s heart hammers in his chest. He’s so close he can see the details of Katsuki’s eyes.

“So there’s your answer,” Katsuki says with a purr as he leans closer. “Tell me yours. I’m all ears.”

Izuku gapes at the smug alpha and his mind implodes. If he thought Katsuki was stunning this morning, he was devilishly handsome in the flattering orange light of the fire. It’s him in his element, as he should be. The way he’s content and proud in the heat and smoke, the way his molten amber eyes sinfully roam over Izuku's body, and how his exposed fangs glisten in the falling night and now promise to devour him in an entirely different way.

Izuku is painfully aware of Katsuki’s building satisfaction with every second he spends composing himself and mentally stumbling for words. He can hear himself stuttering at first but as the situation registers, he grinds his teeth and glares.

This cocky son of a fucking bitch, Izuku thinks angrily. He doesn’t think I’ll do it.

Izuku’s sudden change in expression is Katsuki’s only warning. He blinks in confusion right before Izuku tilts his head and lunges at Katsuki’s mouth for a kiss. Katsuki lets go with a yelp of shock, and Izuku’s lips nearly brush against his own as he pulls back in retreat.

“Wha-WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?” Katsuki bellows red faced. “DON’T MESS WITH ME!!”

“Oh, come on!” Izuku snaps. “You asked for it! Pulling a stunt like that isn’t fair! A simple ‘YES’ would have been sufficient! You’re the one messing with me. It’s no wonder your entire clan thinks I’m you’re freaking concubine!”

“PISS OFF!” Katsuki growls. “You think I don’t know my life is a fucking mess? I don’t need you giving me crap on top of everything else!”

“What crap? What the hell are you mad at me for!” Izuku snaps. “You started it!”

Katsuki clenches his teeth and turns back to the fire. Izuku fetches a long stick he’s chosen as a poker and nudges at the glowing logs, releasing a flurry of embers in the wind. There’s a beat before Katsuki speaks again.

“So the question,” Katsuki mumbles. “Your turn. Yes or no?”

“Yeah,” Izuku says quietly. “But you already knew that.”

Izuku watches the stars dot against the darkening sky. In an hour or so, he’ll have a breathtaking view of the Milky Way; one that he would never see at home. He doubts he could even begin to explain light pollution to Katsuki and his pack. At least the patterns of the constellations looked the same.

But there was still Katsuki. Katsuki who didn’t have to do any of this. Who still owed his clan protection and peace of mind from danger. Izuku was in the thick of trouble, but Katsuki still fought for him and would continue to defend him no matter the danger. He’s might be an absolute
ass, but he’s also undeniably Izuku’s greatest ally on the island. Izuku exhales softly, feeling grateful, and lets the crushing loneliness he carried over the past few weeks evaporate in the sky.

He was still alive. The rift between Katsuki and himself is beginning to bridge. Perhaps he really would return home someday.

He still had his work and his promising plants. Back at camp he could rest easy knowing the cure was steadily growing in the greenhouse. Maybe one day, he could return and save them all.

When the sun begins to sink beyond the horizon, Katsuki shifts and finally goes to leave.

“What?”

“Izuku smiles wistfully. “Thank you.”

Katsuki blinks, and in that moment Izuku hopes the naga understands all the meaning behind those two simple words. He pauses. Katsuki almost looks like he might reply before he turns away and wordlessly slithers off into the night.

Chapter End Notes

(Is anyone else worried that Hori is gearing up to kill off Baku in the manga or is it just me?)
Izuku can’t keep himself from grinning as he giddily dances around his smoldering campfire with a can of food in his hand. Better. He’s finally better. He’s never been so happy to read a nutritional label in his life.

He can finally continue to work without interruption, just as Katsuki promised.

Katsuki himself hadn’t returned that night, or if he had, he didn’t stick around for the morning. Izuku scratches the back of his head thoughtfully as he sets the can back on the ground. The way Katsuki asked about the fire the night before had implied he’d be back in time to enjoy its warmth.

In all likelihood, Katsuki had busied himself with taking care of his pack and his pups. If Emiko was any indication, the rest of them were probably quite a handful. There was no telling when he might return.

For now, Izuku decides to busy himself with putting out the fire and airing out his emergency blanket. Once that’s done, he unenthusiastically eats the rations left in his bag. The moment he’s finally has a proper meal back at camp can’t come soon enough.

He might know the trail well enough now, but he can’t risk it.

With the current political climate of Katsuki’s people, to return alone would be suicidal. If he ran into trouble, he couldn’t outrun his pursuers. Fighting back also wasn’t an option. The most Izuku had to defend himself was the Swiss Army knife, and it was hardly an intimidating weapon or the
weapon of choice for a battle for his life. If his time on the island taught him anything, it was that an unarmed human didn’t stand a chance against a naga.

Izuku snaps to attention when he hears rustling in the jungle behind him. He quickly darts inside the cave and behind a large rock. While he waits, he quiets his breathing and willingly slows his heartbeat. He tries not to panic. Was hiding even a survival option against nagas? Katsuki had admitted to having the ability to taste his fear by scent alone. If that were true, even hiding from them was impossible.

He listens and hears the sound of scales sliding against the earth. He holds his breath, and nearly begins praying for his life, when a familiar voice rings out.

“Yo! Morning, Midoriya!”

Izuku peeks out from behind the rock, and sees Kirishima enthusiastically grinning at him. A blonde naga with a golden body accompanies him at his side. Izuku’s memories are still jumbled, but he knows at once that the blonde is a friend as well. He’s usually good with names, and he knows his name on the tip of his tongue, but thanks to his prior delirium, he’s drawing a blank. He relaxes and emerges from his hiding spot and trots out to greet them both.

“Hey, morning Kirishima and...and, um. I’m sorry,” Izuku says sheepishly as he rubs the back of his head in embarrassment. “I know we’ve met before.”

The blonde looks devastated. “WHA...he doesn’t remember me! You’re awful!”

Izuku gives him his best sympathetic smile as he feels a sharp pang of guilt. “I’m really sorry! I’m sober now, and I won’t forget this time, honest!”

The golden naga recovers quickly. He takes this opportunity to puff out his chest and proudly point a thumb at his own body.

“Denki Kaminari! I watched over you in the first night you were hit with venom. You showed me a bunch of tools in your camp, like this,” he says as he motions to the metal on his necklace.

“Um. A spoon?” Izuku asks with disbelief.

“Yes!”

“Well, I guess that’s one way to use it. Thanks for taking care of me. I never meant to cause so much trouble.” Izuku says bashfully. “Have you guys seen Kacchan? I thought he would be back by now.”

Kirishima stretches one of his arms and scratches the back of his head. “Yeah, so did we, but that’s not too surprising. He really wanted to make up for missing the last meeting. Emiko’s a determined kid. She most likely had him out searching all night. When he’s done, he’ll definitely come back here.”

“We’re hoping to catch him when he does,” Kaminari explains. “We wanted to ask him about moving the herd.”

“The herd?” Izuku repeats. The only herd that comes to mind are the pigs he’s seen. No other animals on the island have any sort of pack. “You don’t mean the herd of pigs, do you? Why? Do you own them?”

“Sort of,” Kirishima says. “I’m the gamekeeper of the island. It’s my job to make sure they stay
healthy and grow up strong for satisfying hunts.”

“Whoa,” Izuku breathes. “They’re so aggressive though. Isn’t that dangerous?”

Kirishima extends his arms with a snort, as his skin layers and hardens. He mashes his fists together with a solid *CLANG*. “Maybe, but against my quirk? What’s the worst they can do?”

Izuku grins.

“I also watch their numbers to ensure we always have a good hunt,” Kirishima explains. “Otherwise, we’ll eat from the sea.”

“Ah…” Izuku says as he pursues his lips. He recalls Katsuki had given him crap for cooking his own meals for the sake of flavor. Yet, here were two of his packmates admitting they had a preference in taste. His annoyance quickly shifts to curiosity. “What’s your favorite food?” he asks.

“Tuna!” Denki exclaims. “But pigs are a close second.”

Kirishima beams and gestures at the teeth collected on his necklaces. “And for me, can’t you tell? Shark!”

“You guys go after sharks? Really?”

“When we lived in the ocean, sure! Now we’ll make a special request to the maids if we crave it,” Kirishima explains. “And with the herd, we take turns rotating the hunts to each territory. They can get destructive if they stay in one place for too long.”

“Yeah,” Denki agrees. “I wanted to ask Bakugo if we could migrate the herd to my territory. I’ve been eating from the ocean for a while now, but I’d really love a good hunt on land.”

Izuku looks back and forth between the two of them in confusion. “But if Kirishima’s the gamekeeper, why not just ask him?”

“Bakugo calls first dibs,” Denki explains. “The whole herd is free game after the alpha’s choice. Plus, he’s the one who recently had the herd moved to this side of the island. I can only hunt them in my territory. I wouldn’t want to move them unless he approves.”

“So you manage the all pigs?” Izuku says thoughtfully. “Even the giant boar?”

Kirishima looks at him quizzically. “You’ve seen them?”

“Yes! One of them nearly got me too. They kept eating my garden, so I laid down some traps, caught one of the sows, and he ran out for revenge. He chased me up a tree, but I would have died if he didn’t stumble.”

“Sheesh! That’s incredible. You really are lucky to be alive,” Kirishima agrees. “Do you remember what he looked like?”

“Well, he was huge!” Izuku says as he stretches out his arms. “With a dark pelt and long tusks. Quick, too. Must have been fairly young. I had some equipment that put me at his level, so I spared and trained against him until my gear broke.”

Kirishima looks stunned before he laughs. “You *sparred* with him?”

“I needed the practice to fight Kacchan, but yeah, looking back, that was pretty stupid,” Izuku says.
“Let me guess, when your equipment broke, Bakugo came in and blew him up?”

“Yes, actually,” Izuku says hesitantly. “How’d you know?”

“Keeping tabs on the boar is my job, remember? Bakugo told me he blew up an alpha boar, but I never knew why. He knows better than to slaughter them without thinking. Well, at least someone was able to fight against Mangemane before he died.”

“You name them?”

“Well, sure. At least I do. Makes it easier to keep track of.”

Kirishima would have been happy to go on, but suddenly both of the nagas perk up and turn to the trees. Moments later, Katsuki slithers into view. His hair is damp and his body still dripping wet from the sea water. He’s not quite in the clearing when Denki enthusiastically calls out and meets him. While Denki chatters, Katsuki’s eyes dart away for a moment to check over Izuku. Maybe it’s Izuku’s imagination, but it almost looks like Katsuki is relieved to see him.

However, seeing Katsuki again is bittersweet. Even from where Izuku is standing, it’s clear that he’s completely exhausted. This wasn’t the return of a proud father. The alpha naga looks a bit more pale than usual. He’s bleary eyed and grouchy even before Denki starts talking to him. If he had found the missing mermaid, Katsuki would be in much brighter spirits. The triumphant alpha would have announced it to all of them by now.

It looks like Kirishima was right about him searching all night. Izuku thinks as he nervously pulls on his lower lip. I guess I’ll ask him to go back with me when he’s done.

Kirishima crosses his arms and sighs. “He overdid it.”

“Yes, looks like it.”

“Well, don’t worry about him. He’ll bounce back pretty quick. Oh!” Kirishima exclaims. “You’ll probably appreciate this,” he says as he swings the basket off from his back. He releases the hatches, and the lid pops open to reveal a large collection of stripped seeds inside. “They’re a pain to get, but it’s their favorite. Take a look.”

“Hang on,” Izuku says as he crouches to better examine the seeds. “I know these. You got these from a plant I’m studying.”

“Yeah. Bakugo mentioned that’s what you were doing. You’ve got quite a collection hanging up in your tent. I take it you’re an enthusiastic climber?”

“Sorry, what?”

“The seeds? From the tall palm trees with the prickly leaves? In time they’ll ripen and fall on their own, but once they do, they’ll lose this pattern. The ones that haven’t reached maturity still have the stripes.”

Izuku furrows his brow. “The plants I’m studying are low growing. I’ve had to breed a couple generations, and even then the tallest barely even reaches my shoulders. The third generation produced the exact seeds in the dirt with the roots.”

“That can’t be right,” Kirishima says as he shakes his head. “I’m telling ya, these can only be found
at the top of the prickly palms. If you want ‘em like this, you have to climb up and pluck ‘em yourself. It’s a lot of trouble, but I collect them ‘cause the pigs on the island love ‘em. It’s what we use to encourage new migration patterns.”

Irritation builds Izuku’s chest, but he strains himself not to show it. It’s all starting to come together. “Interesting,” Izuku mutters as he grinds his teeth. He suddenly can’t stand it any longer. He grabs a fistful of seeds and runs off.

“I’m borrowing these!” he shouts back to Kirishima as he makes a beeline for Katsuki.

“HEY!”

But Izuku doesn’t stop. He charges right at Katsuki and Kaminari and starts chucking the seeds at Katsuki’s face.

“YOU SONUVA BITCH!” Izuku screams as he chucks the seeds at Katsuki’s face.

The alpha naga swears and shields himself with his arms and coils. He catches Izuku before he gets too close, and coils around his shoulders, pinning one of his arms to his sides.

“What the hell,” Katsuki snarls as he loops another coil around Izuku’s legs to keep him from thrashing.

“I can’t believe you! What were these seeds doing in my campsite?”

“What are you fucking talking about?” Katsuki bristles. “Seeds? What seeds?”

Izuku jerks in his grip and holds one of them right in front of Katsuki’s nose.

“I know, okay? These didn’t come from my plants! Kirishima just told me! Wanna explain how they made it to my garden right after your challenge?”

Izuku watches as Katsuki’s irritation morphs to a combination of surprise and unease. It’s as good as any admittance of guilt as far as Izuku’s concerned. So he continues, with an added bite to each of his words.

“I’d say it would have been pretty easy to sneak into my camp and plant them in my greenhouse,” Izuku says darkly. “Especially since I was giving you daily reports of my habits! I mean, you already snuck in and stole my book. And now that I think of it, it’s real funny how these seeds stopped appearing in the garden after you found out about my gear and asked me to use it in our skirmishes!”

“I had no choice! Your presence is a danger to my pack. You weren’t supposed to stick around alright?” Katsuki snaps. “Why are you bringing this up now? Can you let this go already?

“No, I can’t,” Izuku growls. “You can threaten me, hypnotize me, make fun of me, and push me around, but don’t you ever, EVER mess with the plants I’m growing for my work!”

“Oooh,” Denki says with a grimace. “You didn’t tell him?”

Dread hits Izuku like a punch to the gut, and his stomach drops.

“Tell me what.” Izuku says in a low voice. When neither of them answer, he raises his tone. “Tell ME WHAT?”

Katsuki gives Kaminari a glare that seems to drain the very life from him before responding.
“DEKU…”

“Get off me!” Izuku shouts and he squirms until Katsuki releases him. He stomps back to the cave, and snatches his sleeping bag from the tree. He quickly folds it and stuffs it away back into his backpack.

“I’m going back to camp. ALONE. Don’t you dare to try and stop me. You’ve got absolutely no reason to keep me away anymore. LOOK,” he says as he picks up the can of beans from his bag. “Pinto Beans, 100 Calories, 0 grams Saturated Fat, 310 miligrams of Sodium, 7g of Fiber! I’M FUCKING FINE!”

He tosses the can in his bag with a satisfying THWACK, and once it’s secure, swings the bag over his shoulder.

A chorus of shouting and swearing erupts behind him as he marches back. He isn’t at all surprised to hear their long bodies chasing after him through the underbrush. When he gets close to the campsite, he breaks into a sprint, and he sees it. He doesn’t want to, but he can’t miss the dark bruise in the middle of the field.

Izuku stops at once and lets out an ear splitting scream that echoes throughout the valley.

“WHAAAA- WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT THE FUCK HAPPENED?”

The rest of the campsite is an absolute mess, but the plants are in the worst shape by far. It doesn’t feel real. It has to be a dream. He would give anything to wake up right now. Izuku estimates about 80 percent of the greenhouse has burned away. Besides the surviving crop, the only thing left of the plants are the seeds he’s stored away back in his tent.

“Who did it?”

He swivels around to see all three of the nagas look at him guiltily. None of them look prepared to give him any sort of explanation.

“Oh, so it was a group effort?” Izuku spits. “Is that it?”

It’s Katsuki who finally speaks up in a low growl. “It was an accident. None of us were trying to-”

“SO THIS IS WHY?” Izuku shrieks. “This is this the reason you rushed me out of camp so quickly? YOU COWARD!”

“FUCK YOU! I’m not an idiot!” Katsuki snaps. “You coming back and finding the mess was inevitable!

“You hid it from me! WHY? Why didn’t you tell me?”

“WHY? Because having a whacked out human on my case was the last thing I needed! In case you haven’t noticed, everything right now is a fucking disaster! Maybe I like dealing with my shitstorms one at a time!”

Izuku grits his teeth. “Why’d you do it?”

“I didn’t DO anything. It was all you and Drooly!” Katsuki barks as he jabs his arm at Denki. “Oh, please!” Izuku shouts. “You’ve been wanting me to leave since I got here!”

“So now you’re blaming me?”
“You’re damn right I’m blaming you!” Izuku snaps. “This entire thing is all on you!”

“LIKE HELL IT IS! It’s all your fault!” Katsuki roars.

Denki and Kirishima watch the clashing altercation in horrified bewilderment. Their attention bounces back and forth between the human and their alpha, as if they’re watching an increasingly turbulent tennis match.

“How the **FUCK** is this my fault?” Izuku screams. “Making the challenge, the luring pigs, blasting through the ruins, breaking my gear, stalling on the last day, and letting me get captured; ALL OF THIS IS ON YOU!”

“Don’t act all innocent you PIECE OF SHIT!!” Katsuki bellows. “I think we both know whose fault this is, and it sure as HELL isn’t mine!”

“What the fuck are you fucking talking about?

**YOU!**” Katsuki roars. “YOU BEWITCHED ME AND RUINED MY LIFE!!”

“Whu-**WHAT?**” Izuku screeches in disbelief. “**ME?** I CANNOT FUCKING BELIEVE YOU! You’re the one with the goddamned hypnotic powers and lover’s venom you fucking BASTARD!”

“**SHUT UP!** You knew exactly what you wanted! And you got it too! Otherwise you wouldn’t be breathing!”

“OH F**K OFF!” Izuku screams. “If you wanted me to leave so badly, why didn’t you just destroy my plants in the first place?”

“You know, what? **FINE!**” Katsuki roars. “What if I really did destroy your plants? SO WHAT? What’re you gonna do? It’s not like you can bring them back! I guess that’s it then!” Katsuki says as he gives a long, humorless laugh. “Humans will all die out, right? Good riddance! One less threat for me to deal with! Looks like I came to my fucking senses and did something right for once!”

Suddenly all he can see is red. Izuku feels himself wind back and snap forward. His punch lands squarely on Katsuki’s jaw. The blow takes the alpha naga off guard, and he staggers back.

There’s a beat before all four of them register what happened. The rush Izuku feels is unreal. He doesn’t even feel the hot, screaming pain from his knuckles. He pulls back for another punch, but he’s roughly shoved to the ground as Denki wrestles his arms behind his back.

Izuku thrusts and kicks himself off against him, legs flailing wildly fighting to get back at Katsuki. His face is squished against the earth, just at the right angle allowing him see that Kirishima has pounced as well. It’s quickly obvious that the beta is using all of his strength to man handle his alpha and pin his thrashing body to the ground. His entire coils are entangled with Katsuki’s body. The alpha gnashes his teeth and snarls, eyes wild with bloodlust fixed completely on Izuku.

“YOU WANNA GO, SHITTY NERD? I’LL BEAT YOU TO A **FUCKING CORPSE!!!**”

“LET ME GO!” Izuku screams as he writhes in Denki’s grip, desperate to escape and attack again. “LET. ME. **GO!**”

“Oh my god!” Denki yells. “What the hell is wrong with you two?”

“KAMINARI!” Kirishima grunts as he wrangles his alpha. “Get- **eurgh. GET MIDORIYA OUT**
Denki gives his friend a quick nod before carrying Izuku off into the thicker area of the jungle. Katsuki howls after them. Eventually, his screams of fury and bursts of explosions slowly fade in the distance. Izuku struggles against Denki’s hold the whole journey, until all he can manage are half hearted twists.

*Superhuman strength must be a universal trait among naga,* he thinks bitterly.

“WILL you quit it already!” Denki says when they’re far enough away. “You’re just going to hurt yourself!”

“I can’t believe this! I hate him!” Izuku shouts as Denki lets him go. “I hate him so much!”

“I can’t believe you punched him!”

“He fucking deserved it!”

“Okay, maybe. But listen, are you crazy? You can’t just punch him like that! You can’t just sock an alpha in the face! None of us could ever get away with that!”

Izuku tries his best to control himself. He takes in shallow and rapid breaths as tears blur his vision. He tries to stay in control, but he wobbles, his knees fold, and he crumples to the ground.

“All that progress is gone. All I have is the experiments and the notes back in the tent. Maybe some of the samples I’ve collected will be enough to form a compelling argument in my manuscript,” Izuku murmurs as his voice trembles. “I really was hoping for something more ground breaking. In this environment, it’s not enough for my findings to be novel alone. I needed something life saving.”

“Were those plants...really that important?” Denki says slowly.

“Yeah,” Izuku mutters as he stubbornly tries to keep his tears from falling. “They were. And I’m running out of time.”

Denki’s eyes darken and he shuffles his coils against the ground. “Look,” he says with a defeated look. “What Bakugo said at the beginning is exactly what happened. It really was an accident, but it was way more my fault than yours.”

Izuku sniffs and wipes his nose. “You don’t have to cover for him.”

“I’m not!” Denki yelps. “Listen, this really was my fault! If we hadn’t been throwing stuff around, it wouldn’t have happened! I’d go back and stop us if I could...but I can’t. I’ll help you clean up and care for what you were growing, or whatever.”

There’s a shining light in his eyes, and a hint of a red in his cheeks from shame, but his companion doesn’t shy away. Izuku might not remember much about his companion or even know him at all, but he knows sincerity when he sees it. Denki is telling the truth.

“Well, okay. Thanks,” Izuku mutters. “I might take you up on that.”

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When they return, Katsuki and Kirishima are gone. Izuku’s feelings on their absence are mixed. If
they remained in camp, he can’t guarantee that he wouldn’t have rushed over and punched Katsuki
in the face all over again.

He shakes his head and decides bandaging his red and steadily bruising hand takes priority over
everything else. What was Katsuki’s face made out of, anyway? Concrete?

After his hand is fixed up, picking up the garbage is next on the list. It’s the easiest and least
stressful of the tasks before him, and he knows that just seeing the field clean will improve his
mood.

Once he gives Denki a new garbage bag for the empty cans, Izuku targets the scattered pieces of
paper. The wind has blown them all around the field, but thanks to the underbrush, none of them
have gotten far. Every piece he finds is a mess of scribble, splatters, and chicken scratch. They’re
colorful, but ultimately unimpressive. They remind Izuku of his art projects from elementary
school.

Besides the paper, the most common debris around camp are the empty cans and lids scattered
every which way. It was almost as if someone had intentionally thrown them around. As he works,
the memories trickle back to him.

“Hey, Kaminari. I think it’s all coming together now. Baseball,” Izuku says as he gestures at the
trash. “but without any of the proper equipment. The giant fireball I remember was the plants
burning. All of my hallucinations were somewhat grounded in reality. And then that leaves the
seafaring adventure.” Izuku says hopefully. “What about that one?”

“All in your head,” Denki says with an apologetic smile. “You’ve got a good imagination. You
made a decent captain.”

Once he’s gathered all the pieces of paper and has them piled in a warped stack, he walks back to
his tent, and sees a final fluttering piece. An empty can rests on top, which Izuku assumes acted as
an anchor. He scoops up the can and tosses it in the trash bag.

The paper underneath is different from the rest. The other side has a painting that looks like an
actual explosion. There’s a clean middle at the epicenter of the blast, and clouds of angry bursts of
color all along the edges of the paper. This wasn’t by Izuku’s drug induced mind. It had to be
painted by Katsuki.

Izuku carefully turns the page around in his hand in admiration. So Katsuki had even been willing
to paint with him. Maybe there really was no limit to his insatiable curiosity; a trait they both had in
common. Katsuki may have been a jerk at first, and he’s a jerk now, but at least he’s trying.

He’s come a long way, Izuku realizes as he feels a twinge of guilt. And then as soon as I’m better,
I punch him in the face. Nice, Midoriya. Real nice.

The paper’s discovery adds to the melancholy of his next task. It’s the part he’s been dreading the
most; assessing the damage to the plants. At worst, he’ll need to return home, and let his
University know he needs to start over. At best, he’ll have enough of his original notes and
preserved seedlings to continue where he left off.

He keeps his expectations low, but not low enough. Hardly any of the plants survived. The ones
that did are withering from the aftermath of the blaze and lack of care. Still, he grits his teeth and
presses on. He busies himself with his notes, and compares what he has.

After hours of pacing, muttering, and note taking, Izuku collapses at his desk. He closes the
notebook he’s been scribbling on rests the pages on his nose. An early return was absolutely necessary after all.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Denki says as he pokes his head in the tent, jarring Izuku from his thoughts. “Are you okay to be alone? I don’t want to risk it.”

“I don’t know...it seems a little risky,” Izuku admits. “I can make a fire and we’ll make a night of it. We can gather round, sing some songs, and tell ghost stories, like we did at summer camp when I was a kid.”

“What’s a ghost?”

Izuku raises an eyebrow. “You’re joking, right? You guys don’t have ghosts? The spirits of the dead? Phantoms who return to haunt the living?”


“Fascinating. I think every human culture has at least some legend about them. Maybe it’s because of our unbridled curiosity of what happens after death,” Izuku says thoughtfully. “Ghosts...are a bit hard to explain. There’s all sorts of hauntings. Sometimes you see them, sometimes you’ll feel their presence. Other times you’ll hear the wailing voice in the wind from someone who’s passed on. Most of the time they remain with us to complete some unfinished duty, or carry out a curse.”


“Are you sure?” Izuku says with the most neutral expression he can manage. “Have you ever died before? Have you spoken someone who has? There’s no way to know for sure. Maybe there’s a world beyond this one, and if there is, how do you travel to the next? Maybe after death your spirit can be lost in it’s journey, and never truly find its final resting place.”

Denki curls his long tail around himself. “None of it’s real, right?” he whimpers.

Izuku laughs. “I’ve never met one myself. Don’t worry, I’m just teasing. It’s just all just in good fun.”

“Y-yeah!” Denki agrees aggressively. “FUN!”

Once the fire is happily burning, and his belly is full, Izuku can feel himself getting tired. But the day can’t end like this. Not with the way things were. Not with this hollow feeling in his gut. Izuku bites his lower lip and gathers his courage to ask.

“Um, Kaminari? If you wanted to, would you be able to lead me to Kacchan?”

Denki winces. “I can, but...”

“I just want to talk to him,” Izuku quickly explains. “That’s all. My head’s clear now. I realized something, and I know we can sort this out together.”

Denki deflates. “Well, if I had to guess, they’re probably in my territory watching the herd. It’s a good distance from here, though.”

“I can make it.”

“Alight, but keep your guard up. If we run into one of the alpha boars, you’ll need to climb a tree at a moment’s notice. I’m good at protecting myself,” he says as his body crackles brightly with
electricity. “Others, not so much.”

Denki wasn’t kidding about the distance. The entire journey could be a mistake. What if Katsuki doesn't want to see him? If only he could call Katsuki somehow. Izuku quietly wonders what the nagas and mermaids would think of cellphones for the rest of the journey. Could a cell tower even function on the island with the storm’s interference?

They make it through the forest and find both Katsuki and Kirishima just as the sky ripens to a glowing orange. Izuku’s heart leaps at the sight of them. He quickly dashes ahead.

“Kacchan!”

“The hell’re you doing here?” Katsuki snarls.

Izuku stops. He’s not sure what to say, but steadies himself in time.

“I know you’re mad at me,” Izuku says slowly. “You have every reason to be upset, but I want to set this right.”

Katsuki blinks at him and scowls.

>Please? I know you’re not obligated to stick around me anymore, but I won’t be able to rest tonight until we work something out.”

Seconds tick by and for a moment, Izuku isn’t sure Katsuki even wants to look at him. Maybe coming out here was a mistake. Izuku is nearly about to apologize when Katsuki gives him a slow nod of acceptance. “You two can go,” he says as he acknowledges his packmates. “I’m talking to Deku.”

Kirishima and Denki nervously exchange glances.

“It’s fine,” Izuku says with a wavering smile of assurance. “I won’t hit him this time, I promise.”

The two nagas give him nervous smiles in return, before slithering off into the approaching twilight.

Izuku clears his throat. “Kaminari told me what happened.” he says carefully. “He said the whole incident was his fault.”

“Yeah, so did I.”

Izuku winces. “I know. I should have believed you. I wasn’t thinking.”

“Obviously. ”

“I didn’t mean to hurt you. I’d take it all back if I could. Everything got to me at once, and I was frustrated, overwhelmed, and angry.” Izuku blurs. “And um…and I’m sorry I punched you in the face.”

Katsuki’s sharp eyes study his face before he turns back to the trees. “I barely felt it.”

Izuku gives a defeated sigh. He supposes it’s the closest thing to closure he’ll get. “Okay.”

“That’s it? That’s all you wanted to talk about?” Katsuki snaps. “Why the fuck did you make Kaminari drag you all the way out here?”
“Because I don’t want to be enemies!” Izuku blurts. “And I know you feel the same. You’ve sacrificed everything to make sure I stay alive. For even allowing me to work here, and looking after me; I owe you everything I have.”

“You don’t know anything about me, anything about us! The deal is up, and we’re done here. So beat it!”

“It’s not that simple!” Izuku cries. “Kacchan, please. Whatever this is...whatever we are, it’s a mess. But it’s something, and if we neglect it or pretend it doesn’t exist, we’ll just keep getting hurt!”

Katsuki gapes at him.

“What you said back near the end, about wanting to destroy my work. I know you didn’t mean it...even if you wished you did. I want to work this out, but I can’t do it alone! Would that be so hard to believe?” Izuku asks.

“Don’t toy with me!” Katsuki snaps. “I slammed you down and pushed you around for two weeks straight. Your strength can’t even compare to mine, and I ground your face in it!”

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees. “And I also remember how you called me out for manipulating your feelings. And you’re right. I did. I’m usually not so bold, but my life depended on your mercy. I have people back home who are depending on me. I couldn’t accept anything less than victory, even if it meant that I wouldn’t win the way I hoped.”

Katsuki’s eyes flash in anger. “So you admit it?”

“I really wanted to beat you fair and square, you know? I had to survive, no matter what. But that doesn’t mean I ever despised or looked down on you. When I said I wanted to help you read and write, I meant it.”

“Sure you did,” Katsuki says with a scowl. “And right now, half of my clan wants you dead. It’s still in your interest to manipulate me.”

“That’s true,” Izuku nods as he meets Katsuki’s piercing gaze. “I won’t argue against that, but it would be foolish to say that’s all that’s keeping us together.”

He sets down his backpack, undoes the claps, and pulls out a sheet of paper. He faces the artwork towards Katsuki and holds it out against his chest.

“I found the painting you made back at the camp. It’s supposed to be one of your explosions, right? It’s really good. I guess at some point, we painted together to pass the time. Do you want it?” he asks. “If you decide you hate it, don’t just go blowing it up. I want to keep it if you don’t.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s the first time you’ve ever made art with me.”

Katsuki’s face twists in confusion. “The first time?”

“If you’re going to learn how to write with me, you may as well practice your drawings. You had fun with this, right? There’s a lot of passion here. I’d love to see what else inspires you. With some proper guidance, you could become a master artist someday.”

Izuku waits for him to respond with rising anxiety. He really can’t prove anything. From Katsuki’s
perspective, this could easily be seen as a scheme to protect himself. But he’s said his piece. If Katsuki asks him to leave after this, so be it. He’ll respect his wishes.

It could be the setting sun, but it almost looks like Katsuki’s face is reddening. The naga swears suddenly and pinches the bridge of his nose. After what feels like ages, Katsuki clicks his tongue in annoyance.

“Keep the stupid paper,” Katsuki says at last. “Like I have any use for it. Gimme a fuckin’ break with this ‘feelings’ crap. I’ve had two long days in a row.”

“S-Sorry,” Izuku murmurs as he gives a small smile. In a way, he supposes both of those long days are his fault. “You really pushed yourself. I’m guessing last night’s search was pretty rough.”

Katsuki grumbles and lets his arm fall back against his side. “I wasn’t able to find a damn thing.”

Right.

The wave of relief Izuku feels is set aside for the moment. Emiko’s mom was still missing. Not good. Back home, if a missing person isn’t found after 72 hours, the police would start looking for a body. And Ibara had been missing for longer. Much longer. Izuku doesn’t want to say the worst, but Katsuki does it for him.

“Shiozaki’s gone,” he says flatly. “And that can only mean more trouble’s on the way.”

Izuku’s heart sinks. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I was really hoping you’d find her. What’ll you tell Emiko?”

“The truth. That Shiozaki’s still missing and that I’ll keep looking for her as often as I can. We’ll have to be more careful. Schedules, curfews, chaperones; I don’t like any of it, but until we get some solid intelligence on the enemy, no one in the sea can be alone.”

Izuku considers this. Katsuki was right. In the meantime, this really was the best they could do. He’s about to reply when Katsuki suddenly changes the subject.

“Have you seen the beach on this side of the island?”

“No, why?”

“C’mon.”

The two of them travel until Katsuki leads Izuku to a sharp cliff that looks out over the ocean.

Izuku takes one look and knows exactly what he’s looking at. The landscape before him is oddly unnatural. A cliff had been carved into the land. Before them stretches a valley of rubble, as if a massive body collided into the earth. Bits of plants poke from the rocks here and there. It’s another battle ground. All of this was relatively recent; possibly as recent as the bowl shaped cave he and Katsuki once spared in.

What intrigues Izuku the most is the wrinkled plain of dark, hardened lava at the foot of the rubble. Its solid mass stretches beyond the horizon, and devours the landscape of white sand. From a distance, Izuku would think this were simply a black beach, if it weren’t for the sprinklings of white sand that appeared in between.

“What am I looking at? Is that volcanic rock?” Izuku asks in awe. “I didn’t realize there was an active volcano on the island.”
“There isn’t,” Katsuki mutters. “This is the site of the final battle. All of this was molten when I was a pup.”

“How?”

“Two Face’s sire. Our previous guardian controlled fire. After his transformation, he could spew magma from his body just as easily. His bones aren’t far from here.”

This was made by one creature, Izuku thinks in disbelief as his eyes scan the entire beach.

Their previous guardian could probably have expanded the whole island himself if he wanted to. Shouto was able to produce both ice and flame, Izuku recalls. From the sound of it, he inherited his fire quirk from his father. Was is possible that the ice power came from his mother? It’s a tempting question, but for now Izuku sets it aside. The great battleground before them holds a worrying implication.

“I don’t understand. I know there was a war of some sort, but wasn’t this battle supposed to happen? You said before that the maids can call on the guardian for wipes.”

“This wasn’t a wipe called on by our own. It didn’t target just the naga. It targeted everyone. There was an invasion back when we were pups. The wounds of the dead suggest they were slaughtered by another clan. My generation was hidden away before the battle. We lost, and everyone else died. I never even got a good look at the invaders. All I saw was the monster that finished the job. and after that day, I never saw it again.”

Izuku blinks at Katsuki in stunned silence. “Why are you telling me this?”

“This is our home. It’s supposed to be impenetrable. There’s nowhere else for us to go, and our kind depends of Guardians to secure and defend the land.” Katsuki says flatly. “There’s two important rules for understanding guardians. First, they never leave their pack behind. And secondly, guardians are never supposed to be slain.”

It’s hard to follow, but Izuku does his best to connect the dots. “Emiko said there was a monster in the sea,” says Izuku quietly. “Is that what the guardian fought? Do you think that’s what got her mom? Is it possible there’s another guardian picking you off?”

“No,” Katsuki says grimly. “Guardians have no will of their own. They’re bound by instinct alone to patrol their waters and protect their land and people. One wouldn’t search to kill another. They also don’t eat us. That thing absolutely did.”

“So the monster everyone’s afraid of is just based on that day? Just because it came here once doesn’t mean it will again,” Izuku mutters. “It could be anything. That doesn’t make sense! If it was another tribe, why would a monster come after them? Were they trying to shake it off their trail?”

“You don’t get it! IT DOESN’T FUCKING MATTER WHAT IT WAS!” Katsuki roars. “The death of our parents, the missing pups, human invaders, and now Shiozaki! NONE OF THIS WOULD BE HAPPENING IF ENDEAVOR HADN’T FAILED! If that thing decides to come back there’s nothing we can do to stop it! Right now we’re without a guardian and we’ll have to wait at least 100 years until I become the next! One hundred fucking years.

I don’t know what’s hunting us but I’m going to end it. I’ll be strong enough for anything when I transform! Stronger than that that trash who left us for dead, and stronger than his exalted spawn! Until then, we’re vulnerable. We have to go about our lives in hiding, hoping that we aren’t the
next to be taken, as something out there picks us off one by one like we’re some kind of—“

“Prey.” Izuku finishes.

Katsuki holds his gaze for a moment. He takes in furious puffs of air, before grinding his teeth and forcing his fury down to a nearly neutral expression. His eyes reflect sorrow without a twinge of pride. Izuku waits and Katsuki bows his head in a stance that seems almost apologetic. Katsuki bites his lower lip and looks out to the sea.

“We’re dying.” he says at last.

Izuku nods. “So are we.”

They listen to the rolling tide for a moment under the darkening sky, regarding themselves as warriors facing impossible odds against the oncoming chill of twilight. Nothing more needs to be said. Izuku sighs and crosses his arms.

“I won’t lie. The greenhouse fire was a major setback,” he says gently. “I’ve put some thought into it, and I’ve decided it’s not worth continuing where I left off. For now, it’s important that I update my university on my progress. It’d be a different story if I could communicate beyond the storm, but I can’t.”

It’s without a doubt the best choice he can make. He has to let them know what he’s recorded. Izuku doesn’t want to keep his hopes up, but there’s also a chance that his fellow researchers have already made some sort of breakthrough. Had the researches outside the storm made any further progress? He doubts it. None of the previous trials had much effect. The current medication could only delay the inevitable.

“You’re leaving?”

“Well,” Izuku says with a hint of a smirk. “Considering most of my equipment has either broken, melted, burned to ash, or exploded; yeah I kinda have to. Depending on whether the board approves of my findings, I could return. I’ll try my best, but what I have might not have enough to sway them. And honestly, for now, it might be best if I keep my distance from your clan.”

“When?”

“Dunno. There’s still a lot of preparation I need to do first. I’d like to flesh out a majority of my paper before I take off. I’d say a couple days.”

Izuku scratches the back of his head thoughtfully, and is about to suggest that he makes his way back to camp when Katsuki speaks again.

“I can’t fix your plants or find your cure,” Katsuki says suddenly. “But if you want, I’ll let you do your weird science measuring stuff.”

Weird science measuring stuff?

The words bounce off of Izuku’s ears and he blinks at Katsuki comprehendingly. “Huh?”

“You can study my claws, my palms, and my teeth. I’ll…” Katsuki pauses and flexes the claws in one of his hands. “…even let you take some venom.”

“Wha- really?” Izuku yelps before quickly tapering down his enthusiasm. “I-I see! Well, I mean, if you’re okay with it. Then, y-yeah. I’m definitely interested, but you don’t need to push yourself if—“
“It’s fine.” Katsuki interrupts.

“Okay.” Izuku mumbles with a wobbly smile on his face. “Um, you didn’t mean tonight, did you?”

“Whenever you want. It doesn’t fucking matter. I have to escort you back to camp anyway.”

The journey back is quiet and Izuku can’t seem to place a finger as to why he’s suddenly nervous. This was Katsuki’s version of an apology, so already there were some emotional ties at play. But what he was offering would be no different from any other measurement Izuku’s done back in the lab.

*He’s just another specimen, Izuku thinks. I’m a professional. I’ve studied all types of organisms in my college career. This is no different. I just need to show him the proper respect, explain every tool, get his consent, and everything will be fine.*

Back at the tent, Izuku decides to take things slow. If either of them feel uncomfortable, they can stop the examination before they cross any major boundaries. Carefully, Izuku pulls out his tools and arranges them in front of Katsuki. The stethoscope, thermometer, measuring tape, tuning fork, tongue depressors, otoscope; all of his tools are fairly basic, takes the time to introduce each once and demonstrate its function. He even allows Katsuki to hold them and inspect each one. The naga treats them as priceless treasures. He’s cautious and very methodical as he picks them up and maneuvers them in his claws.

*Okay, Izuku thinks to himself. See? This isn’t weird. This isn’t weird at all.*

“We can start with something simple first,” he says feeling braver. “Can I see your claws? They’re retractable, right?” Izuku starts with his measuring tape and the claws.

Katsuki helpfully flexes and retracts the claws on one hand as Izuku wraps the tape around each side.

“I’ve noticed when you’re hunting, that’s the first thing you’ll attack with.”

“No shit,” Katsuki snorts as he gestures at Izuku's nails. “That’s standard with every creature except humans. But look at those puny things. It’s like you’re incomplete and have to carry around tools to make up for it. And then there’s you, taking it even a step further. So proud of making your own venom.”

“Making my own-” Izuku stops as the realization hits him. He can’t stop the blush from spreading on his face. “Oh great. What did you do to pull that one out of me?”

“You brought it up all on your own. You were very proud of yourself,” Katsuki snickers.

“No,” Izuku says as he narrows his eyes. “I’m not proud of it. Not even a little bit. I wouldn’t have bragged. I was nearly expelled!”

“You say that, but your inner ‘bad boy biochemist’ says...”

“My inner, what?” Izuku squawks. “N-no! It was a mistake! I really messed up. I’m never making drugs for profit again! I nearly lost the trust of everyone I cared about. Can we talk about something else?” Izuku mumbles as he hurriedly sets the tape aside. “Let me take your pulse.”

Katsuki obliges and Izuku counts the beats in his hand.

“I’m not very good at keeping my mouth shut when I’m delirious am I?” Izuku mutters as he traces
the veins under Katsuki's skin with his eyes. “I can get kind of bold when I’m not fully in control. And I, um, I think I made a deal with you. About saying something when I’m sober.”

Katsuki looks interested. “I’m aware.”

“Can you tell me what it was? I don’t remember.”

“Remembering was part of it,” Katsuki growls dismissively. “Try harder.”

“That’s very unhelpful,” Izuku mutters as he jots down the numbers in his notebook. He picks up the stethoscope next and warms the metal in his hands. “I’m going to use this to listening to you heart and breathing, okay?”

Without any prompting, Katsuki lifts an arm, and takes off the strings of beads from around his neck. The beads clatter on the surface as he places them Izuku’s desk. He’s not any less clothed than he was the moment before, but seeing him bare chested sends something fluttering in Izuku’s chest.

Izuku stands frozen as Katsuki tilts his head back exposing the muscles of his neck, collarbone, and shoulders. His red eyes flicker to the corners of his eyes, watching Izuku expectantly. It’s almost as if Katsuki’s inviting him to…

No, Izuku thinks as he bites his lower lip. Calm down. This was all just procedural. If anything, Katsuki was just anxious to expose himself this way. He was allowing Izuku full access to study his anatomy. That’s all.

“A-Alright, I’m going to listen to your breathing and heartbeat. I’ll ask you to take a deep breath as I move. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, yeah…”

Izuku presses the stethoscope against Katsuki’s chest. Katsuki jerks and hisses at the metal, but thankfully holds still. He searches along his chest, but is ultimately disappointed to find that Katsuki’s heart is exactly where a human’s would be. The sounds is familiar as well. Well, almost. As he moves, he also hears an unmistakable echo, as if there’s another beating muscle farther away. The more he thinks of it, the more Izuku wonders how a single heart in his chest would never be enough to pump blood through the rest of Katsuki’s body.

“Do you have more than one?” Izuku asks aloud, mostly to himself.

Before Katsuki can respond, Izuku eagerly moves the stethoscope down his waist, around his back, and down the length of his scales. The naga tenses at the touch, but Izuku pays him no mind. He leads with one hand, as he listens for the pulse. Katsuki takes a shuddering breath when Izuku stops about a quarter down from where he started.

The second heart is more powerful, and pulses at a slower rate. If he had to guess, the heart would be about the size of a catcher’s mitt. He holds the instrument there, listening as the heart strums to a quickening pace under his hand. The scales are pleasantly cool against his skin. They seem to warm slowly against him, like the cold side of a pillow.

“Amazing,” he breathes.

“OI,” Katsuki snaps. “Don’t just touch me without asking, you fuckin’ creep!”

“S-sorry…” Izuku mutters bashfully as he draws away from Katsuki’s coils. “I really should have asked first. It’s just, everything about you is so interesting to me.” He pauses. Katsuki’s expression is odd. He also looks sweatier than usual. “Are you sure you’re alright? You look kinda sick.”
“I’m fine.”

He has his doubts, but Izuku puts them aside as he starts to test the lymph nodes in his neck. As he feels around the skin, Izuku watches as Katsuki’s skin pebbles with goose bumps at his touch. Something’s up. He gives an exasperated sigh, and pulls away.

“Kacchan, if there’s something bothering you, we can stop. You can tell me anything.”

“Forget it. It’s nothing.”

“Bullshit.” Izuku crosses his arms and waits until Katsuki’s eyes flicker away.

“It’s the venom,” Katsuki says at last. “Once the toxin’s in your blood, it’ll alter your chemistry to form a bond that goes both ways. The more intimate your encounter with the one who gave it, the more you’ll crave and appreciate their touch. When the one who gave the mark is near, it’ll increases any feelings of attraction and matches it to the other.”

Izuku gapes at him.

“You knew this, and asked for a physical examination?” Izuku says in disbelief. “Well, jeeze. Whatever. We can stop now if you want to.”

“I’d break it if I could,” Katsuki interjects. “But we don’t have that kind of control. I’m here and you’re leaving soon. Your tools are out, so you might as well get it over with.”

He’s conflicted. Now that Katsuki mentions it, he feels a bit of a rush every time they touch. But when would he ever get Katsuki to willingly go through an examination? He shakes his head and sighs. Continuing goes against his better judgement, but he’d be kicking himself for the rest of his life if he passed this up and then never returned to the island.

“Alright, but if you really want me to stop, I will.”

Up next is checking his mouth and ears, so he’ll have to stand right in front of him. Which is totally fine. He can do this. It’s just Katsuki’s face. Just his stupid, beautiful, punchable face.

_Godammit. You’ll be fine as long as you don’t kiss him._

As long as he breaks down each piece of his face and studies their individual parts he can relax. The alpha has much less of an effect on him this way. The most interesting part of his face are the eyes, with their blood red irises and a dark slit down the middle. When Katsuki is especially aggressive, the eyes expand past the whites, taking on a bestial form. But at the moment, they look more human than reptile.

The second most interesting part of his face are the ears. They looked mostly human, coming to a point near the top. Behind them, and along the length of Katsuki’s neck, appear to be a pair of long white scars.

“What are these? Gills?”

“They were. I lost them when I made it on land.”

“But can you still use them?” Izuku asks awestruck. “If you go back in the water, will they open up again?”

“Not unless I’m actively drowning. Otherwise, I can hold my breath for a maximum of two hours.”
Izuku sets aside the otoscope. “Now I’m moving on to your teeth. Open up and say ‘Ah’.”

His breath isn’t the greatest, not that Izuku expected it to smell like peppermint, but he manages to get a good look. The tongue hangs out of his mouth, and past his jaw. Katsuki is exceedingly patient with him as he lifts his lips and runs his hand along his jawline. He’s still making notes and trying to stay busy, but one question won’t leave him alone.

“Um, Kacchan? About your tongue. I’m just curious. I sort of remember you being able to move it around on your own. Is it actually prehensile? I’m only asking because with most snakes, that’s really not the case.”

Without saying a word Katsuki holds up two fingers in front of his lips. His long forked tongue slides out and wraps around the tips and all the way down to the knuckles of his hand. For a fraction of a second, his cheeks hollow before he slurps it back in his mouth.

*SHIT.*

It’s so obviously a phallic gesture. It’s so easy to imagine Katsuki working that powerful, slick muscle between his legs. The growing tightness in Izuku’s pants won’t let him think of anything else. His entire face reddens as he sweats nervously. He does his best to remain calm but his brain shuts down.

“Haa, ha ha ha ha ha!” Izuku forces himself to laugh in order to break some of the tension. “Long and dexterous! I see! It’s like a giraffes!”

*OH GOD. Why’s it weird? Why did I agree to this? ABORT MISSION. ABORT.*

Izuku goes to turn away and hide his panic when Katsuki closes his fingers around his hand. He searches the naga’s face for answers, but when Katsuki meets his eyes, he’s completely stone faced.

“Are you done?”

“I mean, mostly!” Izuku cries. “All I need is a sample of your blood and venom, and we can call it a night!”

Katsuki seems to consider this as he reaches for Izuku’s other arm. “The physical doesn’t have to stop here. I don’t know anything about live humans either,” he says in a hushed tone. “This examination could go both ways.”

Izuku swallows, trying desperately not to think of Katsuki’s words the night before. “I-I mean, sure. I guess that’s fair,” he says dumbly. “If it’s just general questions about my biology, I’ll answer any question you have.”

He’s close now. Izuku feels like a deer caught in headlights. His eyes keep wandering from Katsuki’s eyes to his lips. He’s trembling on the inside and if he’s learned anything about the naga, Katsuki must sense it too.

Katsuki’s eyes flash with irritation. “*What?*”

“I-I just thought...um.” Izuku says as he grasps for words. The air suddenly feels heavy. “You’re really close. It j-just...looks like you’re about to kiss me.”
Katsuki tilts his head as if considering the question, and he closes the space between them. “If I were, what kind of kiss would you want?”

Izuku gulps. He’d expected Katsuki to bristle and back away at the suggestion, but he’d done this instead and the flustered human is completely unprepared.

*Is he messing with me?*

He studies Katsuki’s expression carefully. It’s the same face that’s been threatening and laughing at him since they first met. Did he mean it? Or was Katsuki teasing him like he had while they played cards? He shakily releases a breath he’s been holding and gives him the safest and most honest answer to call his bluff.

“A real one,” He says, hoping the firmness in his tone drowns out the butterflies in his stomach. “No more games.”

Katsuki narrows his eyes, but instead of getting angry, his chest rises, and he sighs deeply. He curls a hand behind Izuku’s hair, and Katsuki drags the tips of his claws along his jawline, sending tingles in their wake. Izuku watches, completely transfixed, as the alpha stops his fingers at his chin, just below his lower lip.

“No more games,” Katsuki echoes.

The kiss is soft and slow and sends warmth in Izuku’s cheeks. It feels vulnerable and sincere, and it’s over before Izuku’s brain can register what happened.

“Eh?” He blinks at Katsuki. After a second, it sinks in. “EHHHH? Ka- Kacchan!” Izuku sputters in shock as he covers his lips. “Y-you...I didn’t think you’d actually do it!”

“Yes? Well, I did! SO WHAT?” Katsuki bristles from a combination of hot embarrassment and frustration. “You didn’t like it?”

“No it’s not that,” Izuku stutters as he nervously clutches his notebook to his chest. “S-sorry. I wasn't ready. Can you do it again?”

Katsuki’s face twitches. Reluctantly, he grumbles and grimaces up at the tent’s ceiling before he’s able to face he human again. “Fine.”

This kiss is identical to the first and Izuku’s stomach flips. They make out slowly, as if the other would crumble if they press too firmly. All the while Katsuki strokes the tips of his fingers his neck and shoulders, sending sparks of electricity up his spine.

Katsuki’s next kiss is more urgent, and Izuku reciprocates, maybe a bit too eagerly and Katsuki inhales sharply and breaks it. For a split second Izuku thinks the naga changed his mind. He’s cursing himself for his enthusiasm when Katsuki surprises him and mashes their lips back together. His tongue runs on the inner edge of Izuku’s lower lip, silently asking for a deeper kiss.

Izuku’s eyes close. His mouth opens and he loses himself in the moment. The tongue is dexterous and teasing, darting and exploring the cavern of his mouth. The notebook falls from his loosened hand as he hears the whispering of Katsuki’s coils encircling them, cutting them off from the rest of the world.

Katsuki runs his hand through his hair dark curls and right along the base of his neck. His other arm snakes around Izuku’s waist and roughly pulls him into his chest. Izuku squeaks. The sudden friction of Katsuki’s pelvis grinds on his cock, and he feels Katsuki’s mouth curl to a smirk.
He becomes more ravenous. Katsuki growls and kisses his neck. Teeth tease along the skin as he sucks and swirls around his tongue. It’s dizzying and they’re going too fast. Every touch leaves an aftershock on his skin, and an aching need he didn’t realize he had.

Katsuki reaches lower, stroking along his leg, and he gasps, nudging his leg closer, riding it up his scales. Izuku’s heart strums and he swears there’s the phantom sugary, sweet taste of venom in the back of his mouth. He can’t bear to have any part of him without the naga’s touch.

Katsuki’s grip tightens on the back of Izuku’s leg, and he moans. Katsuki pulls back suddenly looking frustrated. He says something, but the words don’t register. Izuku’s thoughts are jumbled as he grasps for the right words.

“What?”

“The hell!” Katsuki snaps. “Quit pretending they’re sensitive!”

“What? Why would I—”

“You know I like your legs,” Katsuki growls accusingly. “Why else would you make those sounds?”

Izuku blinks in disbelief. “I’m not pretending they’re sensitive because you like them, you wierdo. I don’t know any humans who wouldn’t be affected by someone stroking their legs!”

Katsuki’s face twitches and he massages his temples. If he tilts his head, Izuku can see the blush coloring his cheeks.

“Godammit. What is it with you,” Katsuki mutters as he uncovers his face and traces his claws along Izuku’s chest. “Making me wanna have all of you at once.”

Izuku’s cheeks burn at the suggestion. Just how far was Katsuki willing to go? “W-What do you mean?” he asks shyly.

“We don’t have to stop.”

Katsuki places a kiss in his collarbone, and runs his long tongue up Izuku’s throat and behind his ear. One of his claws hikes up his shirt and traces patters right below his ribs.

“Do you trust me?”

Izuku shivers. This was Katsuki, the alpha, the who had all the cards from the beginning. All the total authority of the island, and if he wished, absolute control over his body and mind. He didn’t have to do any of this. He didn’t have to go this far. But here he was, waiting on the human’s word.

“Y-yeah,” Izuku sighs at last. “If you wanted to hurt me, you could have done so a long time ago.”

Katsuki purrs appreciatively and nuzzles into his hair, placing a kiss on his jaw. His mouth wanders back to Izuku’s lips as he rolls his hands under Izuku’s shirt. Izuku raises his arms without a word, letting the naga pull it up over his head.

“Lean back.”

Katsuki’s body has formed a bed of coils behind him. Resting on the muscles is like laying on a spread of cushions.

“T-this…whole thing, this ‘examination’.” Izuku stammers as he eases onto them. “Was all a ruse
“Don’t act like you didn’t know better,” Katsuki snickers. “You were already semi hard when I took off my necklaces.”

Izuku flushes and turns away towards the tent. “Th-that was all on you and your bedroom eyes.”

The next kiss is all biting, as Katsuki pulls and sucks on his lower lip. He’s arching into Katsuki’s hold and his head swims. His chest pounds. He’s light headed and white spots bloom in the corner of his vision. When Katsuki’s hand wanders from his stomach and massages his inner thighs, Izuku can’t stop himself from gasping. It’s then he feels something pressing against his stomach.

He looks down to see two dicks, one directly underneath the other, have extended from a slit in Katsuki’s groin. They have pointed heads, and feather like ridges along the shaft. Izuku regards them in quiet fascination.

“They’re um...they’re not toxic are they?”

“Doubt it,” Katsuki grunts. "The humans in the murals didn’t seem to have any problems.”

“I didn’t think you were taking notes.”

Katsuki shuts him up with a kiss. His claws hook around the belt loops of his shorts and he tugs at them impatiently. Izuku tries to speak with a mouth full of tongue, but can only garble instructions before Katsuki growls fiercely, and with a determined snarl, rips the shorts in half.

“BWA-” Izuku squawks as he jerks his head away from the naga’s face. He blinks at the frayed seams in disbelief as he catches his breath. “K-Kacchan, t-there was a zipper!”

“The fuck’s a zipper?”

“N-Nevermind…” Izuku stammers as he facepalms his reddening face. “I just...I can’t believe you did that.”

Katsuki tugs them down further and past his hips. His erection is caught in the waistband, but snaps back against his stomach, as Katsuki slides them down past his knees and off his feet. And then Izuku gulps, as he lies completely naked on his coils.

Katsuki seems to absorb the sight before him hungrily. Izuku lifts a hand to his groin, but Katsuki bats his hands away. “I’ve been waiting for this,” he says, pupils wide and wanting. “Let me work. There’s so much I need to learn.”

Katsuki starts agonizingly slow.

Each kiss is light, and Izuku prickles at each touch. His movements are patient and careful, working his body as if he’s kindling a fire. He’s caressing his chest and sides, sucking at his nipples, as if working to pull the lewdest cries the human can make from his mouth. Izuku brings a hand to his mouth and bites into his knuckles, trying not to keen from the blaze.

Katsuki breaks a kiss at his chest, and grins down at him. “God, you look good like this,” he murmurs as he runs his hands up Izuku’s thighs in reverence. “If you want something from me; you’ll have to ask.”

Fuck bastard...
All he wants is for Katsuki to travel lower, and put that mouth over his crotch and dick. He faintly reminds himself of what lay hidden behind that teasing mouth. Teeth, Sharp, and complete with venomous fangs that rested in the place of his eye teeth. The very thought should frighten him, but it only makes him harder and he twitches at the thought.

Katsuki spreads his thighs apart and massages with his palms. He digs in with his fingertips, as if he’s sculpting the muscles himself. Izuku balls the hand at his chin to a fist as Katsuki cups and kneads into his buttocks, pulling them up, closer to his face. He’s kissing the tip of his cock, nuzzling it, and using his lips to hint at licking the full length with his entire tongue.

Izuku’s teeth pinch at the skin of his index finger but his moans escape through his teeth and knuckles. He bucks restlessly, begging and praying for Katsuki to take him in his mouth. The naga’s tongue flicks out to snatch the beads of precum and teasingly swirl along the top. Then Katsuki is biting and pulling at the skin of Izuku’s inner thighs, marking him and earning a desperate cry from Izuku’s throat. He bites back his words until he can’t stand it.

“GOD! K-Kacchan...take me in your mouth,” he gasps. “I need you! Take all of me, please!”

“Well,” Katsuki purrs with blatant satisfaction, as he pulls himself to gloat in Izuku’s face. “Took you long enough.”

He kisses him sloppily, claws brushing along his ribs, and sucks Izuku’s tongue into his own mouth, just as he had done with his cock. It's almost enough to distract him from the naga’s tail winding around his shoulders, lifting his arms, and binding them in a vice above his head.

“But since you asked nicely…”

A question dances on Izuku’s lips, when Katsuki licks a wet stripe along his chest, and peppers him with kisses all the way down to his dick. Izuku trembles in anticipation. This was it. It was actually happening.

He sucks in as Katsuki’s lips engulf the tip. The naga opens his mouth and lets the saliva drenches him and trickle down to his balls. And there’s something else. Something warm, long, and slick against his arousal. His head bobs down, and it curls all the way to the base. Katsuki slurps shamelessly alternating between massaging and squeezing his cock to Izuku’s groans and whimpers.

“Oh fuck,” Izuku whines as he throws his head back against the coils. His hands ball into fists and his nails dig into his palms. “Don’t stop! Please, don’t ever stop!”

Katsuki snickers against his skin, letting his dick free with an audible pop. A sinister smile exposes his glistening teeth as he gloats up at the human. “So polite, Deku…”

There’s a cracking sound, like knuckles popping, and suddenly Katsuki’s mouth is feels wider than before. There’s a pleasant warmth engulfing his balls, and Izuku realizes Katsuki’s taken all of him whole. Katsuki growls, and his entire throat vibrates.

His thighs clamp tightly around Katski’s head like a vice and his heels dig into his shoulders. His body quakes. It just feels so good. He’s never had a blowjob this good in his life. He can’t keep his hips from rolling against Katsuki’s mouth.

Just when he thinks the tongue goes can’t go any further, something slides past his taint and strokes at the ringed muscles of his entrance. Izuku jerks in surprise, but as the slick muscle works him along with the steady pumping of his cock, and he leans into it and whines encouragingly. His legs
tighten, his toes curl, and his fingernails dig deeper into his palms. Any restraint he once held is
gone, and he loses himself.

He’s screaming praises now; writhing, sobbing, and loud enough for the whole island, but it’s not
enough. He’s thanking God, thanking the earth and moon, the watchful stars, rejoicing in whatever
forces lead them to share this night together. If Katsuki does this any longer, he’ll go hoarse.
Izuku’s vision goes white. His hips snap and he cries out. With a final cry, he arches, reaching
climax, letting himself spill in Katsuki’s mouth and down his throat.

As melts in the coils and rides it out the orgasm, he swears he can taste the sweet caramel flavor of
venom on the roof of his mouth. He swallows, grateful to have been blessed with it as well.
There’s a cracking sound and he watches in fascination as Katsuki’s jaw settles back to where it
was.

“Back so soon?”

The fading adrenaline is replaced by the warm, loose feeling in his calves and thighs. Izuku feels
himself turn beet red as he slides his legs off Katsuki’s shoulders. He’s embarrassed to see his inner
thighs have been marked from clenching around the alpha’s pointed earrings. They’ve broken the
skin, but not by much. Little trickles of blood have smeared around the cuts. He doesn’t feel it now,
but the spots will absolutely ache and form angry bruises in time.

“Ha...holy shit.” Izuku sputters. “I’m...so sorry. I couldn’t stop myself. I...didn’t know you could
do that.”

“There’s a lot of things I can do,” Katsuki says smugly as he pushes back to examine his
handiwork.

His eyebrows raise with interest and he reaches for Izuku’s legs. He brushes along Izuku’s thigh
with a finger and licks off the blood with his forked tongue. The naga gives a breathy moan as he
laps it up. It’s enough to jar Izuku from his stupor and make his hair prickle.

“Oh, relax.” Katsuku says casually. “I’m just tasting you at your peak. I can’t let this go to waste.”

“W-What,” Izuku sputters. “You didn’t get enough a minute ago?”

“I swallowed it,” Katsuki says nonchalantly as he cleans his fingers. “I’ll make sure to savor you
next time.”

Next time? His heart leaps at the promise but Izuku sets aside the question for now. They aren’t
done yet.

“And speaking of which,” Izuku says as he eyes the leaking cocks at the naga’s pelvis. “What
about you?

“I’m close enough. I’ll finish up.”

“Wait! There’s something I want to try.”

“You don’t have t-”

“I want to.” Izuku stands. He’s a bit wobbly. His legs are like jelly, but with Katsuki’s guidance, he
stumbles forward and straddles his pelvis with his legs. “Lie all the way back.”

Katsuki obediently lies against the grass and Izuku lowers himself right above Katsuki’s hips. He
stretches out on Katsuki's chest, propping himself like he's about to do a pushup, and straightens his legs directly behind him, right along Katsuki's belly scales.

“This is really the least I can do, but um...you like my legs, right? How's this?” He asks as he tightens his thighs around both of the naga's cocks, earning a hiss of delight from Katsuki.

Katsuki’s arms encircle him around his shoulders and he pants against Izuku’s hairline. Izuku wants him to like it and bends his knees slightly, to test the waters and pump his muscles around Katsuki’s cocks. He tries to imagine his movements similar to that of a swimming mermaid. He doubts anything he does will compare to the combined blowing and rimming he’s received, but he has to try.

Izuku meets his red eyes and grins impishly. “Does that feel good?”

“Shit, Deku…”

He rocks his hips as he humps against Katsuki’s body. Katsuki’s little grunts and moans are music to his ears, and Izuku’s toes begin to curl as his body tightens. His heart is racing all over again as he silently begs for more friction against Katsuki’s belly.

Suddenly, Katsuki’s tail whacks the against the desk and the lamp light clatters to its side. It’s enough to snap Izuku out of it entirely.

“Whoa, hey! Break anymore of my equipment and I’ll kill you,” Izuku growls.

Katsuki chuckles he pushes himself up by his elbows. “I’d like to see you try,” he purrs against his forehead. His tail loops around them both curling under their ribs. The smooth scales press Izuku closer. “It would be cute.”

“Cute, huh?” Izuku says as he reaches behind his back. Idly, he traces circles around the heads of the cocks in between his thighs with his fingertips. Izuku’s thighs clench and squeeze, bringing Katsuki to arch into his back, breath becoming ragged. His thrusting becomes more erratic.

“Mmmm... FUCK!”

Izuku keeps up a rhythm until Katsuki gives a throaty gasp and throws back his head. For a second Katsuki forgets himself. The coils squash and constrict around them both. Katsuki jerks and snaps up beneath him, while fear hits Izuku like a blast of cold air. He smacks the naga’s face frantically until the coils relax. To his immense relief, they’ve slackened enough to even slide of his body. Izuku's legs slide out on either side until his knees rest on the ground. He catches his breath as Katsuki’s body trembles between his thighs.

Well, that was a surprise...

He breathes a sigh of relief and waits for Katsuki to come down. After what feels like a minute, Izuku begins to actually count as Katsuki spasms against his body. One minute becomes two, and Katsuki is still writhing and panting in ecstasy.

“Are you fucking kidding me…”

Izuku spitefully counts how long he stays like that. He stops after seven minutes. Seven goddamned minutes.

“Welcome back,” Izuku mutters when his red eyes finally focus, and his breathing steadies.
Katsuki flashes a lopsided grin. “Miss me?”

“That is so not fair.” Izuku grumbles.

“I was surprised too,” Katsuki snickers as raises a hand to thread his fingers through Izuku’s soft curls. The thick coil between Izuku’s legs shifts, and slides over and under, until they’re bound. “Well, I’ve got some ideas that can help with that.”

Izuku swallows nervously. This got way out of control. “I didn’t think we’d go so far... Did you?”

“Venom does that. The first times are always different,” Katsuki murmurs. “With a human, and the legends of marking, I should have known better to take it slow.”

“You think? A warning would have been nice,” he mumbles. “So, tasting venom? That’s claiming?”

“For humans, supposedly that’s all that’s needed. It’ll fade in time, but the bond can get stronger the more you have. You could take another taste and experience sex during the high.”

Izuku’s mouth hangs open.

“I’m very good,” Katsuki says casually.

“W-will you quit messing around and be serious for once?”

“Who said I’m not serious?” Katsuki growls. Absently, he lets his hand fall lower and traces patterns against Izuku’s shoulders with the back of his claws. “Do you regret it?” he adds hesitantly.

“No...” Izuku breathes as he relaxes against the touch. “Kind of the opposite.”

He melts against Katsuki’s chest as his thoughts return to him. “U-um. You mentioned something about venom?” Izuku asks. “That I could collect it? I’m not sure when would be the best time to ask, but does this mean, um. Is it okay that...are we now-”


Izuku scowls and twists to peer his face. “Hey, are you falling asleep?”

Katsuki’s head rolls to the side and with minimal effort he squints, with one eye more open than the other. “Lucky you. Spending the night in my coils,” he slurs as they tighten around the human in a playful squeeze.

“Lucky?” Izuku chirps.

“You told me how much you like ‘em.”

Izuku blinks at him as Katsuki smirks through heavily lidded eyes.

Is there anything I didn’t tell him?

“But if you spend the night here...” Izuku begins.

“T’s not a cave,” Katsuki slurs. “Doesn’t count. Shut up ‘n keep being warm.”

Izuku has a feeling that to the rest of his clan, it absolutely counts, but holds his tongue. Katsuki
looks exhausted. He decides the alpha can bask in the afterglow before Izuku kicks him out. Only he waits too long, and in seconds, Katsuki is dozing soundly next to him. In resigned silence, Izuku realizes he can’t bring himself to wake the naga up, even if his limbs were free.

Still. Pulling himself away from Katsuki would be like divorcing the night, and he’d like for it to continue like this in his memories. He can’t believe it even happened. He’ll remember this forever.

That was it isn’t it? The perfect blowjob. I’ll be chasing after that feeling for the rest of my life. A thought suddenly occurs to him and he glares daggers at his handsome bedfellow. He did this on purpose, didn’t he?

With a sigh Izuku rests against Katsuki’s steadily rising chest. Somehow, they’d gone from screaming and fighting to this. Stress and unease that trickles back to his mind. This didn’t fix a goddamn thing. If anything, they made everything worse. The tangled mess of emotions between them had done nothing but intensify and leave them paralyzed and desperately clinging to the other.

He shouldn’t allow this. He shouldn’t let it continue. This would only hurt Katsuki further. Just sparing Izuku’s life and being at his side is already a strain on Katsuki’s clan. What would happen now?

Izuku times his breathing to Katsuki’s and counts the beats between his two hearts, One at his ear, and the other at his ankle. Izuku finally lets himself rest. Maybe just once, he can let himself be selfish. He can allow himself fall deeper into whatever they’ve become.

Just for tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops.

Happy belated Valentine’s Day.
Farewell

Chapter Summary

"But you can skyrocket away from me
And never come back if you find another galaxy
Far from here with more room to fly
Just leave me your stardust to remember you by"

Chapter Notes

Thanks for being patient! This chapter is a bit ambitious.

When the warmth laying over his torso begins to stir, Katsuki eases into consciousness. The alpha is tired, but peacefully so. Thanks to the human cradled to his body, he wakes up feeling refreshed and light. It’s as if Izuku has the warmth of the sun radiating from his core. Memories from the night before filter back. He inhales deeply, treasuring their mingling scents.

He cracks an eye open to peer at his newest lover. Izuku’s lies flat on his stomach, with his head on the side. A thick coil loosely rests right above his shoulders and between his elbows. His dark, messy hair quivers against Katsuki’s breath. The naga has wound himself around himself and the human three times; around his shoulders, ribs, and hips, keeping Izuku nestled in place.

It’s then he notices the puddle of lukewarm drool that’s trailed from Izuku’s mouth and collected on his sternum. Katsuki makes a noise of mild disgust, but can’t bring himself to shove Izuku away. Not while he so nicely wearing the patterns on his coils against his lightly freckled skin.

There’s something incredible about seeing Izuku’s bare arms and shoulders; or just his naked body at all. Deku had a deceptive way of looking scrawnier than he was while dressed. The dips and curves of his bare muscles are more alluring than they had any right to be. Perhaps this musculature was impressive, even for a human.

As nice as Izuku looks held in place with his coils, he’ll have to be careful. The human is fragile; dangerously so. He’s so sensitive to touch. The red blossoming marks along Deku’s neck and chest are proof. Katsuki even held himself back from biting. Well, mostly.

It isn’t like being with his own kind. What was it about the human that fascinated him so? Was it the challenge of pleasing something so delicate? Was it the battle to restrain himself? A moment of passion could strangle him, bleed him out, or even snap a bone. Katsuki was infamous for bouts of violence and leaving trails of destruction in his wake.

Was it really worth it? His own clan were far more durable. He even had Kirishima, whose quirk could weather out the worst of his carnage. He’ll take heat for this later, he’s sure. But ultimately, Izuku was leaving. After the confusing whirlwind of events, they might as well sleep together.

And besides, he thinks as he runs his claws along the rough sandy stubble that’s grown on his chin,
successfully bedding a human was a challenge of its own. Having Izuku writhe and scream in ecstasy was the most lovely sound he’d ever heard, and he’d teased it out of Deku just from using his tongue. His mouth waters at the memory alone.

Fuck, he tasted good. All of him; his skin, his mouth, his cock, his blood. The superficial cuts in Izuku’s thighs freed a wonderland of pheromones, a devilish concoction of flavor that screamed at Katsuki to ravage the human on the spot. And then to top it all off, Izuku had even welcomed Katsuki’s fascination with his legs, and used those provocative thighs to pleasure him.

He’s hard. They both are. Their morning wood rests sandwiched between their bare skin They had to go again before the day started. Hell, they had to try something else; anything before Izuku heads home.

Oral sex was one thing, but if Katsuki was cunning, maybe he could seduce and fuck Izuku before he left. How would that translate between species? From what he’d seen in the temple, it seemed like even male humans enjoyed some sort of penetration. It’s an interesting thought, one he’d like to experiment with later. But if they don’t get that far, there’s also the question of how Izuku would take him in his mouth.

The very fantasy of those gorgeous green eyes looking up at him, as that thick little tongue runs along the ridges of his dicks is enough to make his heart pound and cocks swell. It could happen. It absolutely could, maybe even this morning. Izuku was the type who was eager to give something in return, and Katsuki had already blown his godamned mind.

He snaps out of his daydream as Izuku begins to stir once more. Suddenly the human’s squirms become more forceful. Katsuki’s eyes narrow. Was he really trying to leave? He quickly closes his eyes and feigns sleep as Izuku grumbles under his breath.

Izuku grunts, bends his knees, and attempts to push himself up, with little success. The human trembles for a moment, before his body collapses against Katsuki. Katsuki’s coils haven’t even tensed to apply extra pressure on Izuku’s body. Their weight alone is enough to prevent his escape. Instead, he wiggles in what looks like an effort to shimmy out from underneath.

“Kacchan, I need to get up.”

*What the fuck.*

He has to be joking. There’s no way in hell Izuku is just going to leave him without even acknowledging him or giving him any sort of affection. He waits for it, continuing his ruse, hoping Izuku is too embarrassed or shy to make he first move. But no, he squirms again, grunting as he bends his knees, and attempts pushing off the ground. Katsuki is about to lose his new favorite source of heat, just like that.

*Unacceptable.*

Izuku’s movements become more forceful, and perhaps, driven by instinct, Katsuki tightens his hold. Allowing any sort of creature escape his coils goes against every instinct he has, and he’s not about to fight it now.

“I know you’re awake,” Izuku mutters accusingly in a voice still hoarse from sleep. “I know you can hear me. Let go.”

*Not happening.*

Katsuki’s upper lip curls and he gives a low warning growl. The growl alone would be enough to
mollify one of his pack to submission, but Izuku isn’t pack, and he refuses to take the hint. He persists, even attempting to bend his elbows in order to grab the coil around his shoulders.

It’s to be expected, but it’s still annoying. Izuku manages to get both hands underneath the coil around his middle, and pushes up, attempting to hoist it over his head. Katsuki tenses and holds him tighter in response, snickering through his nose at the human’s whines and straining muscles.

“Godammit, come on…” Izuku pleads. “I won’t kick you out, but I need to start cleaning and writing my report.”

Kasuki opens his eyes and glares. “Just like that?”

“W-well, yes,” Izuku mutters as embarrassment creeps in his voice. “I’m kind of on the clock, so…”

The human is notoriously stubborn. He’s learned this first hand. Holding him any longer will only make Izuku angry. Maybe it was time to change tactics and get right to the point. Maybe humans suffered from short term memory loss. Somehow he’d forgotten who he’d chosen to spend the night with and made him scream. He’ll just need a reminder.

Katsuki’s coils slither around him, pulling him up by his ass, positioning Izuku’s face until it’s just hovering above his own. He tilts his head in at the angle he knows will perfectly hood his ruby red eyes. Katsuki purses his lips and fixes Izuku with his best smolder. It’s legendary among his pack. None of them were immune to it.

“Look at where you are right now,” he murmurs, letting his voice deepen to a dangerous purr. “It’s early. Is launching yourself right to work the best way to start your day?” Katsuki smirks and casually brushes a claw under the human’s chin inviting him closer. “I can think of a better way to wake up.”

Izuku’s cheeks flush crimson and he quickly ducks away from Katsuki’s face. “Q-quit it.”

The blush spreads to his ears, but he isn’t squirming anymore. He’s nibbling his lower lip, and bashfully sneaking a glance at his face. It’s the effect Katsuki’s hoped for, but it’s not good enough. Izuku might want him, but he’s still fixated on starting the day.

Katsuki curses his luck. If only he had some sort of distraction. He’s about to let go, when a familiar voice rings out.

“Yo, Midoriya! You awake?”

It’s Denki. Izuku freezes. His chest stops and his heart flutters against his rib cage like bird’s wings. Katsuki whips his head to the tent’s entrance. The door’s been zippered shut. There’s a chance their scents have trailed out of the tent, but if it had, it would be minimal. Denki shouldn’t be able to pick it up.

Katsuki’s mind races. Denki would probably assume Katsuki accompanied Izuku for the return to camp, but he couldn’t have known that Katsuki had sex and stayed overnight. If he had, the electric blonde would be hysterical. For now he sounds pretty neutral. Katsuki silently counts his blessings that the fabric of the tent wasn’t translucent. The only way for Denki to confirm that they were sleeping together would be to open the tent himself.

“Shit.” Izuku mutters.

_Fuck everything._
Katsuki suddenly can’t bring himself to give a damn. His clan already believed Izuku was his concubine. Creator willing, this wouldn’t be the last night they sleep together. If they’re about to get caught, they might as well have fun while they can. Without a second thought, the naga rolls on top of Izuku. He slips his torso out from the hold, leaving Izuku pinned on his back, still trapped in his coils. He lies across from him and cages in his shoulders with his elbows.

“Yeah,” Katsuki whispers with a wolfish grin, as he leans close to his lips. “We can’t be found like this. You better get rid of him.”

Izuku blinks up at him, before narrowing his eyes in annoyance. “Or maybe I’ll ask him to pull me away from you,” he hisses.


“Maybe I will. Maybe that doesn’t bother me at all,” Izuku growls with an insistent squirm.

“I think it might,” Katsuki murmurs as reaches back and trails a hand along Izuku’s hips. The tip of his tail slithers along the underside of his thighs and delicately strokes against the base of his morning wood. “By the time he gets here, it really might.”

“Y-you wouldn’t.”

Katsuki slides the thickest part of his body between Izuku’s hip bones and inner thighs. The tip of his tail strokes the length of his dick once more and Izuku’s glare falters. Katsuki flicks his tongue against Izuku’s nose and catches the rising flavor of pheromones from his body. His face is flushed pink, his freckles swallowed by his reddening cheeks. Izuku’s expression is stern, but without the defiant fire in his eyes.

Katsuki lunges without warning. He kisses sloppily along Izuku’s collarbone, carefully pinching the skin with his teeth and traveling up the column of his neck. Izuku squeals and arches behind locked lips, but otherwise he doesn’t make an audible sound.

“Tell him I’m asleep at your bedside,” Katsuki murmurs huskily against his neck. “Say that searching the night before drained me. He’ll buy it.”

“Bastard…” Izuku hisses.

“Go on,” Katsuki goads as he dances the back of his claws in circles just above Izuku’s knee. “Wouldn’t want him getting suspicious.”

Izuku attempts a fresh glare, but instead he takes a deep breath. “K-Kaminari?” Izuku croaks in his convincing impression of a sleepy voice. “What’s going on?”

“Is Bakugo with you? I can’t find him anywhere.”

Katsuki considers Denki’s tone once more. Does he already know? It could go either way. Either he knows or he doesn’t. Still, there was something to be said about Izuku’s acting.

Katsuki is impressed. Deku’s pretty good, even when put on the spot. It’s too easy for the human. He’ll have to fix that. Katsuki licks along his jaw and nibbles at Izuku’s earlobe. Izuku instantly pinches his ear to his shoulder. He mouths an angry ‘STOP.’ in a wordless snarl.

He looks ridiculous. Is it supposed to be an intimidating display? All he’s done is flash rows of unimpressive, dull teeth. Katsuki responds with a toothy smirk of his own that proudly displays his fangs, and tickles his forked tongue against Izuku’s nose.
“Y-Yeah, he passed out last night,” Izuku gasps quietly as his breathing becomes more ragged. “I didn’t have the heart to kick him out, so I just let him sleep.”

It seems he’s hit a nerve with his ears. There’s only one way to know for sure. “Mmmhn,” Katsuki murmurs breathily as he licks the shell of Izuku’s ear. “So sweet of you.”

Izuku shivers and jerks immediately away from his mouth. So someone has sensitive ears. It’s good to know, but were still so many other ways to make Izuku crack.

He slides his coils and he rearranges himself to better explore Izuku’s chest with a calloused hand. He teases Izuku’s left nipple, pinching at the nub. Izuku tenses at first, but arches in a quiet gasp as soon as Katsuki’s other hand drifts higher along his inner thigh and skims along his balls.

“Oh, um. Okay,” Kaminari replies with a tremor in his voice. “When he wakes up, can you ask him to find me?”

“Yup!” Izuku grunts through his teeth as Katsuki’s coils flex and loosen along the length of his dick. “Sure can.”

Katsuki watches in amusement as Izuku’s breath becomes ragged and his hips spasm in an uneven rhythm against his body. He’s leaking pre cum and intermittently grinding against Katsuki’s hold. He’d only wanted to tease Deku a bit, but here the human was right on the edge of giving in to his ministrations. Katsuki greedily strokes the tip of his dick again, as the coils massage higher up his legs to the cusp of his ass. He’s so close. All Izuku needs is a gentle push.

I’ve got him.

Izuku quivers and chokes out a whine between his teeth. All at once, he surrenders, and his legs widen. His calves curl around the thick coil between his legs. His heels knead into the scales as he pulls Katsuki closer in an embrace with his calves. The balls of his feet run up his spine and massage against Katsuki’s body, allowing the human to grind against his smooth belly scales.

SHIT.

Katsuki barely holds back the strangled groan from escaping his throat. He hadn’t expected Deku to retaliate, and now he’s been pulled into practically mounting him. Teasing Deku was one thing, being tricked into fucking him on the spot in front of a packmate was another.

“Sorry,” Denki apologizes. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“U-uh, it’s...fine!” Izuku pants as he arches and digs his nails into the coil around his sides. “No harm done!”

“Shhh,” Katsuki whispers. “He’s not gone yet.”

“Assho-mmph!”

Katsuki cuts him off, kissing him roughly, slipping his long tongue in his mouth. He cups behind Izuku’s soft head of curls as the human furiously kisses him back, sucking him in further, biting his lips, and whimpering in between breaths. It’s nearly overwhelming, but once Katsuki is sure his packmate has retreated into the jungle, he frees himself from Deku’s mouth, leaving them both panting and dizzy.

“Lift your head.”
Dazed, Izuku does, and Katsuki slides a growing stack of coils underneath his neck and shoulders, propping him until he’s sitting up. Katsuki does his best to focus on the sight before him. His own dicks are a leaking mess against his scales.

This human bastard almost made him lose control. If he’s going to go any further, Katsuki’s going to give Izuku the perfect view of what he’s done to him. He strokes them lazily, as he sneers down at the flushed human who can only watch glassy eyed as he tries to catch his breath.

“Having fun? Or did you want me to stop?”

“K-Kacchan…” Izuku whimpers.

“Hrm?”

Izuku grits his teeth and looks away. “Just get it over with,” he mutters.

“Ooh, sexy.”

“FUCK YOU.”

The alpha can’t help but laugh as he positions himself on his elbows to and slides his long tongue along Izuku’s length. Izuku whimpers and attempts to stutter forward. The coils around his middle tighten slightly and keep him in place. He’d promised Izuku he would savor him the next time, hadn’t he?

Once he slurps Deku inside with his slick saliva, it doesn’t take much to push him over the edge. He’s so sensitive and aroused, shamelessly bucking against his mouth and coils after the first few bobs of his head. Izuku’s soon biting into his lower lip desperate to keep himself from crying out. His moans sneak out at higher octaves through strained gasps of air. When Izuku starts trembling, Katsuki lets his dick free, and positions himself so that it’s pointing at his own face. It’s then he notices Izuku’s eyes have scrunched shut.

“HEY,” he snarls. "Eyes on me, you fucking nerd.”

Izuku’s eyes flick to meet him in time, before his hips snap forward with a gasp, and he’s shooting bursts of cum into Katsuki’s open mouth. The naga catches what he can and pulls away, lewdly smacking his lips. He’s treated to Izuku’s gasping, awestruck expression. Deku’s cheeks are completely flushed, tears bead at the edges of his refocusing eyes as he takes in ragged puffs of air before the alpha. It’s a fucking beautiful.

Mine.

The single word floats away in his mind as quickly as it appeared. It surprises him at first. But it was true. He’d won Izuku from Shinsou. He’d already told Deku he claimed him, and they’d gone and grown closer still. But he still wasn’t entirely Katsuki’s. Not yet, anyway.

“O-oh my god...” Izuku pants as he comes down from his orgasm. “You are such an ass.”

“Mmm-hm,” Katsuki hums as he uses the back of his hand to wipe the mess from his face. “Nice job getting rid of Drooly. Real convincing. Little shaky at the end though, Deku.”

“No thanks to you,” Izuku snaps. “Now get the hell out.”

“You said I could stay,” Katsuki pouts.
“Well after that stunt, you went and lost that privilege.” Izuku grumbles as he kicks a leg to free his thigh from a coil. “Shouldn’t you investigate what’s wrong? That’s your job, right?”

“It’s probably something stupid,” Katsuki says as he rolls his eyes. “If something was really bothering Dunceface, he’d have burst in here screaming.”

“And what would you have done if he’d found us?” Izuku grunts as he wrenches an arm free of the loop of scales around his chest.

“Hah,” Katsuki snorts. “Nothing, that’s what. Even if rumors ended up spreading, I’m still the alpha. Just smelling like you do now, the rest of the pack won’t even be able to look you in the eye.”

“Smell?” Izuku blinks in disbelief. He hesitantly lifts his newly freed wrist for a cautionary sniff. “Smell like what?”


“You’re disgusting.”

“You loved it. Don’t even lie.”

“Yeah, well, I hope you’re happy,” Izuku grumbles. “Now get out, for real.”

Katsuki’s eyes narrow in disbelief. Had he been wrong about Deku? Was it possible that Izuku really was callous enough to shut him out the morning after? As if nothing had happened? As if he hadn’t blown his fucking mind the night before?

None of his clan would be this inconsiderate. Receiving affection in the morning was just expected for an alpha. Katsuki doesn’t budge.

“You’re actually going to get to work? Right now?”

Izuku looks at him like he’s asked the stupidest question on earth. “YES.”

Katsuki’s stomach drops. Somehow, they’re right where they started this morning. He can’t believe what he’s hearing. Izuku is done with him. Even after he’d so graciously gotten him off. No morning sex? No kiss? Not even a nuzzle or a caress on the face? And here he’d even pegged Izuku for the considerate type.

“So we’re done here? After all of that?”

“I’m not sure what you want from me.”

“I’m still hard.”

“You’re the one who got all worked up,” Izuku grumbles. “You have hands, right?”

“Right,” Katsuki snarls as he bears his fangs. “Forget it! You can just leave for all I care.”

The sudden shift in tone catches Izuku off guard. “What?”

“Like I needed you to begin with! It’s better this way,” Katsuki snarls. “Get going already!”

His growls come out in angry bursts of air in front Izuku’s startled face. Izuku stares him down in
bewilderment before understanding passes through his eyes. He reaches out without hesitation and combs his hand through Katsuki’s hair.

Katsuki tenses, but makes no move to stop him. Izuku does it again, repeating the motions in lazy circles and Katsuki’s growls fade into a deep purr as the human’s dull nails dig and massage his bubbling anger into nothingness.

Izuku sighs bitterly. “Unbelievable. If you wanted to cuddle, you should have said so. I’m not a mind reader,” he mutters as his nails circle around Katsuki’s scalp.

“You think I like being ignored?” Katsuki manges to grumble.

“Well, no. But you’ve bound my arms and hands twice now. I just didn’t think you’d like having affection the morning after,” Izuku explains as he scratches behind Katsuki’s right ear.

Katsuki scowls. “Why the fuck wouldn’t I?”

“I guess ’cause it didn’t fit in with your tough guy alpha act.”

It’s getting difficult to hold up his own head, and Katsuki finds himself resting in the crook of Izuku’s neck and relishing its unbridled warmth. It’s heaven. Katsuki lets himself relax completely, and his grip loosens. The coils around Izuku’s shoulders slide down to his waist. It’s enough to free his other hand, which soon joins the other in running along Katsuki’s hair and shoulders. Izuku sighs and shakes his head.

“You are so needy…I didn’t expect that.”

“M’not,” Katsuki mutters. “You’re just fuckin’ clueless.”

Izuku laughs softly. “Alright, I’m sorry. Last night was fun. I’ll do this for a few more minutes, but then I really have to get up, alright?”

Katsuki slurs some kind of response as the nails trail along the nape of his neck. He’s not even sure what he’s said. This isn’t like him.

Maybe he’d be concerned if it didn’t feel so damn good. Any other time, he’d savagely snarl at anyone who would touch a vulnerable part of him so easily; but with Deku, somehow this didn’t matter. Besides, it wasn’t like he had any real claws to speak of anyway.

Katsuki loses track of time under those blissful nails, until Izuku chuckles lightly. “So much for humans being the worst, huh?”

Katsuki snorts against his shoulder.

“Huh?” Izuku asks with a bemused smile. “What’s with the snort?”

Katsuki cracks an eye open. “Don’t be stupid. Nothin’s changed.”

Izuku’s hands stop and his smile fades. “What?”

“You think just because we slept together, that changed everything? We have the right idea about humans,” Katsuki says nonchalantly. “You’re different. That’s all.”

“Different?” Izuku repeats in disbelief.

Katsuki lifts his head from Izuku’s shoulder and scowls at him. “Don’t take it that way. It’s a
complement.”

“No,” Izuku says as he pulls his arms away. “It isn’t.”

Godammit.

“Oh, come on, Deku. You’ve seen my clan in action. Humans are inferior to us in every way.”

“Get off me, please.”

Katsuki growls and twists his face in annoyance. “Are you serious?”

“NOW, please.”

Katsuki’s eye twitches. Now he’d done it. Izuku was legitimately angry. He could feel it radiating off him in waves.

“Don’t be stupid,” Katsuki snaps as his body relaxes and slides enough from his legs for Izuku to get free. “Humans are still responsible for ruining everything we had! You really thought one night of fucking can fix the past?”

“I never expected it to fix anything!” Izuku cries as he folds his legs under himself. “But I would have liked to think that in accepting me, you were opening up to us a little!”

“Us?” Katsuki deadpans in disbelief. “Us, as in all of humanity? You wanted me to forgive all humans, because we slept together?”

“I didn’t say that! Don’t put words in my mouth!” Izuku snaps.

“What, then? What were you expecting to fucking happen?”

“Nothing!” Izuku cries. “Well not nothing, but that wasn’t…I just didn’t expect you…” Izuku falters for words, before lashing out in frustration. “GODAMMIT, KACCHAN. Are you thick? Or are you deliberately being obtuse?”

“THE FUCK’S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN?”

“KACCHAN, WHY AM I HERE? Why did I even brave the storm in the first place? Why did I face certain death, just at the chance of finding anything at all? I wanted to think that since you’re permitting me to work on the island, you also accepted my duty to save my kind! Was I wrong? Was that so unbelievable?” Izuku chokes.

Katsuki watches flabbergasted while Izuku works to compose himself. “I just hoped, maybe…” Izuku swallows as he tugs on one of his index fingers. “Since you were letting me stay, you were allowing yourself to heal.”

He’s glassy eyed, and for a moment Katsuki’s anger subsides. The sight of Izuku bare and vulnerable with his legs folded in the grass is enough to stop the callous words threatening to burst from his mouth.

“Don’t make me laugh,” Katsuki grunts. “We’re better than humans. I won’t forgive them so easily.”

It isn’t the wrong answer, but it’s not what Izuku wants to hear. The human pulls himself to his feet and steps over the coils to reach the dresser at the other side of the tent.
“Okay,” Izuku says as he pulls on a fresh pair of boxers and searches for a comfortable shirt. “It’s fine if you can’t forgive the humans who were here before, but my kind isn’t beneath yours and I don’t like being talked down to. Excuse me. I have a lot of work to do.”

Katsuki watches him in dumb disbelief. Izuku isn’t angry. He’s seen him when he’s angry. That part had passed and gone. This is more of a painful, quiet disappointment. Something tastes sour in his mouth and his stomach knots. He almost hopes Izuku stayed mad at him. Somehow, this is worse.

His palms begin to smoke, and he’s suddenly antsy enough to rip through the tent and set it ablaze. Instead, Katsuki snatches the beads from Izuku’s desk, and rushes out, whipping his long body behind him before he can say or do something he’ll regret.

The jungle passes by in a blur. Deku was being stubborn again. But why was this so annoying? Of course humans were inferior. It wasn’t up for debate. Deku should just accept it and get over it already. Who the hell did he think he was, telling off an Alpha, for Creator’s Sake?

And why the fuck did Katsuki care?

It doesn’t matter, he thinks as he approaches the nearby stream. Deku was leaving and Katsuki had his duties. He’d wasted enough time with him already. They’d have time to work things out. It wasn’t like Izuku was leaving immediately.

He supposes he’ll have to deal with Denki before anything else. Maybe whatever was bothering his packmate would be enough to distract him from thoughts of Izuku for the rest of the day.

Katsuki slithers to his favorite part of the stream, and angrily scrubs himself of Izuku’s scent. The human’s pheromones aren’t like his own, and they fade away easily enough. It’s fine if Izuku’s been marked by his scent. It might even keep the moron out of trouble. But he won’t allow it to be the other way around. His pack was already irritated by Izuku’s presence, and he’d rather not agitate them anymore than he has already.

He hones his focus on shaving the stubble from his face with the sharp edges of a shell. Even as he splashes away the residue from his face, he can’t bring himself to relax. He’s still worked up, and can’t even bring himself to give his scales a much needed soak. Irritated, he decides that he’ll throw himself at full power to take on whatever is bothering Denki, no matter how stupid.

He finds the golden blonde an hour later, nervously sun basking in his territory. Even under the warmth, his body is tense, curled in a circle and wound nearly into a ball.

“Alright,” Katsuki calls out. “What is it?”

“Bakugo!” Denki cries with relief as he unravels to meet his alpha. “Perfect timing! You’re not gonna believe this. There’s something that’s been bothering me since yesterday. Have you heard of ghosts?

Katsuki wrinkles his face in disgust. From the sound of it, Denki was worried about something trivial and harmless. He’d fucking called it. “The fuck are those?”

“They’re a human legend! Midoriya told me all about them!”

Deku. Katsuki’s eye twitches at the very mention. He’d only just gotten in Denki’s territory. Why was it already back to being about Deku?

“He said they’re spirits, but they’re made after death. So when you die, you make a ghost, which is
alive but also dead!"

“That’s the most asinine thing I’ve ever heard!”

“Okay, but if you think about it, it really isn’t! Think of guardians! They as die as alphas, but thanks to the ritual, they can move again protect us. That’s fucked up, right? Like if our spell’s what’s keeping them moving, what happens to the spirit? Where does it go? Does it haunt the corpse? That has to be it! That’s why they always wander back to the altar and the offerings we leave for them!”

He’s had enough. The day just started and he’s already done. Katsuki tenses his body and positions himself in the beginning of a striking pose as his palms smoke. “If you brought me all the way out here for a baseless theory, I’LL TO BLAST YOU INTO A CRATER,” Katsuki roars.

“Wait, wait! I haven’t gotten to what’s bugging me! Okay, hear me out,” Denki says frantically. “I was near the edge of my territory, checking to see if you guys were still around. But by then you weren’t. So I was kinda worried, and thought I’d just listen for signs of a scuffle.”

“I told you, last night. We just talked.”

Denki shuffles his coils around nervously. ‘Yeah! I know, it’s not that I didn’t believe you. But um, last night I heard something.”

“Like what?”

“Well, um I’m not sure,” Denki murmurs. “It’s hard to describe.”

“TRY,” Katsuki spits.

“Like wailing? Actually, maybe it was more like moaning? I’ve never heard anything like it! It was really eerie. I figured since both of you were down there, you might be in danger.”

Katsuki’s lip curls to a furious snarl. Of course he fucking heard them. Dunceface never ceases to amaze. He has the Creator to thank for making Denki so catastrophically clueless. Anyone else would have connected the dots. It was going to be a fucking day.

“I’m sorry! I would have investigated, but I was too scared. I’m glad you’re alright though!”

“That’s it?”

“Well, yeah! Don’t tell me you didn’t hear anything!”

“GHOSTS AREN’T FUCKING REAL, DUMBASS!” Katsuki roars. “It’s a dumb human superstition. Just forget about it, alright?”

“I CAN’T! Have you thought about how many dead people are on the island? There’s SO MANY, man. Just think of everyone who died in the war! Any one of them could be wailing!”

“You’ll be the one wailing if you don’t shut the fuck up!” Katsuki roars. “It was just a bird or something, okay?”

“NO WAY! I’ve heard plenty of bird calls,” Denki insists. “This was different.”

Katsuki suddenly can’t take it any longer. The sweat collects in his palms, and he sets off an explosion in front of him, sending debris and plant matter flying. Denki jolts backwards, and raises his arms defensively.
“What the-”

“Enough!” Katsuki shouts as he feels himself ready to unleash the next blast. “DROP IT ALREADY, WILL YA?”

“WHY ARE YOU YELLING AT ME?”

“SHUT UP!” Katsuki screams. “I’M NOT YELLING, YOU’RE YELLING!”

Holy shit he’s pissed off. He can’t even see straight. He’d been dragged all the way out here because of Deku. Because of Deku’s stories. Because of Deku’s screams and because Denki was a goddamn moron.

“ME?’ Denki shrieks. “What’s gotten into you? You’re the one setting my territory on fire! Look at that tree!” Denki cries gesturing at the smoking remains of a sapling. “It was completely innocent!”

“IT’LL GROW BACK!” His blood is boiling. He feels like ripping something apart. Now that he thinks about it, he can’t remember the last time they last sparred. If anything this was a chance to burn off his rage.

“You know what? I’m glad you dragged me out here!” Katsuki spits as he cracks his knuckles. “We’re picking up from last time!”

Denki’s defensive stance falls slightly. “Are you for real?

“You’re sloppy! COME ON!” Katsuki bellows as he extends all of his claws. It’s all the warning he gives before lunging at his packmate. “IT’S A SPARRING MATCH! LET’S GO!”

“WHYYY!” Denki screeches as he frantically dodges Katsuki’s claws and charges himself with crackling electricity. “Why is this happening?”

Izuku scrapes the stew from the bottom of the pan with a spoon as he patiently waits for the laptop in his tent to run numbers. He can’t bring himself to use a bowl. It’s just one more thing to clean. All that remains of his cream of chicken soup are a few shreds of onions and some elusive peas at the bottom. He nudges together the remaining food as he tries his best not to think of Katsuki.

It’s harder than it should be. How the hell could he still be thinking of that asshole? How could someone so impossibly frustrating be so enticing? Katsuki was abrasive, arrogant, and looked down on him still, even after everything they’d experienced. Yet, there was just something about Katsuki that perfectly hit all of his buttons.

Izuku swallows nervously. Being being bound and dominated during sex was way hotter than he’d anticipated. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise. He hadn’t experimented much, but at home, it was the little things; being led by his tie, being shoved and teased against the wall with a knee hiking up between his legs, and being ordered to strip while his partner lie clothed and expecting, but it never escalated from there.

The night before and this morning were different. He supposes it was a combination of things; his sharp eyes, chiseled body, rough gravelly voice, and the powerful coils that embraced and bound him in the most satisfying hug he’d ever had. And then even worse, the alpha knew exactly how he’d unravel.

Holy shit, that finisher. Even remembering Katsuki’s gloating smirk while being completely at his
mercy is enough to make his heart race. He’d never been in the crosshairs of someone so
dangerously good looking and self confident. Smug bastard.

GOD. That was a face he could jerk off to for the rest of his life.

The laptop on his desk chimes, and the memories of Katsuki vanish. The scan of the weather is
complete. His shorts are too tight and Izuku has the sudden, uncontrollable urge to run inside and
slam his head repeatedly against the desk.

Instead, he takes a seat inside, grabs a fistful of hair, and forces himself to focus on the data. Multi
color patterns on the screen of his laptop swirl continuously in a pattern as they replay the activity
since his arrival. The storm is tumultuous, but with his latest program, is at least predictable.

Dread creeps in his gut as he scans it once, twice, and then a third time to confirm. His best chance
of getting out safely would be leaving tomorrow evening. Based on previous activity, it could
become dangerous to wait for the next opening. He has to tell Katsuki. He owes him that much.

Izuku chews on his lower lip nervously. Never once had he and Katsuki shared a stable, healthy
relationship. It was volatile, and erratic; with a force that made them recklessly charge and hurl
themselves at the other with wild abandon.

Like everything between them, their farewell will be frantic, rushed, and without closure. It won’t
be the good-bye they needed. He exhales, folding his fingers under his nose as emotions pile all at
once. He feels worry? Fear? Guilt?

Was I too hard on him this morning?

No, he decides. Katsuki was deliberately insensitive. The alpha had never once respected humans.
Even Izuku was held in contempt. Katsuki was right. He’d been naive. Sleeping together was a
mistake. Katsuki was the alpha. He had his own people to manage and take care of. All Izuku had
done was get in the way, and now they couldn’t revert to what they were before.

How the hell has they even gotten to this point? Izuku’s eyes wander to his notes from the night
before. All he wanted was to collect data on Katsuki. He’d collected some, but not enough.

How much did Katsuki even weigh? He might not ever know for sure. Weighing a full grown naga
would be a daunting challenge. He had no doubts that Katsuki would break a conventional scale.
Maybe if he somehow suspended him from a hook and weighed him like a fish? Izuku doubts he
would ever have the proper equipment to get an accurate weight, and much less get Katsuki to
cooperate.

He also hadn’t measured the length of Katsuki’s body. He had to be about the same length as the
wild reticulated pythons, at least. But the coils themselves had so much weight to them. Even
freeing himself from Katsuki when he wasn’t trying to ensnare him, was a chore.

But perhaps worst of all, he’d never gotten a venom sample. He doubts he’ll ever get it now. What
would it be like to taste it again? Would it have the same spicy, caramel flavor? Would it really
make a difference if he had it while having sex? He can only guess how venom would enhance the
experience.

It’s so easy to fall back on memories of how the caressing scales and Katsuki’s long tongue felt
against his naked skin. What would fucking a naga even be like? He was nearly constricted the last
time Katsuki orgasmed. Would he want to stuff both inside at once? If he stretched himself enough,
would they fit?
Izuku facepalms.

GODAMMIT. Focus. He sighs, and takes a drink from his canteen. He doesn’t register the presence of his visitor until he’s right outside the tent.

“Hey Midoriya, are you-WHOA!”

Izuku lurches out of his seat with enough time to recognize Kirishima’s presence. He seizes the nearest object as a weapon; a metal ruler, and clutches it defensively. Its pointed corners dig into his hands, as he scans the tent for whatever set Kirishima off.

“What?” he asks, still tense.

“I um-er…” Kirishima stammers as he stares wide eyed at Izuku in shock. His face turns nearly as red as his hair before he looks away. “Just wanted to make sure you’re alright.”

“I’m fine…” he says cautiously. “What’s up? What did you see?”

“Nothing,” Kirishima counters. “Nevermind!”

Izuku returns the ruler to the desk and quickly runs a checklist though his mind. He’s completely dressed. He’s wearing a shirt and pants. He did a good job cleaning up. Nothing in the tent looks suspicious or obscene. There shouldn’t be any evidence of the act the night before.

“You sure?”

“Yeah, it’s just nerves. ‘cause, um…” Kirishima falters. “‘Cause of how you guys almost attacked each other yesterday.”

Kirishima is a terrible liar. Izuku does his best to look convinced and gives him a gentle nod. “We worked it out,” Izuku explains. “He was tired last night and passed out here. Kacchan’s an ass, but he wouldn’t deliberately hurt me.”

“Maybe not, but he nearly charged at you yesterday without thinking. accidents happen.”

“Well, yeah. But that’s cause I punched him. And hopefully, I won’t be doing that again.”

“It’s alright, I get it,” Kirishima says. “Fucking him has a better outcome that fighting him.”

Izuku freezes. It’s like the wind has been knocked out of him. How did Kirishima know? Did Katsuki tell him? There’s some strange tension in the air. The naga’s features remain cheerful, but his face is strained and Kirishima’s usually sunny disposition has darkened.

“H-How did you?”

“I wasn’t going to push it,” he says as he absently scratches the side of his nose, “I really wasn’t, but the scent in here is overpowering. It’s kinda hard to focus on anything else.”

Right. Katsuki had mentioned the musk earlier that morning. Even if he couldn’t smell it, the rest of Katsuki’s clan could. Izuku swallows nervously. He can’t explain this away. There’s no use denying what happened.

The gears in his head begin to turn. How much did Kirishima know? Did he even know they spent the entire night together? Katsuki had explained that kind of behavior was for true mates only. Would Kirishima tell the rest of the pack? Would Katsuki be punished? Would the pack hunt him down for this?
“We didn’t plan on it!” Izuku blurts as panic seizes him. “I mean at least I didn’t! But as time went on, I knew what he wanted. He’s took the lead, but I’m not blaming him! I didn’t stop him and even asked him to kiss me again and….um. I guess you didn’t need to know that, but I was selfish and wasn’t thinking straight, and….I’m sorry.”

“I’m not mad,” Kirishima explains carefully. “It’s just…there were the concubine rumors, sure. But I never bought it. The way he acts around you didn’t add up. I get that he’s stressed and doesn’t know what to do, but he’s our alpha. To not tell us the truth, and to not tell me….”

Kirishima exhales gently through his nose and examines Izuku quitely. Izuku’s stomach knots with worry as a tense silence with unspoken words fill the gaps. There’s grief, pain, and an unmistakable air of wistfulness.

He’s in love with him.

“I-It won’t happen again,” Izuku stammers. “I’m leaving tomorrow evening. I’ve been studying the patterns of the storm, and it’s my best bet.”

“Does he know?”

“When I’m leaving? Not yet.”

Kirishima shifts his long body uncomfortably. “Y’know, I wasn’t sure what to make of any of this,” he says with a pained expression. “When he first showed up with you slung over his back. I didn’t know what to think, and now I get it even less. I thought for sure if he had any sort of doubts, he’d have said something.”

There’s a beat before he speaks again.

“So, I have to ask,” Kirishima says quietly. “What’s he to you?”

Izuku is suddenly a fresh bundle of nerves. He doesn’t sense any sort of hostility from the naga, but the question takes him off guard. They were newly made lovers, certainly, but even that could pass. What was Katsuki, indeed? A fling? A rival? Ally? Friend? He considers each one and tosses them aside. None of the answers seem to fit.

“I’m sorry. I’d tell you if I knew. But when I’m with him, it feels...safe, like belonging.” It sounds stupid out of his mouth and he mentally kicks himself. “Sorry, I’m not very good at explaining. I don’t understand it myself.”

The answer seems to satisfy Kirishima, who takes in a deep breath and sighs. “Yeah, I figured,” he murmurs before running a hand through his hair and changing the subject. “So when you leave, what can we expect from now on?”

Izuku frowns. “Huh? I’m not sure what you mean.”

Kirishima pauses and his expression hardens. Any trace of a smile is gone. “When you leave, forget everything you saw here. We need this land. Don’t take our island from us.”


Kirishima flashes him an insincere, lopsided grin. “Okay,” he says as he turns to exit. “Well, I’m glad both of you are alright.”

His long red tail moves like a gash across the ground, and Izuku feels like he’s been kicked in the
gut. Suddenly he finds himself chasing after it.

“Eijiro, wait!”

He skids to a stop right in front of Kirishima, blocking his path.

“I’m sorry you found out this way, but I never meant to hurt anyone. You don’t have to worry,” Izuku says as he stamps his right fist over his heart. “I understand what’s at stake here. I swear on my life this is a secret. And even after I head home, it’ll stay that way. I’ll never tell them the truth, no matter who asks. Not even my own mother.”

Kirishima’s binks in surprise. His red eyes crinkle with amusement. “Y’know, I never really put too much thought into what humans were like, but I can tell that you mean it.” He brings a hand down and gives Izuku a single pat on the head. “You’re alright. And now the only human I’ve met is leaving.”

“W-well kind of. I mean, ideally, this won’t be my last visit,” Izuku quickly explains. “The cure is here. I’d bet everything in my life on it.”

Kirishima scratches his chin thoughtfully. “Want me to tell him when you’re leaving?”

“Y-yeah. Could you?”

Kirishima nods and once he’s nearly in the thick of the jungle, gives him one final glance. “Midoriya, if I don’t see you again, I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

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Izuku has barely even begun removing the storage containers outside the tent when Katsuki appears at the campsite, bristling with hot anger.

“You said you were leaving,” he snaps. “You didn’t say you were leaving fucking tomorrow.”

“Yeah, well. There’s been a slight change of plans,” Izuku grunts as he pushes his folded desk out of the tent. “I’ve been tracking the weather. The most optimal time to travel is tomorrow night.”

“Is that a fact?”

“It’s science,” Izuku says adamantly. “It’s not exact, but it’s what got me here alive in the first place.”

“You promised to help me read,” Katsuki snarls. “So much for that! Can humans ever be taken at their word or is it just you?”

“Stop it, that’s not fair,” Izuku argues hotly as he points to the remains of greenhouse. “You know exactly why I’m leaving! I’d stay longer if I could.”

“Well, what the hell. You left the notes behind from the ruins, but that’s all I’ve got. It’ll be a broken promise unless you give me a lesson tonight.”

“I’m out of time! This isn’t ideal, believe me. It took forever to get all my equipment to this spot, and every second counts.”

Katsuki is unmoved. He juts out his chin defiantly and puts his hands on his hips. “Teach me tonight, and I’ll carry your stuff.”
Izuku snorts. “All of it?” he asks incredulously.

Katsuki slithers forward and effortlessly hoists a box up with one arm. Izuku can’t stop himself from staring. The feat would have been impressive enough on its own, but he picks up the other and balances both over his shoulders as if they’re made of styrofoam. Katsuki sneers, arching to proudly to flex his powerful muscles.

It’s amazing, and...pretty hot, actually.

“It shouldn’t take long.”

Izuku swallows and stuffs down the excitement brewing in his gut. He knows he’s starting to blush and he hates it. Katsuki gently places them down to where they were. Izuku roughly exhales, and turns away on his heel, hoping he gives an air of aloof indifference.

“So,” Katsuki says with a jagged grin. “Deal?”

“Won’t it look bad to your pack?” Izuku asks as he peers over his shoulder.

“What, cleaning up your mess and getting you off our island faster? Nah.”

Izuku considers his options. It was a better alternative to running back and forth to the ship like a madman. When he first landed, he had spaced out his trips to the ship over a span of days. It would be stupid not to take Katsuku up on his offer. After a moment, he resigns himself.

“All right, deal. You can help. When we’re done, I’ll give you a quick run through tonight at the ship.”

Katsuki snorts. “Oh no. You already made me miss one of my duties, you’re not making me miss another.”

“Sorry, what?”

“Tonight there’s a ritual only the island’s alpha can do. I can’t miss it.”

“I-is that really okay?” Izuku fumbles for words. “I mean, I shouldn’t go if the rest of your pack is there, right?”

“It’s just me.”

“Then why...?”

Katsuki glowers at him and grinds his jaw impatiently. “I guess you’ll have to show up and find out, huh?”

He waits, hoping for Katsuki to elaborate, but when he doesn’t get a further explanation, Izuku sighs. “Alright, fine.”

“There’s a temple east of here that we still use,” Katsuki explains as he triumphantly jabs a thumb in the air. “Above ground.” he adds. “We’ll head over when we’re done.”

Moving everything is no easy feat. It’s exhausting, even with Katsuki doing most of the work. Together, they’ve made two trips. Izuku carries the last crate to his chest, but lingers. He stands before the at empty space in the clearing where his tent and his greenhouse once stood. He can’t help but let the cold, hollow realization wash over him.
“OI, DEKU,” Katsuki bellows out, snapping him out of his thoughts. Katsuki has stopped and turned around enough to jerk his head in the direction of the crate in Izuku’s hands. “You having second thoughts, or do ya need me to carry that, too?”

“No,” Izuku replies. “It’s nothing.”

I just...can’t help but feel like I failed.

***

After traveling for some time, they reach a worn, ancient stone structure that curves towards the sea. There several tunnels lead to an opening. Katsuki chooses one, and Izuku follows to emerge into the clearing of what appears to be a large stone amphitheater. The stage itself stretches out right before the sea.

Enormous pillars line each opening. Grooves have been carved in the stone to reveal a shire for small figures of naga. Each little statue has a face and patterns on the scales. The figures all seem to be wearing some sort of ornamental clothing. Above each one is a startlingly realistic stone mask.

Instead of chairs or benches, each row in the theater is lined with stone cups. He assumes these acted as some sort of seating arrangements for naga. All plant life has been cleared away for the center stage. At the center, is a complex magic circle, cut deep into the rock. They’re all so intricate still, despite their age and being exposed to the elements. Was someone maintaining the carvings?

Near the wall are enormous stone pyres that circle along the ocean. There are specific patterns around the base of each one. Izuku walks out to the ocean and stands back to get a scale of it all. He looks down at his feet and spots an eye. Puzzled, Izuku takes a step back, and turns until he’s able to find the second, carved in the rock at the other side of the wall. It’s a serpent, and the creature’s long body winds around the huge circle in the center all the way to seats.

The creature’s mouth, wide and gaping, spread in a proud display of power, reminding him of leviathans he’s seen before in the cave underground. The scales are decorated with shapes in the center. He notices a pattern. The circles on each one open and close into a crescent until there’s nothing but the gash of a semicircle, before slowly widening again. It’s the phases of the moon.

It’s a god, he thinks suddenly. A god of the moon and sea.

He’s dying to know its name, but he has a feeling that it’s been lost, as with the rest of their stories.

Katsuki gestures vaguely at the stage. “What do you think of the altar?”

Izuku blinks owlishly and scans the structure, looking from one side to the other. “Where? I don’t see it.”

“You’re standing on it.”

Was he referring to the stage itself? Izuku gives him a faint smile. “You’re joking.”

"All of this is for the guardians and the alphas they used to be,” Katsuki mutters, “A majority of what we are is lost, but we have this. Even if our guardian fell; I’ll honor the ones who didn’t; the ones who protected our people until the next guardian took his place.”

“How often do you do this?”
“Every cycle when the moon wanes. Traditionally, after three days. That’s how it’s always been. That’s when the alpha pays respect to the guardian and honors the future they’re set to inherit. Our calendar revolves around the moon. We gather under the full moon, when it’s brightest. The new moon symbolizes death, the unknown, and the trust we have in the guardian.”

“It’s funny. Your kind worships the moon,” Izuku observes as he takes all of it in. “A majority of human cultures center around the sun. It makes sense if you think about it. For humans, agriculture was the backbone of civilization. Before we settled, we hunted and traveled with the animals we hunted. The sun was almost universally seen as the source of all life. I’m surprised you don’t worship it as well; considering how you’re mostly cold blooded.”

Katsuki scoffs. “We need the sun, but the moon is different. It’s more like us; always changing, shedding the old for the new. It’s the reminder of mortality and the cycles of life, death, and renewal.”

“Well, for a people of the sea, moon worship seems fitting. It also rules over the tides,” Izuku explains with a smile. “Did you know that? We discovered the ocean’s connection with the moon’s gravitational pull.”

Katsuki’s eyes narrow. “There’s a lot we don’t know. What we have isn’t much. There’s a ritual the alpha performs that’ll light the torches in their honor, but not until sunset.”

Izuku decides to take advantage of the sun while he has it, and unloads the materials from his bag. He hands Katuki the book and helps him with each letter.

“You can hold it as you’re comfortable for now, but we might need to make a grip for you in the future.”

He lies on his stomach, and props himself with his elbows against the stone. Katsuki settles in a nest of coils next to him. Izuku starts with the basics and breaks down each character in the order of the strokes and the sound it makes. Then he slides the paper over to Katsuki to practice.

Izuku stops to correct him occasionally. Katsuki is very receptive to criticism and pointers, and he soon finds the naga able to write each character on his own without guidance. Their hands brush as they write. Izuku chances a glance, and for a split second, locks eyes with Katsuki. The naga’s red eyes flick back to the page in front of him.

What was going on? What were they, really? Was there something else? Was Kirishima right? Could there be something more?

“Good,” Izuku says as he hands him a fresh piece of paper. “Now write them over and over until I say stop.”

It doesn’t take Katsuki long to master the letters. Izuku moves on to reading them aloud. He folds a sheet of paper over and over until he has little squares, and tears the worn part in the middle, creating makeshift flashcards for each character.

“Here. You can keep these.”

After he’s done, Katsuki picks himself up, and slithers to the center of the stage. Izuku takes a seat in one of the seats at the amphitheater, and the ritual begins. It’s hard to tell in the fading light of the sun, but it looks like Katsuki’s mouth is moving.

Izuku strains his ears and picks up deep hissing. The vocals rise and fall in an alien melody. The
circles around the pyres at the edge of the sea glow a deep orange and suddenly flare to life. Katsuki folds his hands together and rests his index fingers to his forehead in a silent prayer. Izuku waits until the ritual is over before scrambling from his seat and racing to the naga's side.

“What the heck was that? You just lit those like magic!”

“Wha'dya mean, like magic? You’ve seen it! It’s in our gaze, our song, our quirks, and in this land itself. It’s magic that allows us to call upon guardians in the first place.

“What else can you do? Izuku asks eagerly.

“That’s it. I’ve been taught how to pay respects to the previous guardians, but that’s all. Neither of my parents were mages, so I don’t have the proper training.” Katsuki scowls. “But then again, neither do the ones we have now.”

“You mentioned something about rituals with creating guardians too. I could be remembering it wrong, but you said alphas become guardians through sacrifice? That they’re killed first? But that can’t be right.”

“That’s exactly how it is, and this is the stage where it happens.”

“But how? What if something goes wrong? You could die for nothing!”

“It’ll work! It’s called a ritual for a reason! Our mages are trained from birth to master that specific spell,” Katsuki snaps. “I’ve seen it myself! Our last alpha underwent the transformation right after Icy Hot’s quirk was confirmed. Once it’s done, they’re ready to serve. They have no memories. They’re driven purely by the needs of the pack, and in return, we carry out the decree they made as alpha, and leave them offerings.”

“So, what you’re saying is, the guardians are undead?”

Horror creeps in Izuku’s stomach. Their entire livelihood depended on a corpse. The faces hanging from the walls aren’t just sculptures. They were death masks, faces to remind the pack of who the alphas were before the transformation to bestial leviathans. The naga religion cycled with each generation. The shrines were a testament for each one.

“That’s how it is.”

“Is that all you have as a goal? If that’s true, then… You’re just looking forward to the day you die.”

Katsuki scowls, but he doesn’t dispute the conclusion. “Death is inevitable. You think I’m afraid of dying? I fight and train so they can have my strength. That’s my legacy! With it, we’ll never be vulnerable again.

Listen up. The day I accepted my role as alpha, I knew what my orders would be as guardian. We can’t afford another war. We have no guardian, so my word is law. I’ve told the entire clan I’d do whatever it took to keep them safe. They expect me to be strong. My lasting decree, would be for the clan to intercept and kill any and all visitors, without exception.” Katsuki’s gaze hardens. “Because of that, I have no reason to let you go.”

“No, y-you...” Izuku falters. “You promised.”

“I promised, but I have expectations to meet. They know I’ve had my fun, but that’s as far as it should go. With my quirk, stranding you would be easy. You’ve shown me exactly where you boat
is. Your weapons are broken, you can’t fight against me, and with my spell, I could keep you and make it so you’d never want to leave. There’s no disputing that fact.”

It feels like the world is crumbling away at his feet. Izuku can’t believe what he’s hearing. What was the point in Katsuki helping him? Was any of this real? Was he really gloating that Izuku belonged to him, and could never truly leave? Had Katsuki been playing him as a fool this entire time?

“Letting you go is a crime that puts my entire clan at risk,” Katsuki continues. “No one knows we’re here, and it’s staying that way.”

“Kacchan, no. Please, you can’t do this!” Izuku begs as he tries to keep himself from sobbing.

All of his efforts were for nothing. He won’t ever make it home. What was the point of all the battles before? Katsuki had even cleaned up all his things in one spot to destroy. Did he bring him all the way out here as a sacrifice?

Izuku squeezes his eyes shut, and tries to hold in the tears. They sneak out through the corners of his eyes, and collect on his cheeks. Suddenly, two strong hands slap on his shoulders and shake him roughly.

“The fuck’re you crying for?” Katsuki snarls. “You won and you’re leaving. That part’s over.”

“Wah- what? B-but...you said...”

“I said killing or keeping you’s expected. I didn’t say I’d do it. So, stop, will ya?” Katsuki snaps.

“B-but-”

“Get it together and let me finish!”

Izuku shakes his head. “You s-scared me…” he sobs through his tears. “I can’t help it.”

“Well, try! I’m opening up to you, you fuckwit,” Katsuki mutters as he flexes his claws. “This is a big deal, okay? I’m gettin’ to it!”

Izuku takes a few desperate breathes, but can’t contain himself. Now that they’ve started, the tears won’t stop leaking from his eyes.

“No, I-I can’t…” Izuku blubbers. “I can’t stop...”

Katsuki growls and in the next second, Izuku finds himself forcefully clutched to the naga’s chest. Shocked, Izuku nearly gets a hold of himself. But when he raises his arms and hugs Katsuki back, he’s suddenly bawling.

It had barely been over two weeks. The terror of their first encounter haunted him still. They barely knew each other. Some part of Izuku’s brain it never understood that he was safe, and fully believed Katsuki would choose following his decree over their deal.

Navigating around Bakugou Katsuki still felt like stepping around shards of glass in a minefield. But being in Katsuki’s hold meant something entirely different from the day they met. Why was it so comforting? Why did Izuku never want to let go? He doesn’t trust himself to speak.

Izuku swallows and forces himself to ask, “But, y-you are letting me go?”

Katsuki tightens at the question, but lets out a long breath before his shoulders sag.
“Dammit…yeah,” Katsuki grumbles. “I am. But fucking listen for a sec. You have to keep your damn mouth shut. And if you do come back, I can’t guarantee I’ll still be the alpha.”

“What?” Izuku yelps.

Katsuki gives him a humorless smile. “Get it now?”

“But who would take it? Todoroki? You already won against him.”

“Fuck yeah, I did,” Katsuki bristles. “He’s annoying to fight, even half assed, but he’s welcome to challenge me as often as he likes. Letting you free might finally be the push to set him off.”

“But that’s not…” Izuku trails off as he tries to form his thoughts “Is that what you want? To fight him at full strength? Are you hoping you’ll lose?”

“This isn’t about me or him! If I’m unsuited for being alpha, so be it! Out of everyone, he’s most likely to take my title, that’s all! But to get it, he’ll have to beat me himself. Our pack deserves the greatest guardian we can give. That bastard just better not keep me waiting.”

Izuku sniffs and stares up at him. “It sounds like you’re giving up.”

“I’m sparing you,” Katsuki grumbles with an eyeroll. “I’m sure as hell not giving up.”

It takes Izuku moment to consider this before he breaks free from their embrace. “JEEZE, YOU STUPID JERK!” Izuku shouts as he shoves Katsuki violently. “If you’d already decided to spare me, you should have started with that!”

“I WAS GETTING TO IT!” Katsuki snarls, catching his hands before Izuku can push him again. “You should have known that already! The first part was more important! Next time, you might not have me defending you. What’ll you do then?”

Izuku doesn’t want to think about it. He can’t shy away from his findings on the island now. He doesn’t want a battle, but mankind was desperate for an answer to the pandemic. If given enough hope, they’d provide whatever means necessary for him to succeed.

Izuku ducks forward to wipe away the tears with the back of his hands. “There’s no reason for that to happen,” Izuku declares as he grits his teeth. “You’ll win. I know you will. I’m not going to fight against your clan and I’m not going to tell your secret. I swear on my life and everyone I’m going to save, that no one else will discover this island.”

Katsuki says nothing. His hands travel past his wrists and to his elbows, up and down his arms, leaving Izuku buzzing underneath.

“So, why are you letting me go? How could you even spin that? Won’t you be punished?”

“Hell, if I know. They won’t kill me for it,” Katsuki mutters. “Pack is pack. To kill or torture one of our own is sacrilege.”

“Then why spare me?”

“You know why.”

“I don’t.”

Katsuki looks irritated, wound up and ready to pounce. “What, you want a hint? Why would I hint around something you already know the answer to?”
Why couldn't Katsuki just spit it out? Why was he so evasive? It would take a lifetime to work out what’s growing between them. They might never see each other again. And even if they did, it might be under entirely different circumstances. Did it really matter if what they had was incomplete and dangerous? Izuku takes a deep breath as the reality of it all comes crashing down and decides to give Katsuki exactly what he needs to hear.

"FINE. If you won’t say it, I will.” Izuku says at last. “I like you. And...I know you like me too. You’re the most incredible creature I’ve ever seen. I like everything about you. Even how you’re stronger than me and how it feels when you hold me in your coils... e-especially that. I like your body, your soft hair, and the patterns on your scales, They’re gorgeous when they’re out and shining in the sun. I love how you carry yourself in battle and how you plan your strategy in games. Getting to know you feels like a dream and it hurts to leave without knowing when I’ll see you again.”

Katsuki blinks at him dumbfounded and Izuku cheeks burn

"H-how’s that?” Izuku stumbles as he tries to sound braver than he feels. “We like each other. Sound right to you?”

Katsuki gives no warning before he suddenly snakes a hand around his wait and grabs him by the hair. The claws knick his scalp and he’s forcefully pulled into a deep kiss. Izuku’s heart strums and he stares breathless back at the naga after it’s broken.

“Fucking took you long enough.”

He’s kissing him back, running his hands through Katsuki’s hair and neck. Katsuki’s hands are all over him, and his tail loops around his ankles. Izuku throws his arms over Katsuki’s shoulders and pulls him so close that the beads around Katsuki’s neck dig into his skin. Katsuki’s hands hike up his thighs and stroke along the bulge in his pants, stealing gasps and little moans from Izuku every time his hand kneads his ass.

Izuku manages to squirm out of the next kiss and sneer, panting in Katsuki’s face. “What, you get a confession and I don’t?”

Katsuki growls, and spins him around, pressing Izuku’s face against one of the pillars. “I like you, and I want you now,” he snarls in Izuku’s ear. “How’s that for a fucking confession?”

Izuku feels weak in the knees. He practically melts against that deep, gravelly voice. Everything is a whirl of light and color as clothed one second and bare the next. He’s chilly against the breeze from the ocean, but he doesn’t care. He’s just thrilled to have Katsuki’s body against his bare skin. He’s even more excited to have the prodding wetness of the dicks against his belly. They’re already wet from the slit they’re hiding in.

Izuku runs a hands down and between them and strokes, earning a gasp and a string of slurs from Katsuki’s mouth. He’s spun backwards as Katsuki experimentally bends Izuku’s knee back behind him. The naga’s mouth pinches along his back and shoulders.

“They can bend like this too? Does it hurt?”

“No,” Izuku moans. “Not at all.”


Izuku obliges, taking it further, and dropping to all fours. If Katsuki minds, he doesn’t show it. The tip of Katsuki’s tail curls under his neck. The cocks press along his backside. Katsuki takes turns
pressing the heads down, catching them in the cracks between his ass. Izuku presses back, encouragingly. Katsuki rests his torso against his spine and tilts his chin. The roughness is gone. He’s gentle now, even as his cocks twitch against his ass. Katsuki coaxes him to turn his head to the side and kisses him softly on the lips.

“Talk to me,” he purrs. “What do you want?”

“You,” Izuku breathes.

Katsuki snorts. “Well, you’ve got me.”

“Then fuck me.”

Katsuki snarls and spans him. “Brat,” he spits as he yanks his hair and grinds against him. “You think I’ve fucked humans before? Be more specific.”

“T—there’s a spot in male humans, during anal penetration, i—if you hit it just right, it feels amazing,” Izuku gasps. “B—but, I’ll have to stretch myself first.”

Katsuki growls as he nips the human’s neck. “If you want it so bad, work yourself open for me.” The curved edges of his claws run gently along his belly. “I don’t think you want these inside you.”

Izuku brushes a hand along Katsuki’s cheek to his chin. Izuku hooks his legs behind Katsuki’s back and reaches around with two fingers and runs them along Katsuki’s lower lip. He lingers at his lips, which curl around the tips and suck him in without warning. The tips of Izuku’s fingers glide on the cruelly pointed tips. The long tongue to coat them with thick layer of saliva. Izuku’s breath catches.

The saliva is slick, almost slimy. Feeling bolder, he reaches further along the gums, and nudges the base of the tongue with his index finger. Katsuki takes it as an invitation, and purposefully licks along the fleshy pad.

Once he's sure he's wet enough, Izuku inserts the first finger. With the second, works his fingers in a scissoring motion, as he pulls out. Katsuki watches transfixed as Izuku twitches and rocks against his body, until he can’t take it any longer.

“Pick one,” Katsuki orders.

“One?” Izuku protests. “It’s my last night.”

“Then call it incentive.”

“Bottom,” Izuku says after second of contemplation. “I can grind against the top.”

He waits as Katsuki teases his rim. He sucks in the air through his teeth. It’s burns and feels almost like he’s being split apart. He’s still too tense.

“You sure you want this?”

“O-of course I’m sure. It’s our last night, the last time we might even see each other. I want this! And I just...can’t relax enough to enjoy it.”

“Try this.” Katsuki clenches his jaw and kisses him deeply. The tongue tastes sweet and carmely with a bite of spice. And suddenly, he’s weightless. Izuku inhales sharply and breaks the kiss.
“K-Kacchan,” he gasps softly as the sugary wave of pleasure dulls the world around him. “What if-?”

“It’s a low dosage…” Katsuki murmurs. “It’s just me this time. And if we go all the way, it should be gone by morning.”

“O-oh…” It feels nicer, he feels more relaxed. When Katsuki slides himself against his body, he feels warm, as if his body’s humming to life.

“Stop me if you want to.”

Katsuki kisses him again, slipping a hand under his thigh, spreading his legs as the venom works its magic. Izuku paws at the naga’s neck and chest and moans softly as the hand slides up to his ass. He’s never been so turned on in his life. Claws trail circles around his hips, and he presses to Katsuki’s muscular chest, squeezing his thighs around his ribs.

Izuovers the lower cock, and lowers himself slowly. He exhales, easing down stuttering himself up and around the head, drawing out a hiss from Katsuki’s teeth. He then sits, easily taking in Katsuki’s length, one ridge at a time.

Katsuki’s whole body shudders and he shouts suddenly. “FUCK!”

“W-What? What is it?”

“I-It’s you…” Katsuki gasps. His eyes are blown wide and stupefied. “You’re so warm.” Katsuki rocks forward and groans through his teeth. “Fuck…”

Izu kisses him, arching slightly, taking him in further. The next time Katsuki rocks into him he cries, as pleasure sparks across his nerves. He moves slowly at first, until Izuku yanks his hair and bites at his jaw. The coils ooze along his hips. He can feel every scale caress against his skin.

He reaches out, and strokes the dick along with his own, in lazy drawn out strokes. Both of them are hard and leaking. Katsuki’s feels so wet in comparison. Yet somehow, it’s not enough.

Katsuki swears and Izuku’s on his back, lying against a layer of coils on the altar. His body acts as a cushion to hold him in place as he fucks him in a rapid erratic rhythm. He spreads one leg spread high in the air as Katsuki’s tail winds from his thighs to his calves and ankles.

Warmth pools in Izuku’s lower belly, and builds like a spring. Izuku bites his lips until they split. Katsuki eagerly sucks at the wound until he’s licked all the blood. The flavor seems to bring out something instinctual and ravenous. He picks up the pace, and fucks Izuku until he’s mindlessly screaming his name.

“K-Kacchan! I’m going to-” Izuku cries.

His vision goes blank and he’s still seeing stars minutes later as he unwinds in the haze of venom. The world is a canvas of stained glass color in his teary eyes. He thanks whatever forces necessary that he’s coherent enough to catch the beautiful picture of Katsuki rolling and snapping forward as he comes. The naga roars fiercely, into the night vibrating against all the bones in Izuku’s body. And then he’s collapsed, resting on Izuku’s chest leaking fluid in his chest and ass.

The air smells like smoke and sweat. Izuku doesn’t feel the time pass between them. He gently runs his hands in the naga’s hair and his biceps. He’s just awestruck at the stars, the sea, and the burning flames that give his lover an auburn glow. Even resting passively against Katsuki’s coils sends thrills up his spine. He’s just content to be before the gods and guardians, and share this
moment together with the island’s alpha.

He’s placid and limp when Katsuki scoops him up by his legs and shoulders and carries him down the den in the underground temple’s entrance. Being nestled in the darkness among roots and water feels natural and primal. The naga cuddles him in a flurry of kisses as he licks his body clean of any cum or blood still clinging to his skin.

Izuku kisses his face when he can and trails his fingers all along Katsuki’s chest, earning him purrs and faint hissing. Katsuki finally settles, wrapping Izuku in his arms and eventually stills. Izuku rests and some clarity returns to his mind.

What was he doing?

He couldn’t stay. They’d crossed a new threshold. Staying with the alpha for the night was sacred. Based on Kirishima’s reaction, discovering the lingering scent of their love making now in the temple would be enough to send the pack into an uproar.

He had to return to the ship. He couldn’t lie in the cave with the alpha for the entire night! His sleeping bag and clothes were waiting. Izuku rolls from Katsuki and turns away. It aches to pull himself away. He’s nearly ready to stand when Katsuki catches his wrist.

His voice is barely above a whisper. “Ssstay,” Katsuki hisses.

Izuku shivers.

His heart thuds in his ears and oh, he wants to. It would be so easy to return and relax into those strong arms. The coils are so welcoming, and Katsuki’s voice is low and sensuous as his claws drift along his skin. He’s absolutely finished when Katsuki’s mouth ghosts warm breath along his shoulders and peppers fluttering kisses in the nape of his neck. His muscles loosen, and he melts against the naga’s body.

“Okay,” Izuku breathes and he rolls over to meet Katsuki’s mouth with his own lips.

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The sun casts it’s rays in the mouth of the cave revealing an armory of old weapons in coats of a greening bronze. There’s still so much to uncover and learn. It’s cool in the temple, but he’s never without a coil or two around his body, soaking up what warm his body can offer.

The idea of leaving Katsuki seems impossible. His stomach betrays him first. He’s starving. He really ought to eat something, but food was a journey away to the ship. Away from Katsuki. Izuku grumbles and rolls over to face the alpha.

Scrapes and bruises on his body cling to him like old tattoos. He pokes one of the darker ones experimentally and feel a numbness in its place. He’s still slightly high, but he’s certain to be in a world of hurt once the venom really wears off. Its Katsuki who nudges him to his feet and out to gather his things.

They arrive at the ship too soon. He thinks of one more thing before they go.

“I-if you don’t mind. I brought my vials with me. Could you fill them before I go?”

It shouldn’t be a big deal. Katsuki had said he could have a sample. But for some reason, it makes him nervous, and the naga’s face reddens at the request. Izuku would have been happy to take care of the task himself, but Katsuki snatches the vials from his hands before he can stop him. His hands
steam and he’s shaking when he lifts the vial to one of his fangs.

His finger twitches, the vial cracks, and shatters. Izuku leaps up as Katsuki swears, and fetches cotton balls and tweezers from his first aid kit.

“Here, sorry. I knew you were nervous and I should have said something. Let me see.”

Once he’s sure the shards of glass have been picked from the naga’s mouth, he places cotton balls to soak up the bleeding. Katsuki shifts the soft wads in his mouth with mild disgust, but leaves them be.

Izuku milks the fangs carefully, pressing the curved tooth against the glass, and watching the venom drip and collect at the bottom. Under normal lighting, the venom is clear with a hint of amber, much like that of venomous snakes outside the island.

He ends up with two samples, one with pure venom, and the other mixed with some of the saliva in Katsuki’s mouth. Once he has them properly labeled and sealed, Katsuki spits out the cotton.

“Thanks for this.” Izuku says as he tries not to think of the purpose of the substance now stored away in his bag. It’s venom in its pure form. Venom without the fever, without the enhanced senses, without Katsuki’s passion, without kissing him, tasting him, and feeling his body and scales slide all over his skin.

Izuku clears his throat to refocus and Katsuki jumps slightly. He tilts his head at Katsuki. “Are you alright?”

“Don’t worry about me,” he mutters. “Just don’t lose ‘em. C’mon. Get going. You’re the one who wanted to get home as fast as possible.”

Right.

Izuku gulps and takes a tentative step towards Katsuki. He has to say goodbye. He’s spent as much time with Katsuki as much as he could.

It’s time.

Izuku goes in for a simple hug, but winds up clinging to Katsuki with all his limbs like some sort of octopus. His eyes water and tears leak as he scrunches his face and presses against Katsuki’s chest. He can’t. His hair brushes against Katsuki’s chin as he shakes his head.

“You have to,” Katsuki growls as he raises his chin, forcing him to meet his eyes. “You said you’d find the cure. So you better keep your promise and follow through. This isn’t over, right?”

“Yeah,” Izuku nods. “If I return...I really will try to work out what I can from the clues in the ruins. I mean it. And...I um...when I leave, will you wait for me?”

Katsuki curls his lip in annoyance. “Wait for you? This is my island, dumbass. I’m not going anywhere.”

“Okay,” Izuku sniffles. Prying himself from Katsuki like ripping apart two pieces of fabric at the seams. He digs in his backpack and pulls out the Plant Encyclopedia.

“I want you to have this. Practice every day.” Izuku scolds. “Don’t forget about the notebook I left for you either. You should be fully literate when I see you again.”
Katsuki grumbles some sort of response, but Izuku doesn’t turn around as he walks the hull, and climbs up the ladder. He can’t go in for a goodbye kiss. If he faces Katsuki again, he’ll wind up back in his arms.

Once he’s inside and closes the hatch, it’s over. He couldn’t take one last look at the island if he wanted to. The ship has no true windows. It’s made for solely for deep sea travel and surviving the rip currents around the island.

He takes a shaky breath and settles into the chair and mentally prepares for the journey ahead. It isn’t like the ship is cramped. Far from it. The interior chamber is decently sized and has about the same room of a moving van. The ship hums to life as he turns the ignition. Its legs shove itself against the sand like a sea turtle, and soon, its gliding into the water.

There’s a dull pang in his chest. He stubbornly balls his fists and silently rationalizes with himself. He has to leave. There’s no way he can stay any longer. He has to report home. Izuku takes a deep breath and releases it slowly. The ship’s monotonous hum comforts him. It’s been constructed so well. If it weren’t for Mei’s design, he wouldn’t have even made it this far. That of itself was a victory.

He flicks the switches and sets the ship for autopilot. He would have preferred to master steering the device before setting out on his adventure, but he’s on the clock. He didn’t have that kind of luxury. For now, he puts his faith in the algorithm that navigated through the storm. He has no doubt that the machine will safely deliver him home.

He studies the monitor. By the looks of it, He’s cleared the shallow end of the coast. When was the last time he’d eaten? Absently, he goes to fetch a snack from his bag. He’s only just started to open a bag of dried fruit when the ship is rocked by the first collision.

**WHAM.**

The machine lurches and the bag flies from his hands. Izuku is slammed face first to the floor. The entire ship tilts, wobbles and corrects itself back on course. The shock leaves him lying temporarily paralyzed. He isn’t badly hurt, just bruised and shaken.

The hell was that?

**WHAM!**

The next impact sends him flying to the wall. He extends his arms too late, and the side of his face collides with the unforgiving metal wall. He’s hit with a burst of pain as red lights flash and a beeping warning alarm blares above him. The horrible sound of claws scraping against metal screeches all around him.

Something or someone, is hunting him. Blood trickles down into his right eye and he winks, squeezing away the warm fluid.

But who?

Izuku grits his teeth and shoves himself up off the floor, and makes a wild dash to the cockpit. He’s hardly qualified to steer the ship off course and navigate on the fly, but he has no choice. If he wants to survive, he’ll have to navigate through the waters himself.

**WHAM!**

He expects it this time, and he’s seized a hold of the chair milliseconds before the blow, but it’s
still enough to send him stumbling sideways. He straps himself in with trembling hands.

Is this it? Is this the monster? Or is it one of the pack?

He’s earned a fresh batch of bruises, but he’s made it into the seat. He has endless questions on the identity and motives of his attacker but forces himself to focus. None of that matters. He has to live. He can guess all he likes once he’s safely returned to the harbor.

The screen is a jumble of characters and squiggles. It’s the damn venom. He can’t make out the symbols. He’ll have to steer blind by using the patterns as they appeared on the screen.

To make things worse, he has no clear visual of his pursuer. Whatever, whoever they are; won’t stay still for long. Izuku swears. Without windows, he only had the sonar to identify his assailant.

For now, there’s only one, but their strength is incredible. He can’t afford to take any more blows. His attacker is certainly powerful enough to rip apart the metal frame with time and if the ship is punctured, even slightly, at this depth, he’s finished.

The assailant swings around for another blow, and Izuku rips the wheel to the side, and lurching the ship to the right. He’s dodged the attacker this time, but he has to shake them somehow.

His only choice is to dodge the attacker and muscle his way through the powerful current. Shakilly, he grips the controls. Swimming out of the current is also a guaranteed way to lose his life. Mei’s ship might be sturdy, but going off course was suicide.

The two of them had spent endless hours comparing data, drawing maps, and creating algorithms to find the safest way through. The ship had been designed to take punishment from a certain path, but beyond that was risky. If he’s swallowed to the center of the whirlpools, the ship could never get out.

He sees his chance and takes it, diving the ship headfirst and spinning into a rouge current. The change in speed is instantaneous. He’s plunged down, and he watches in silent horror as the dials spin to keep up with the sudden change in pressure. He rides it for as long as he can, as he’s spun unforgiving as the machine desperately tries to balance itself.

A new alarm blares, his ears pop, and he slams the breaks, steering with all his might to fight the pull of the current, and break free. He grinds his teeth, battling back the panic that threatens to seize his entire body.

Suddenly, he’s out. He’s careening back on course of the original current. The ship re balances itself and according to his sonar, the attacker is nowhere to be found.

I’ve lost them.

He presses a button to override the multiple alarms. The ship quiets, but an angry red light pulses on the dashboard as a constant reminder of the damage. He shakily releases control of the wheel, and wills himself to breathe normally.

He’s bruised, bleeding, and pumped full of adrenaline. It’ll be a long, sleepless journey home. Still, he’s lucky to be alive. All those hours Mei had spent designing and tinkering the perfect ship to defeat the storm were well worth it. He doesn’t want to think about the damage on the outside.

As relieved as he is to return home, but the ship will need extensive repair if it ever wants to sail another voyage. He’ll have to face the engineer’s wrath eventually. Izuku groans and cradles his forehead in one of his hands with newfound dread.
“Mei’s gonna kill me.”
Chapter Summary

"There was a boy. A very strange, enchanted boy. They say he traveled very far, very far, over and and sea."

Chapter Notes

Bit of warning, this chapter is very different from the others. There's a few characters that haven't yet appeared in the anime. If you haven’t caught up to the manga, I highly recommend it!

Izuku’s hands clench in a death grip around the wheel as he switches the engine to neutral, and lets the ship safely coast into the marina. Only after he slows to a stop at the dock does he let go. His fingers and wrist ache. After the attack, he hadn’t allowed himself a second away from the wheel. How could he? He still knew nothing about whatever attacked him. Whatever was after him may not have been alone.

Carefully, he flexes his aching wrists and fingers. He grimaces at the discomfort, but stretches them until he feels like he’s banished most of the pain. One hand goes to his forehead, to meet the flaking crust of old blood.

He swears and fetches a small compact mirror out of his bag and examines the wound on his head. A gash runs across his forehead and right above his eyebrow. Fortunately, it doesn’t look deep. But like any facial wound, it’s bled quite a bit.

He quickly assesses himself the best he can. The other injuries from the attack are minor. He’s bruised and decorated with an assortment of scratches on his arms and shoulders. The visible bruises aren’t new, but he’s sure he’s earned a new batch from this encounter. But for now, he opens his med kit and patches himself up as best as he can.

Izuku sighs deeply, knowing full well that he wouldn’t be permitted to re assimilate to human society without a trip to the hospital. It was mandatory for any traveling civilian to be intercepted and thoroughly screened before their return. Izuku was no exception.

All he wants is to retreat to his mom’s house, hold her close, promise her everything will be fine, and curl up in bed. However, getting medical attention and clearance takes priority over everything else.

“You made it home,” he says to himself as he secures a bandaid over one of the minor cuts. “The worst is over.”

But the words ring hollow in his ears. If anything, this was the beginning of a new battle. Keeping Katsuki’s clan a secret would be a struggle. He’d need to very carefully promote his work without encouraging anyone else to venture to the island.
He’ll have to deal with it once he’s in UA. Izuku opens a nearby drawer. For a moment, he does nothing but stare with disdain at the full bodied protective body suit and gas mask. The containment equipment waits patiently as the glass reflects his own battered reflection.

His time on the island spared him the tired routine of fitting the mask over his face, and adjusting the straps that embraced his skull and lower neck. But now, he’d have to slip into it all over again.

The full containment suit is different, however, and the bodysuit encases him completely. He’ll only need to worry about wearing the separate gloves, mask, and other pieces of mandatory civilian attire once he’s been given a clean bill of health.

When he’s certain he’s been safely and correctly dressed, Izuku opens the hatch and carefully climbs over to the dock. It’s gray and rainy evening. The water looks like a single great sheet with tiny ripples of raindrops that stretches out beyond the horizon. A single glance around the empty marina confirms he’s completely alone.

It’s hardly surprising. International mandates had forbidden all forms of travel outside of one’s country. The government had ordered civilians to remove all private boats from the docks as an extra precaution years ago.

He walks alongside it after ship is tethered and assesses the damage. He releases the breath he didn’t know he’d been holding. The thrashing he’d received was worse than he’d realized. He knew it would be bad, but not this bad. He couldn’t brush this off like it was nothing.

The metal is gnarled, mishappen, and jagged in around three impact sites, as if something had tried to break through and rip it open. The claw marks that raked across the metal are thick and nearly deep enough to have punctured through the protective layer of metal. If Mei hadn’t designed the ship with layers of protective armor, he’d have died then and there.

He’d been lucky.

Izuku stretches his hand and spreads his fingers and presses it carefully above one of more prominent tears. The damage nearly match the distance between his own nails. This couldn’t be from an ocean leviathan. At the very least he can take some solace in that. The monster Katsuki feared was enormous, and capable of pulverizing the land and decimating mountains, as if they were nothing. If he were really attacked by that creature, he doubts he’d still be alive.

As much as he’d like to think otherwise, he’s nearly certain that his attacker was one of Katsuki’s clan. At the depth he’d traveled, and with the claw marks matching as close as they did, what else could it have been?

Katsuki’s clan all seemingly possessed superhuman strength. He hadn't seen the mermaids in battle, but if they were the same species, they could probably do just as much damage. Their kind had a predatory nature, and could chase after him under the sea. He’d seen for himself how they could perfectly see in the dark, and he’d witnessed first hand how their claws could slice through the rock walls of the ruins.

As far as motive, he'd made enemies just by stepping on their land. To make things worse, Izuku was Katsuki’s lover, and the first of any human in god knows when to live and return homw to tell the tale. There’s no concrete proof, but those facts alone would be enough to motivate any of Katsuki’s pack in an attempt to take his life.

*But who was it?*
Shouto already wanted him dead, but if the naga had a chance to attack the boat, he probably would have used his quirk to catch him. Encasing the ship in ice and trapping him under seas would have been quick and effective. There was no reason for Shouto to go through the trouble of ramming the ship and slicing at it’s armor.

As much as he hates to admit it, the most likely culprit was Kirishima. Out of all the clan, he had the most reason to interfere. He’d been the first to discover that Izuku had spent the night with Katsuki. He also knew exactly when Izuku was leaving, and even offered to pass on the message to Katsuki.

But the theory doesn’t sit right. Even though Izuku hadn’t know him long, the redhead didn’t seem like to type to go behind his alpha’s back and attempt to kill him. Would Kirishima have told anyone else?

Izuku curses under his breath. If only he and Mei had thought to install a security camera and video feed. Katsuki didn’t understand most human technology. Most of it broke before the pack could learn anything. Chances are the naga and mermaids wouldn’t even understand what a camera was.

For now he has no way to solve the mystery. But if he were to return to the island, he’d better prepare with the right equipment to defend himself and solve the identify his attacker. He returns to the ship and unloads his personal items, and with a backpack and a suitcase in tow, he makes his way from the marina to the main road.

He removes his phone from his bag and calls for a tow truck to deliver the ship to Yuei University. Once it’s inspected, it should be back at the school and dropped off in Mei’s lab in a couple of days. As much as he’d love to call up his friends and family, he’d rather not instill false hope until he’d been officially cleared and granted permission to meet them in person.

He opens the subway app next out of habit. The usual stops were blacked out in red X’s from the map. Areas like this are only closed off when an infection is caught too late. No one took any chances. The new strain of Zaba was no joke. Sometimes, in a rapid outbreak, entire districts would be evacuated and blocked off. He squints in disbelief at the "X" right near the hospital, and is greeted with an apologetic message from the line.

Izuku sucks in the air between his teeth. This wasn’t here before he left. It’s close. Way too close. If the Hospital’s street has an outbreak, there could be serious trouble.

With a resigned grumble he opens a ride service next, and sets a destination at a local bus stop for pick up. He takes a seat on the bench next to an older woman wearing a clear plastic mask. He watches the crowd and cars pass by as puddles slowly collect on the asphalt. Most of the people have their faces cloaked with medical grade masks.

Not a single one of them is without a mask. It’s difficult to remember a time without them. The emergence of the virus in the last two years had changed everything.

Public spaces required everyone wear some sort of protection. Civilians could be fined and prosecuted if they ignored the law. Full body suits like his own were typically reserved for healthcare workers and other high risk occupations. Cloth masks were the most common, but the occasional civilian wears the plastic type with and eyesheild and canisters. The higher grade gas mask style was superior, in thanks to modern marketing, more fashionable and expensive.

It wasn’t a welcome change, but this was the price of fighting against an illness as ruthless as Polio and more contagious than the Spanish Flu.
While he waits for his ride, Izuku steals a look at the newspaper the woman next to him has folded to her face. The front page of every issue is required by law to list the beginning symptoms of Zaba: fatigue, dizziness, memory problems, stumbling, and difficulty breathing. Later stages include coughing blood, fainting, psychosis, and respiratory failure. Underneath the is a contact list of hospitals in the city.

An identical issue lies abandoned and folded in a heap on the sidewalk near the edge of the bench. Izuku scoops it up and absently flips through the warped, damp pages, picking up headlines and snippets of articles.

As always, it’s nothing short of bad news. Human testing had been internationally approved. Human euthanasia is now legalized with doctor’s recommendation and written consent. The headlines boast in record sales of mouse traps and bird traps to keep pests at bay. It’s estimated that 40% of humanity has already been infected. But what was the virus? God’s wrath? A bioweapon run amok?

A new passenger stops and leans against the sign for the bus stop. They’re listening to a loud talk show. Izuku doesn’t need to strain his ears to pick up the fervent words spewing from the speaker.

“They keep telling us different things! I’m tellin’ ya, these scientists are talking out their asses and making it up as they go along! First it’s the rodents, next it’s the birds! What next? Will they make us stop drinking water? The only thing they seem to agree on, is that we’re all dying off!”

He doesn’t wait long before the car he’s waiting for pulls up to the curb. He and the driver exchange a standard greeting as he assists Izuku load in his suitcase, and he settles in the backseat. The driver does a double take at the map display on his phone.

“Let’s see, you’re...heading to the Hospital? You’re not sick are ya?”

“No, just going in for a checkup. It can’t hurt to be too careful.”

The driver’s eyes narrow. He’s wearing the standard gauze mask and the government issued gloves provided for civilians, but it’s difficult to predict the expression underneath. It’s a lie, but Izuku has followed protocol precisely. He’s covered head to toe in the highest medical grade equipment. Even if he were sick, he couldn’t infect a soul.

After a minute of contemplation, the driver turns around and clears his throat. “I don’t like getting closer than I have to. Protesters can make the place a zoo. I’ll drop you off a block away.”

“All right.”

It’s a bit of an odd request, but Izuku lets it slide. These days, trips to the hospital carried a very different weight. The driver was reluctant to approach it sure, most people were. But there could be more to it. He isn’t sure what this man has been through. Had he already lost someone?

They drive off and Izuku quietly watches the buildings pass by in the window. In the past couple years, the city had a different vibe. Restaurants had checkpoints at the door and closed off booths for priority customers.

No business or home was without traps for small animals. These days, traps for pests are a lucrative business. There were a host of vectors that could spread the disease. Insects, mice, birds, the disease only caused a mild effect and remained dormant. It never escalated, unless it infected a human. When it did, it came with a 100% fatality rate.

They hit a light and stop near a skyscraper billboard flashes the importance of hygiene and ways to
keep yourself safe from contaminants. Some advertise constantly on how to prevent mosquitoes from breeding. A blonde woman with long wavy hair winks her enormous purple eyes from a TV billboard, advertising cute multi colored accessories for decorating your gloves and masks.

After about twenty minutes, they come to a halt. Minutes tick by, and after moving at a crawl and sitting through two light cycles the driver loses his patience.

“Oh, c’mon already. What’s the hold up?” The man mutters as he attempts to cranes his head over the sea of cars in front of him.

Izuku squirms uncomfortably. Something must have happened.

Izuku strains in his seat and attempts to peer ahead. It’s then he spots an expensive looking black hearse is decorated with wreaths of flowers. A long line of people dressed in black, holding their own umbrellas walk along both sides of the road.

“It’s funeral procession.”

“Shit. Lousy app. Why didn’t this one show up?” The driver mutters as he swipes through the menu of his smartphone. “The death must have been unreported. Sorry, kid. It doesn’t happen often, but when it does, it’ll eat up your time and your fare.”

“Don’t worry about it. I can walk from here.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, if we get any closer, you might be stuck for ages.”

After a polite thank you, Izuku opens the door and steps outside. The droplets drum a steady patter against his suit. Even though he’s covered and dry, he’d rather be out of the rain sooner than later. He makes a turn, and decided to opt for a short cut in-between the alleyways.

He’s about to turn at the sidewalk, when a blocked off area with yellow tape catches his eye. Here it was, the infected block that was shut down. The subway’s entrance is just around the corner. Little photographs and shrines of candles to the dead are scattered along the roads. There’s a mishmash of crosses, buddhas, and gods of every shape and size. These days, people didn’t care who they prayed to. Anything goes.

He’s only a couple blocks away from the hospital, when he weaves down the next alleyway, and spots a thin man taking small steps and limping, using a cane to support himself. Izuku doesn’t think much of it at first, thinking of him as just an old man, but when he gets closer, fear hits Izuku immediately.

This was wrong. He had a look to him, younger than he should have been, with sunken eyes and an arm with twitching muscles under the skin. His mask had a rusty stain splattered against the clear plastic. A sane person would have cleaned the old blood off by now, and a responsible citizen wouldn’t continue living with the healthy.

Someone that far along shouldn’t be freely walking among the healthy. What was he doing?

“Hey!”

The man runs, but it’s hardly a fair race. His movements are too unsteady, and unbalanced. He’s already exhibiting the beginning stages of motor failure. Izuku drops his bags, dashes forward, and
has him sized by the collar in a matter of seconds. The man swings around and lunges, but Izuku ducks away from the blows in time. He twists around to snatch his arms from behind and hold him down.

And just like that, it’s over. The dwindling strength in the man’s arms is nothing compared to his own. His phone has skidded across the ground in the scuffle. Izuku twists, and with one hand, sets an emergency alert on his phone as he uses the rest of his weight to hold the man down.

‘Get the hell off!’

“I’m sorry, I can’t! You’re sick. The hospital's not far. You’ll be taken care of there.”

“GET OFF ME! There’s no cure!” The man spits. “Just let me live! Live Free, Die Free! It’s our right! Yer just as brain-dead as everyone else!”

“I know you’re scared,” Izuku says as he works to keep himself sounding as reassuring as possible. “But you can’t be out with people who aren’t infected. It’s far too dangerous! We need to contain the disease the best we can.”

“You think you’re helping! Don’t you get it? There’s no future for us. They’ll lock us up in death camps!”

“There’s no death camps! It’s a volunteer run organization. I know them! One of my friends works as a physical therapist. They’ll take care of you. It won’t be the same as living on your own, but you’ll have the freedom to live your best life.”

Despite his efforts to console him, the man remains combative. He doubts he’ll ever cooperate with the authority of any kind. Izuku had heard of the movement. It’s been all over the news. Live Free, Die Free, the idea to let humanity have a dignified death. It’s rife with conspiracy theories and followers. This man must be one of them. The stranger squirms and swears, until he hears the heavy footsteps of the police quickly running over to him.

“We’ll take it from here, son.”

“GET OFF ME! LET ME GO!”

Izuku lets the officers take over and watches detachedly as the man is handcuffed. The other officer runs a report of the man, confirming the suspect’s condition.

Izuku raises a hand tentatively. “Excuse me. But, I’m actually heading to the hospital too.”

The officer nods. “Alright. We’ll escort you. Stay behind us.”

They’re close enough that the officers decide that it isn’t worth ducking inside their cars again and they walk together, with the struggling man in tow.

Just outside the hospital entrance is a of protestors. They’ve been held back to a designated protest area, but graffiti covers the steps of the hospital. The officer on duty gives them a curt nod, and turns to keep a watchful eye on the people who have gathered.

Izuku trails behind them with his jaw clenched and eyes focused straight ahead. The crowd reenergizes at the sight of the officers and their suspect. Izuku does his best not to give them any attention, but the angry shouting and jeers start up immediately.

“How dare you tear away an innocent away from his life!”
“How can doctors be the judge and executioner?”

“Let the families decide what to do with their sick!”

He’s heard all these sentiments before. Despite the danger and risk to not following protocol, there’s been undeniable hurt in keeping people safe. Protecting the healthy from disease is tearing families apart.

It has to be done, he reminds himself.

Once inside, the receptionist raises an eyebrow, but says nothing other than the standard greeting and directs the officers an assigned room to drop off the suspect. She hands Izuku his instructions for paperwork as the officers escort the man kicking and screaming to a room down the hall.

He’s a bundle of nerves as he sinks into the waiting room chair. He hates this. Forcing a civilian into the hospital makes him feel sick to the stomach. Izuku’s hands shake as he wills the pen to write clearly and he swears at the squiggly characters he’s produced on the page.

He isn’t in the waiting room long before being called into the doctor’s office. First things first, the doctor would need a blood and urine sample. A nurse provides him with a gown and a basket for his things, before directing him to the bathroom down the hall.

“When you’re done, head to Room 18. Dr. Shuzenji will see you once the results are processed.”

He strips from his clothes and steps into the bathroom in his hospital gown. He finally catches the chance to look over his whole body in the mirror. His reflection blinks back at him. He’s frazzled, with darkening skin forming bags under his eyes. There’s some tender skin on his face and arms from the fall he’d taken. They’re certain to darken with time.

There was also the bruises and scratches he’d received from sleeping with Katsuki the night before. He’s worried about the marks from Katsuki’s claws the most, but maybe he shouldn’t be. From an outsider’s perspective, it looked as though he were attacked by some sort of large cat. It wasn’t far off to assume the island was populated by animals of some kind.

Izuku traces over them slowly. The naga wasn’t trying to hurt him, he just seemed to have a difficulty keeping his strength under control when they were intimate. If Izuku were in his right mind, he would have scolded Katsuki for being careless.

After his blood is taken, he’s directed to the exam room. He’s only sitting in the examination table for a couple of minutes, when the door opens, and a short woman with a kindly face and white hair in a bun shuffles inside. She flips through the pages on the clipboard and gives it a meaningful tap before smiling up at him.

“Alright, young man. Your blood sample looks good. There’s a few things here and there, but no hints of Zaba. I’d wager it’s probably from experiencing whatever environment’s inside the storm. You’re good to go.”

Izuku exhales slowly. “That’s great to hear,” he says as he offers her a shy smile.

“But I can’t say the same for your friend. The nurses down the hall just finished his examination. He’s got it alright. You did the right thing bringing him here. The new strain is a real beast. We can’t take chances.” She sighs heavily, “and because of that, I won’t dig into you for charging at an obviously infected civilian. I’m sure I don’t need to remind you how reckless that was.”

“Y-yeah. I know.”
“Your suit doesn’t look damaged. There’s no puncture marks that we could tell, so there shouldn’t be any risk of contamination. Once it’s been sanitized, we’ll have it returned to you.”

“You can’t send him away to the hospice center,” Izuku says. “He won’t cooperate.”

“Centers; definitely not. For those that far along and violent, we’ve switched to holding cells.” Izuku blinks in shock but the doctor shakes her head. “We have no choice. Contrary to the rumors and allegations, it isn’t solitary confinement, nor is it punishment. It’s for the best. With the new strain, having the infected fight back is becoming more of an issue. You’re in the leading the project for the cure at UA, aren’t ya? Have you encountered one of these before?”

“Once, but not very far along,” Izuku murmurs. “The patient I analyzed was barely is the beginning stages of the disease.”

“Victims of the new strain have their emotions reach a fever pitch. They don’t like to be held in one place. They’re eager to break free and live out their lives with the time they have. The muscles disintegrate at a pace that doesn’t allow the patient to accept and prepare for the illness. They can’t be reasoned with. No one wants to be cut off from the world, but protocols must be followed if humanity is to survive.”

She gently rests a hand over his own and smiles sadly. “Keep an eye on yourself for the next week or so. If any symptom sticks, see us right away.”

***

Izuku strolls in the lobby, newly dressed in his sanitized clothes, with all his bags, wearing his mask and gloves as he idly looks through his phone’s contacts. He’d successfully passed the physical exam. While he has to tell his loved ones of his finding with the plant on the island, he’ll also need to be careful not to give anything away.

With knots in his stomach, he punches in the number. She picks up after the first ring. Izuku feels a smile already pulling under his mask.

“Hi, Mom.”


“Don’t worry, I’m alright,” Izuku replies in a louder voice as he mushes the phone closer to his face, hoping to better project his voice against the air canister. “I just arrived back in town. Are you still home?”

“Yes, yes! We’re safe! We had a close encounter with a house a couple blocks north of us, but the neighborhood is clear. Did you find the plant you were looking for? Do you have the medicine?”

Izuku pauses and scratches the back of his head, as the hollow guilt he’d felt on the island resurfaces. “Yes, and no. There’s been a minor set back. I’ll tell you all about it when I get home.”

“You’re heading home now?!” She asks hopefully.

“Yeah, I just got out of the hospital. I’m on the train.”

Panic overtakes her immediately, and her voice suddenly spikes in pitch. “The hospital!? Why
“It’s alright! I’m fine, I swear!” Izuku says as quickly as he can. “It’s all just procedural for whenever anyone goes abroad. I’ve passed all the tests, so there’s no possible way I’m infected.”

“Really? Oh...oh that’s good,” she mutters mostly to herself. “These days I just...it’s so easy to race to the worst case scenario. Gosh, what’s even in the fridge? I’ve been having take out for the last couple of days. But I’ll make your favorite tonight! I might need to run out for some groceries. Where are you now?”

“Close, but it’s alright. If you need to run out, I’ll shop with you. It’ll be nice to be in a store again.”

“Okay, if you’re sure. I’ll see you soon. And Izuku?”

“Yeah?”

“I-It’s...It’s so nice to hear your voice again. I’m...so glad you’re back.”

“Thanks. It’s good to hear you too.”

He hangs up, takes a deep breath and sighs, before hitting the speed-dial for Toshinori next.

After the fourth ring, Izuku resigns himself to leaving a message. Suddenly, Toshi picks up. Izuku waits, but doesn’t hear him at first. There’s shuffling, and the sound of someone sputtering and choking on the other line.

“Hello?”

“Young Midoriya!” Toshi wheezes into the receiver. “Is that you? Have you really returned to us?”

“Yeah, it’s me. I’m about to take the train home.”

“Did you succeed? Have you done it?”

Izuku bows his head and bites on his lower lip. “No. I’m sorry. I found the plant and made some good progress, but...I messed up. I miscalculated the island’s climate and lost everything I was growing.”

“Ah,” Toshinori says softly. “These things happen. We can discuss it more in person, if you like.”

“Sure. I’m spending the night at my mom’s, but I’d like to return to Yuhei tomorrow.”

‘Alright. I’ll see you tomorrow. In the meantime, please don’t be so hard on yourself. Tell your mother I wish her the best.”

The next person he decided to call is Mei. It’s a call he isn’t looking forward to. He doesn’t expect her to pick up. He almost hopes she doesn’t. She’ll be ecstatic to see him alive thanks to her inventions, sure, but things will quickly go south when he describes their condition. If she asks, he’ll tell her honestly. Otherwise, decides it’s strictly on a need to know basis.

“You have reached the voicemail box of Hatsune Mei. The mailbox is currently full. Goodbye.”

That’s fairly typical. He decides to compromise, and sends a text. He’s greeted by red text almost immediately.
“ERROR: Message not received”

Odd…

He tries sending an email next.

“OVERQUOTA: Quota exceeded (Mailbox for this user is full.)”

Izuku blinks at the message in disbelief. Seriously? For someone so obsessed with making technology, how can she not know how to use it?

He scrolls through his phone for Majima’s email and begins typing out his message. His best bet might be contacting Mei’s mentor and asking him to take a message.

Thankfully, it’s stopped raining. He calls a second car to the nearest subway station. Once it’s sent, he gets ready for the trudge outside. Fortunately, the full body suit he wore before concealed his identity from the protestors. None of them bother him while he waits.

He’s just buckled up in the backseat when an email alert pings, and he unlocks the phone to see a message from Majima.

"Midoriya,
Good to hear from you.
Reaching her might be impossible for now. It’s a combination of grant season and a participating in a local engineering expo. Your best bet is to use the mailbox in UA’s main office. She should be back on campus in the next day or so, seeing how she lives here now.
-Majima"

Izuku blinks uncomprehendingly at the last line. Lives here? What’s that supposed to mean?

Above the steps in the subway is a chart similar to the once in his phone app, which point out which stops are no longer available, and where to transfer to make the most of your time. Izuku gives it a glance over, once more out of habit, and is still relieved to see his hasn’t been listed.

He boards the train, and searches for an available two person seat. One of the commuters a couple seats away is obnoxiously listening to a very loud talk show, that seem to echo the sentiments of the protestors.

He crosses over to the next car. Once he finds a spot, he hoists the bags overhead, and holds the backpack to his lap as he digs out his phone.

He decides to save time, and texts all of his friends at once.

“Hey everyone! I’m back!”

There’s nothing at first, but then the messages flood in all at once:

“Say whaaaat?”
“HOLY SHIT!”
“HE’S AIIIIIVE!!!”
“What manner of dark deception is this?”
“Is this real? Please tell me it’s real!”
“This isn’t a joke right? If it is, it’s not funny!”
“EVERYONE REMAIN CALM. WITH TODAY’S TECHNOLOGICAL ADVANCEMENTS WE CANNOT ASSUME THIS IS REALLY MIDORIYA. FURTHER PROOF IS REQUIRED!”
Izuku grins. Even in a chat room, Tenya can’t help himself from rushing to establish order.

“It’s really me! I’ll be at school tomorrow afternoon. I’ll tell you all about it.”

While his friends bombard the chat, a few personal texts hit him directly. Izuku assures them he’s alive and well, and he’ll see them all soon, and tucks the phone away.

Even with his friends unwavering support, the rest of the journey feels solemn and empty. There’s only a handful skipped stops, but Izuku remembers the first time it happened. At the Zaba diseases’ debut, the skipped stops were exciting to pass. Passengers would crane their necks to look at the plastic wrapped city blocks and the yellow warning tape, as they passed.

Now, no one bats an eye. Today’s passengers even make an effort to turn away from the windows. There’s a superstition that if you look too long at the infected buildings, the disease will spread to your block next.

Izuku’s eye catches graffiti supporting the “Live Free, Die Free” movement littering the signs at the passing station. Instead of turning away from the abandoned stops, Izuku counts each one. There’s two more since he’d left.

As he walks up the block of his old neighborhood he’s thankful that the rest of the journey is uneventful. He’s lived on campus for the last five years, and visits when he can, but there’s a dull and growing disconnect between himself and the home he’d known all his life.

Izuku enters the cleansing pod outside the apartment building. It resembles a sliding shower door. It’s a basic and inexpensive pod, the sort that’s mandatory for every floor of a residential building. However, pods like this one were optional for each residence.

Once sanitized, the suits could be stored in a special container indoors, along with any masks and gloves for each civilian. It won’t offer complete protection from the virus, but chances the apartment coming into contact with outside contamination is low.

He knocks twice before unlocking the door. It swings open to reveal his mother, with eyes wide and glistening as she dances excitedly from one foot to the other. After Izuku removes his equipment, and places in a sterile container, she dashes right into a hug.

She’s pressed herself against his chest so hard, he can feel the contours of her face.“Oh my god...Oh my god, I missed you,” she chants in a muffled voice against his Tshirt. “I missed you so much.”

“I know,” Izuku murmurs as he returns the hug and squeezes her shoulders. “I missed you too.”

“God, I just...I never thought I’d see you again,” she sniffs. “I can’t believe you’re really here.”

She steps back to wipe away her tears when her brow suddenly knits with worry. She reaches out and runs her fingers along the bandage on his forehead. “Wh-what happened to your face?”

“It’s just a scratch, honest. I had a bit of a rough trip.”

She scans the rest of his face before raising his arm and turning it over. Her eyes widen in shock, “Are those claw marks?”
“N-no!” Izuku says quickly. “It was from a piece of Mei’s equipment! I was careless. I’m fine, really!”

Inko’s face hardens at the mention of the engineer’s name, but she manages a half smile. “Oh, I see. Well, she’s always had a talent for bringing out the unconventional. Sorry, I’ll stop fussing over you now.”

Izuku takes a deep breath and inhales the heavenly aroma of garlic sizzling in sesame oil. She’s already started making Katsudon. He can smell the simmering broth from the kitchen.

Izuku’s stomach growls, and she laughs. “Hungry?”

Izuku smiles sheepishly. “I haven’t really had anything all day.”

“Well, you’re in the right place! Dinner should be ready soon.”

“What about groceries?”

“I made do. Turns out, I had all the ingredients on hand,” she says with a tender grin. “Old habit. Come in!”

The soup is just as delicious as he remembers. He wolfs down most of it at once, but slows enough near the end to tell his mom what he can of his discovery, while omitting anything on the island’s inhabitants, and stopping once in a while to take out notebooks and sketches from his backpack. He carefully explains what he’s been researching in layman’s terms as plainly as he can, and she nods politely.

“The island’s too dangerous for anyone to travel alone,” he says as he finishes. “My tools were broken and my progress destroyed. But I know I’m onto something. I won’t know for sure until I plant what I’ve collected.”

“So it’s over?” Inko asks hopefully. “You got what you were looking for.”

“We’ll see. I’ll need to run some experiments first.”

Inko pushes around the remaining food with her spoon. “I suppose, but the other labs are working just as hard. Maybe the UA lab could find a way to improve what you have so you wouldn’t have to leave.”

“Yeah, it’s a possibility,” Izuku says delicately. “Checking in with them on my list tomorrow. The experiment was unfinished, and the odds aren’t great, but if I have to start over, at least this time I’ll know what to expect.”

He’s chosen his words carefully, but she knows him too well. Inko sighs and lets the spoon clatter against the bowl. “Izuku, you know how I felt about your trip in the storm. About throwing yourself in that death trap, and putting all your faith in that girl and her machines.”

“I didn’t have a choice! This was a lead that no one wanted to consider! You’ve seen the news! The new strain is spreading, fast! If there’s even a chance what we need is still in the storm, I need to take it.”

Inko grits her teeth. “I know I should be supporting you, but I was against this from the start. You have a dream, and I can respect that. It’s a noble mission, and I am so proud of you. But there’s a line, and you’ve already crossed it. You should know better than to cross it again.”
“I won’t fail! We’ve collected actual data from inside! There’s a higher chance of success than ever!”

“You don’t know that! You say you have a better understanding, but the storm could shift, and you might not make it out again!”

“Mom, I-”

“Does your own safety even matter to you? Does your life mean anything at all?”

“I was careful! Mei will take another look at the machines and-“

“No, that’s enough! I don’t want to fight about this. Honestly, the disease has taken too from us already. I’m happy to have you home and safe. I really am. But right now, I can’t do this. I can’t even think of losing you again.”

She gets up without another word and collected the bowls and silverware. Izuku follows and hands her the pots and pans, as they silently do the dishes.

“Want to watch TV?” he asks.

It’s an invaluable distraction. With it, they’re able to contain, but not erase the unspoken anxiety between them. They wait out the rest of the evening on the couch watching game shows and light hearted rom coms, until Izuku catches his mom nodding off. Izuku flicks off the tv, and guides her to her feet as she bids him goodnight and saunters off to her room.

Once alone, Izuku finally retreats to his childhood bedroom. His bedroom smells slightly of lavender and old books. The ceiling is covered in glow in the dark stars. He turns on all the lights so that the pale plastic can charge up, while knowing it’s a pale comparison from the real thing. Being across the sea, so far from civilization and light pollution, allowed him to see the arms of the Milky Way stretch over him each night.

His mom has been watering his plants by the window, none of his things are dusty. He leaves the samples and notes from the island alone for now. His experiments could wait once he was back at UA and in his own dorm. He drops his bags in front of his desk, and flops onto the twin sized bed by the window.

The walls are still decorated with superheroes. The room is a mishmash reflection of his interests growing up. A microscope is set up on his desk, a telescope is in the corner, a periodic table of the elements hangs right above his desk. Some famous inventors are also taped on the walls. The wall across from his bed has been completely devoted to newspaper and journal clippings of Yagi and his findings on the wall as well.

The relief he feels at the sight of his bed exhausts him. With the disease lurking around every corner, he was never truly safe. He bunches the covers in his arms, and holds them close to his chest. A time when monsters and magic were contained in fiction. He remembers a time before disease and disintegration.

He wonders if Katsuki misses him.

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Izuku tries to focus his thoughts on the shuttle back to UA. He’s going to be late. He wishes his mask was opaque enough to hide the blush he feels on his face. He’d left the island, but apparently his brain didn’t get the memo.
He woke up, swearing he could feel the other’s teeth around his neck and ears, and coils sliding over and between his thighs. The phantom taste of warm sugary caramel still tingled on his tongue. Katsuki’s mouth was hot and wet around his ear.

Who do you belong to?

Just thinking about it gives him goosebumps. His sheets were a sweaty mess. He had to practically ninja his way to the laundry room and throw in his sheets and pajamas as soon as his mom left for work. He thanks his lucky stars that his mom had a dryer. Even from a single naga, venom must have a side effect. Perhaps this was the result of having a second dose? Was it addictive?

He hadn’t had a sexual dream that intense since he started puberty. He fidgets with the straps on his mask and clears his throat. Now wasn’t the time to be thinking about Katsuki. If he were to ever see the naga again, he has to make his time at Yuei University count and convince his peers that what he’d found was worth a second trip.

Izuku tilts his head as he walks towards the building before him. Yuei’s glass windows are gleaming and imposing as ever. Although he’d come to love his dream school, he feels a sense of dread, when pushing open the front door.

The worst part was the lobby.

When the students and teachers first began falling ill, little charms and notes decorated their lockers, as their friends hoped for a swift recovery. Then after their deaths, the lockers became shrines. Soon after, the shrines became too numerous and began getting in the way of everyday life, and were rehomed to the school’s main entrance. Before the school stepped in, stuffed animals and flowers created an artificial garden along the wall. Now, there were restrained to only framed pictures on the walls, with flowers and small memorabilia tucked behind each one.

It had been barely a month. Who else has they lost? How many more pictures were decorating the walls?

He turns a corner, and stops in the office. He searches through the faculty mailbox until he finds Majima’s and leaves a note for Mei on top of the box with the broken machines. The secretary assures him that she will deliver it to Majima when he comes in. If the box of machines won’t get Mei’s attention, he’s not sure what will.

“Hey, yo! Madman Midoriya!” A friendly voice booms. A tall, blonde boy in a white lab coat thumps his shoulders enthusiastically. “HE LIVES!”

Izuku jumps, but relaxes as soon as he locks eyes with his lab partner’s beaming face. “Hey, Mirio.”

“Mirio! How about a little respect! You could call me senpai for once!”

“S-sorry, senpai.”

“Ahh, I’m just teasing!” he says as he playfully nudges Izuku’s arm. “Call me whatever! You made it back to us! It’s just amazing you made it from your scouting adventure. Holy crap man! Taking on that black hole of a storm? The name still holds up! Any news?”

“W-well, I’ll have more to say after I run some experiments on the specimens I brought back.”

The older boy blinks in surprise. “Wait, you mean you found it?”
“Sure did,” Izuku says as he smiles sheepishly. “I can’t guarantee the results, but I’ll see what I can do. Anything new on your end?”

Mirio shrugs. “Not as exciting as what you found, I’m sure! We’re making progress on unraveling the makeup of the new, but it’s slow going. I’m glad you went out there. The new strain is a beast. It’s always growing, shifting, and outsmarting us. Anything we try to counter it with is bunk. You remember that good paper Shiketsu published on how to counter the old strains? It was good for slowing down the originals, but this?” Mirio shakes his head. “It’s like a new monster. Nothing so far comes close to slowing it down.”

A blue haired student hugs him from behind. “Mirio!” The girl cries in a sing song voice. “Let’s get crepes! Oh!” She exclaims when locking eyes with Izuku. “Welcome back, partner!”

“Nejire! H-hey!”

“I’d stick around to give you a better greeting, but we’re on break to get, crepes, crepes, crepes!” She sings as she pats her hands on Mirio’s shirt to the beat.

“Well, maybe,” Mirio interrupts. “Did you finish cleaning up?”

“Yeah, totally!”

A thin, taller hair boy walks up to them and shyly raises a hand in greeting. “Amajaki! Tell him!”

“I can vouch for her.” Amakaji says as he rubs the back of his head. “Everything’s put away, and the software’s still rendering, so we really can break. How was the island? What did you find?”

“Well-”

“Noooo!” Nejire whines as she leans her body weight into Mirio’s side. “No science! We’re always talking science! We can science later!” Nejire tugs at Mirio’s arm impatiently. “C’mon, c’mon! Let’s go! Less talking more walking!”

“You’re welcome to tag along,” Mirio says cheerfully.

“Sorry, I’m meeting Toshinori sensei. I’ll catch you later.”

“See ya.”

Izuku heads upstairs, and passes a window that over looks the track field. A singed dark spot has appeared like a blemish in the grass. Izuku frowns. It looked like the aftermath of some sort of wildfire. Was it accidental? Did someone make a bonfire? He has a feeling a certain engineer could be responsible.

He reaches the office door, and knocks twice on the frame.

Toshinori looks up from his paperwork, and rises from his seat to meet him.

When he’s close enough, Toshinori smiles and gently pats Izuku’s head. “Welcome back.”

The office is modest, with a couple bookshelves, and a lamp. The room is decorated with an assortment of shrubs and other plants. It’s a homey space, that almost always had a sort of calming effect on it’s visitors. Izuku takes a seat across from Toshinori’s desk and does his best to return the smile. He seems thinner somehow.

“It’s good to be back, but...”
He trails off and shifts uncomfortably. What can he do? He doesn’t like the idea of lying, but he made a promise. Lying to his mentor, the one who vouched for this crazy adventure in the first place, makes him cringe.

*Keep it vague. I don’t need to say any more than I have to.*

“I was careless,” Izuku says slowly. “I underestimated the island’s unpredictability. The plants in the greenhouse were lost. I have a couple of seeds from the last generation. I’m hoping to plant and grow them here. If it succeeds, I won’t need to go back. But we needed this to be the answer, and I failed.”

Toshinori hums thoughtfully. “Failed is unnecessarily harsh. Young Midoriya, you’ve returned to us alive. That’s more than what any traveler has ever done, and more than we could have hoped. That alone is an accomplishment of itself.”

“You say that, but it doesn’t change that I let everyone down.”

“Setbacks are a part of what we do. We hit a roadblock and we learn from it. You thought you could do your research, sail back with the cure, and instantly save the world?”

“Well...yes? I mean, kind of?” Izuku says hesitantly. “It’s what we need.”

“Our situation is dire, but setting impossible goals is counterproductive to progress, and your well being. Science isn’t magic. It’s an evolving discipline that grows with us. The time you spent overseas was anything but wasted. No one is disappointed with you.”

Izuku shifts and sits a bit straighter in his chair.

“Tell me what you have,” Toshinori says gently.

“Well, the plant I was searching for grows freely in the valleys of the island. They have a rapid growth cycle and they’re easy to farm on the island, but they’re too sensitive to grow outside the storm. I brought some seeds from the latest generation. Over the next few weeks, I’ll test how well the plant grows in our soil.”

Toshinori cocks his head. “It’s just ‘the plant’? It doesn’t have a name?”

“Well,” Izuku pauses.

A name? What would be the right name? The plant had started out as a low growing shrub, but with each generation, it had gotten taller. It could be named after a number of things, but what? He’d confronted Katsuki about it in the ruins, but naga was uncooperative. Izuku had never gotten him to tell him what it was called. They were on better terms now. He bets he’d tell him when they see each other again. But for now? With the disease being globally widespread and public, it had to be something memorable, clever, and not ridiculous. Definitely not something like-

“Deku...” Izuku mutters under his breath.

“Deku?” Toshinori questions as he latches onto the last word. “You’re calling it Deku? The Deku shrub?”

Izuku clamps a hand over his mouth in horror and internally backpedals. *Oh no. OH MY GOD. Why did I say that? How could I let that slip? What else did I say? What was I thinking?*

He’s about to correct himself when the older man’s eyes light up and he snaps his fingers. “Ah,
like ‘dekiru’! I see! A capable specimen for a vital mission! That’s a fine name for a plant that will fight against the virus. I like it!”

Izuku blinks. “Y-yeah, um,” he says as he sweats nervously. “Right! I guess it fits that way, but-”

He’s about to continue, when the door is suddenly ripped open, and bangs against the wall.

“MIDORIYAAAA!” shrieks a young woman with pink dreadlocks.

Izuku jumps as Mei explodes into the room unwashed, smelling like engine oil, with the broken machines clutched desperately to her chest. Her arms swing, and a battered piece equipment careens across the room and skids across the desk, and scatters Toshinori’s papers in all directions.

“YOU HEARTLESS BASTARD! WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS?”

“W-WHOA!” Izuku cries as he ducks out of the way of another piece. “HEY! Can you not throw machines at me?!”

“I can throw them all I like!” she snaps as she marches to his side. “THEY’RE DURABLE! They shouldn’t be affected by casual damage! But this! THIS?” She screeches as she holds up a battered boot right to his face. “This was premeditated destruction!”

“It wasn’t on purpose! I’m sorry, I tried reaching you-”

“Do you understand the amount of work that was put into my babies? The amount of time and love? You’ve helped me before, so I thought you got it! I TRUSTED YOU! IS THIS HOW YOU WOULD TREAT A CHILD?”

“I was careful! I did all I could bu-”

“NO! I AM NOT DONE! I don’t hear a word from you in a month, and you just leave me this?!” she exclaims as she grabs him by the collar. “EXPLAIN YOURSELF! WHAT THE HELL DID YOU DO? Did you fling yourself off a cliff? Multiple cliffs? Did you play in the hurricane? This damage is inexcusable!”

“I’m sorry! I know I should have been more careful, but-”

“BUT WHAT?”

“Er, Hatsume.”

Mei looks over as if seeing Toshinori for the first time. “Oh hey. ‘Sup Toshi?”

The door creaks aside again, and bright faced young woman with hazelnut hair and rushes into the office.

“IZUKU!” she cries. “Is it true that-” Ochako stops in horror as she looks from Izuku’s distressed expression and the grip Mei has around his collar.

A bespectacled, taller man in a suit soon follows. “DARLING! No running in the-MIDORIYA!” He cries as he spots them once entering room. “HATSUME!” he barks. “Unhand him this instant!”

“Hey, Iida, this involves you too!” Mei says as she released Izuku’s collar and points at the machine in her arm. “Does this look like company money well spent?”

“That’s what this is about? Given the unpredictability of the storm and the unknown environment
within, it would be reasonable to expect this sort of damage! Your behavior is unacceptable! I’m sure Midoriya had his reasons. ”

Mei mutters under her breath, but relents, and turns her attention immediately back to the machines in her arms.

“Izuku, are you okay?” Ochako asks as her eyebrows knit together in worry.

“I’m fine, guys. I’m just a little overwhelmed.”

Ochako crosses her arms and glares in Mei’s direction. The flowing maternity sundress flatters her shape. He can see a clear outline of the baby when Ochako rests a hand over her swollen belly.

“You sure?”

“Yeah,” he says shyly. ’I’ve been off to a bad start. I sort of rushed over here. I didn’t even remember to pack a lunch.”

“You’ve gotta join us in the cafe then!” Ochako exclaims. “We were heading over to eat, but then changed course after bumping into Mirio!”

“Oh,” Izuku mutters as he doubtfully looks at Toshinori. “You mean right now?”

“It’s alright,” Yagi nods. “Go and catch up. I can meet you later today when you’re free.”

Tenya frowns at Mei’s bedraggled appearance. “And as for you! Hatsume, when’s the last time you’ve eaten?”

“Recent enough!” She says with a shrug. “I’m totally fine!”

Tenya shakes his head. “I should have specified. I don’t mean snacks! What day did you last sit down and set aside time for a good meal?”

“Ehh…”

“Your meals are covered by tuition!” he says hotly. “Take advantage of them and take care of yourself!”

“Going to the cafe takes time!” Mei argues. "All of my time is precious! Tomorrow isn’t guaranteed! The only true deadline is your DEADline! ”

“Er,” Izuku mutters. “That’s...needlessly dark.”

“It’s the human condition!” Mei exclaims. “You just need the right attitude! I like to think of myself as death-positive!”

Toshinori clears his throat. “Well then, Young Midoriya and I will continue our conversation another time. Enjoy your lunch. And Hatsume-san, please don’t overdo it.”

Izuku leaves his books and notebooks with his mentor. He’ll pick them up later, but for now it’s comforting to walk down the halls with his friends. He hears the soft droning of the voices swell and the occasional clatter of cutlery as they approach the cafeteria doors.

Ochako happily strides besides him. “So? You found the island! What was it like? Was there any civilization? Were there survivors?”
Izuku shakes his head. “There’s no humans on the island. There’s only a few animal species and ruins. It’s only full of the dead.”

“Aw, I was hoping you’d have done some exploring! Tenya’s been doing some research on the island in his spare time! He reads me what he’s found every night as I’m falling asleep. Tell him!”

Tenya tenses. “Er, yes. well. Ochako,” he mutters under a bitter expression. “I was going to surprise him.”

“Ah, sorry!”

“I-It’s alright,” Tenya mutters as he adjusts his glasses to recover.

“But it isn’t just the books he’s been researching! He’s been going to special auctions too!”

“Darling, you’re going to spoil everything!” Tenya cries as he dramatically waves his hands in the air.

Izuku laughs. “I’ll pretend I didn’t hear anything.”

“Well, yes,” Tenya grumbles. “As Ochako said, I’ve been doing research and found some leads of my own. If you have time this week, I’ll show you what I found. I can meet in the library if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Sure! That works for me!”

As the top university in the country, Yuehei’s always been good with their food. Students have their pick from a wide variety of dishes, fruits, and vegetables. Each dish is served buffet style. The meals each day are consistently top notch. Any other time without the mask, the assorted aromas from the hot dishes would leave his mouth watering as soon as they opened the doors. They split up, and decide to meet together at the table, where the first person goes to sit.

With his empty stomach, Izuku is quickly won over by the powerful scent tikka masala curry with rice and some roasted vegetables on the side, and is the first to sit at one of the many divided tables. Each seat and table is separated by transparent plastic walls in an effort to thwart the spreading of germs. Everyone was responsible for cleaning up your spot once you had finished eating. You could still see and hear the people you sat with, but everyone was still acutely aware of the walls between them.

Mei clatters her food to the table with little thought, with some grilled fish, a baked potato, and a fruit cup. She arranges her plates and drink around pages of complicated blueprints, before stabbing the entire baked potato with her fork and taking a bite. Izuku can’t help but feel relieved. For someone who doesn’t always take care of herself, at least she had the sense to build a healthy meal. She’s content to mull over them until Tenya and Ochako return with drinks and napkins.

Tenya sits down with both plates and begins slices the chicken into thin slices and carefully dissects each one. He’s managed to collect quite a few stares from the other cafeteria goers. Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku watches as a couple people have stopped eating are doubtfully staring at the chicken on their plates. Izuku watches Tenya curiously. Thanks to his lab work, he can’t remember the last time he had lunch with them, or with even anyone.

“Er, Iida?” he asks at last. “What are you doing?”

“Searching for any signs of pinkness! Poultry must reach an internal temperature of 165 degrees! To undercook the meat poses the risk of food poisoning! Can you imagine the effect of such an
illness on a mother to be!”

“Well... I guess you have a point,” Izuku admits.

Izuku turns to Ochako. “Was lunch always like this?”

“Ever since I started really showing, yeah. It’s normal. But it’s alright,” Ochako says with a shrug. “I’m used to it by now, and it doesn’t hurt to be careful!”

Once the chicken has been thoroughly dissected into bits, Tenya cheerily returns the plate to Ochako. Mei’s eyes momentarily flick up from the blueprints as the plate clatters against the table.

“Oh hey. Nice suit, Iida. Meeting with our corporate overlords?”

“Of course!” Tenya declares as he triumphantly adjusts his glasses. “As a leader in biotech and medicine Ingenium Inc. is committed to globally eradicating this plague! These past few months Tensei and I have worked through countless negotiations with our partners and competitors. I’ll meet with them as many times as needed! If we’re to survive, we’ll need to have a truce and work to extinguish the disease within a small window of time. To put it simply, we need to hit hard before it knows what hit it!”

“I’m glad you’re doing your best,” Izuku says as he turns to Ochako. “How are things with you?”

“Good!” Ochako replies. “Well, you know, as good as they can be. The baby’s healthy and kicking! I’m still taking classes and volunteering at the containment shelters in my spare time. Ever since the new strain, there’s been less volunteers. I’m not a fully trained physical therapist, but if I can do anything to help the infected, I’ll do it.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Izuku watches the muscles in Tenya’s jaw tighten. It’s subtle, but the tick is there.

“Do you need help?” Izuku asks tentatively.

“Well, I won’t say no! You could meet me and volunteer for a day if you have the time.”

“Sure!”

“I’d love for our department to be as well funded as you Biochem guys,” Mei says as she suddenly changes the subject. She stabs a piece of fish and points at Izuku accusingly. “In this climate, I really need to sell myself to support my side projects. Well, more than usual. Money is so tight, but thank god for Ingenium Inc! If it weren’t for that contract, I’d have nothing!”

“Right! That reminds me,” Tenya says as he cuts into his steak. “We commissioned you for a new type of aircraft carrier. Have you made good progress?”

“Progress, HAH! It’s practically done! All your company needs to do is make it! Get a load of this baby!” She cries enthusiastically as she unrolls a sheet of parchment, showing off the draft for a red winged plane marked with medical crosses.

“It’ll be unstoppable in any form of inclement weather! We can deliver the drugs safely and efficiently all across the globe without waiting for perfect conditions. There’s a limit, but it won’t be hindered by the typical severe ice storm, lightning bolt, or tornado.”

Izuku frowns at the color. “Is all the red really necessary?”
“It’s the most attention grabbing color there is! Once we have it, this baby will be delivering precious cargo! I want it to be recognize by everyone all over the world!”

Tenya nods. “It looks good. Get it approved by Majima sensei, and I’ll discuss the design to Tensei.”

Mei pumps her fist excitedly. “SUCCESS! Money’s been hard to come by with designs for transportation, but having a background in medical robotics in this climate helps! The first babies to really grab everyone’s attention were the artificial limbs! I don’t mind it, but I need something to shake things up, and keep my mind fresh. Majima sensei isn’t helping either! He won’t let me catch a break. These days it’s always, Hatsume, make something practical. Hastume, make an outline of your lecture beforehand. Hatsume, stop setting fire to private property!”

“You commited arson on someone’s land? Do you feel nothing at the expense of others?! Have you no shame!” Tenya cries.

Mei huffs indignantly. “I wouldn’t willingly set fire to someone’s land without reason! Every baby I make functions as it should! That is, as long as they’re not broken,” she says as she shoots Izuku a glare.

Ochako peers between them before settling on the battered machines at Mei’s feet. “What happened?”

Mei narrows her eyes in Izuku’s direction. “This guy ruined them.”

“Well, sure it looks bad, but that’s okay, right?” Ochako says hopefully. “You fix things all the time!”

“It’s the principle of the thing! Did you even look at them? They were completely non functional! It looked like he’d thrown my babies in a blender!”

“It was an accident!” Izuku snaps. “How many times do I need to say it?”

Izuku thinks back to Katsuki, and the bitter weight he carried. If the machines hadn’t captured his attention, would he have been devoured? At the very least, he’d have returned empty handed.

Izuku takes a deep breath and sighs. “I’m sorry, I’m still a little wound up. Honestly, I really am grateful. If I didn’t have those machines, and if Mei hadn’t stowed away the boots, then I wouldn’t be alive. Even with them, was a point where I almost accepted never seeing you all again.”

An uncomfortable silence falls over them before Ochako smiles sympathetically. “It’s that dangerous out there, huh?”

Mei gives a defeated groan. “So before you destroyed them, how were they?”

“It was amazing. It was like moving around in a different body. I could scale the trees and surroundings in seconds.

“Amazing is right! Testing out new equipment on open land without restraining orders and restriction! Must be nice...”

“Er, yeah,” Izuku continues. “Anyway, I tried to reach you yesterday, but the ship should be delivered back to your lab by tomorrow.”

“In good condition, I hope?”
“I mean...it still works?” Izuku offers tentatively. “I’m going to warn you now, you aren’t going to like it.”

“What did y-”

“Mei, listen. I’d have avoided the danger if I could, but that island is no joke. We may have cracked the storm, but we’ll never fully understand the weather or the creatures in the waters.”

“Creatures?” Iida repeats as he raises his eyebrows. “Surely you don’t imply some sort of supernatural beast!”

Izuku bites his lower lip. It would be ridiculous to insist that some sort of creature wasn’t involved. A person could take one look and infer the damage wasn’t caused by something man made or in nature. As if the island wasn’t ominous enough already. If he sells it well, the story of the mystery monster that guards the island could even serve as a further deterrent to travelers.

“I don’t know what I mean,” Izuku admits. “I wasn’t able to see, but I was attacked by something on the way home. When it gets here, you’ll see for yourself. I made the right call going in alone. I won’t ask for anyone else to walk into that meat grinder.”

“Well!” Mei claims as she slams her empty cup on the table and begins gathering her things. “For now it’s back to the drawing board with the anti gravity boots. I’ll need to replicate them before tinkering with an upgrade.”

“If you do, I’ll test them,” Izuku says quickly. “I owe you for letting me borrow them at all. I’ll even test the space gear too.”

He catches Tenya and Ochako exchange nervous glances out of the corner of his eyes.

“Midoriya…” Tenya says quietly. “Are you sure?”

Izuku can’t blame them for worrying. Agreeing to testing everything in Mei’s lab is the equivalent opening up and returning to the crazy schedule they once had as a couple. It’s exhausting, and thankless work, but like the time developing his own experiments, it has to be done.

*If my hunch is correct, and the Deku shrubs pull through, returning to the island is a possibility, I’m going to be ready. If pushing myself through Mei’s lab gets me the right equipment it means surviving the wrath of Kacchan’s pack, I’ll do it.*

“Yeah. It’s fine,” he says resolutely. “I mean it. I’ll test whatever you’ve got.”
Promise

Chapter Summary

“Ikasaseya harehare ha heya ikarhete haiiya
Ikarahete iya ikarheye ikarahete iya ikaraha”

Chapter Notes

If I could quit my job and write fic instead, I fucking would. But hey, it's good to be back.

Thank you all for the comments! I've fallen way behind on responding to them, but read and treasure each and every one. <3

Ducklingkouhai made some lovely fanart: Here!
Brain Nut illustrated a scene from Chapter 8! Here!

Shout out to BeReadyWhenIsayGo for working as my beta reader!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“WHOA! Will you please slow down?” Izuku pleads as he’s pulled at breakneck speed down the hallway.

Mei hadn’t wasted any time. As soon as Izuku had finished eating, she enthusiastically dragged him out of the cafeteria and made a beeline towards her workshop.

Izuku practically trips over his own feet as he ducks and weaves around other students as best as he can.

“SORRY!” Izuku cries as Mei pulls him directly into a student’s elbow. A second later he’s plowed straight into someone’s shoulder, sending their books and papers flying.

“HEY!”

“SORRY!” Izuku yells after them. “MEI, STOP!”

“Stop? Are you kidding?!” Mei cries as she slows her sprint to an aggressive power walk. “This is the best news I’ve had in weeks! Do you have any idea how much I missed having you in my lab? Good, competent minions aren’t easy to come by!”

“Assistant,” Izuku corrects as he wrenches his hand free of her iron grip. “I’ll be your assistant. I said I’d help but give me a chance to settle. It’s only my first day back! I haven't even checked into my own lab yet.”

“There you are!” cries a gruff, exasperated voice. Both of them turn to see Higari Majima, the short but stern head mechanical engineering professor grimly marching forward to meet them.
“Aw, crud,” Mei mutters as her shoulders sag.

“Hatsume, you can’t just disappear in the middle of a project like that!” Majima scolds angrily. “Your interns didn’t know what to do next and gave up. And now your class starts in 15 minutes! What’s the matter with you?”

“Sorry, sorry. I got my babies back in terrible condition. You saw them! But fortunately,” Mei pauses as she gives Izuku an eager pat on the back, “someone was nice enough to volunteer to be my assistant to make up for it!”

“And now you’re about to skip your class?” Majima asks.

“Of course not!” Mei cries. “My class is where I keep my things! I was on the way! It’s fine! I was going to have Midoriya test a particular baby I could use as a supplementary lesson. I’m totally on top of things!”

“Again, your class starts in 15 minutes,” Majima growls. “That’s not a feasible option. You’ve given Midoriya no time to prepare. So, what’ll you do instead?”

Mei nonchalantly waves a hand in the air. “Relax! That was a spontaneous Plan B. I already have my lesson down. Chances are, I’ll have enough material to stick with the original plan.”

Majima doesn’t look convinced. The older man narrows his eyes and looks between the two of them uneasily. “Right. This is an all too familiar scene. I don’t like the look on your face,” he bristles. “Hatsume, let me remind you that you have a job now at a respectable company. I understood that working on Midoryia’s ship would require some collaboration between the two of you, but this doesn’t seem all too different from the relationship you had before. As students in the top of your class, both of you should adhere to a certain level of professionalism. These experiments better not involve anything illegal.”

A wave of panic washes over Izuku as memories from the past two years bubble to the surface.

The year he and Mei spent dating had been a manic rollercoaster of inventing and hustling. He hadn’t realized how bad things had become. Alone, they were enthusiastic nerds at the top of their class; combining them together was like igniting gasoline. With his insatiable curiosity to know absolutely everything and Mei’s bottomless arsenal of ideas, they were an unstoppable two-person army.

Back then, Izuku had been so eager to help and be a doting boyfriend that he had been swept away by Mei and her shameless pursuit of success. All of it happened so quickly. One thing led to another and suddenly he was working double time in his own lab to produce anything that would pay for materials, so she could build more machines.

“O-oh no! No,” Izuku says quickly, face flushing a deep red. “I understand! It’s nothing like before! I’m a temporary assistant for a couple projects.”

“Exactly! Sensei, you have no faith in me!” Mei shouts as she crosses her arms indignantly. “This is a purely professional relationship! And, as you know, I’ll be following protocol for all prototype testing, especially since we’re using Ingenium’s facilities.”

“Huh?” Izuku gawks at her. He’d somewhat distanced himself from the drama in Mei’s life. This must have been a recent development. UA had never restricted her before. “What about testing it on campus?”

“Can’t. I’m kinda banned. Did you see that crater by the track field?”
“Uh, yeah,” Izuku says hesitantly. “What were you-”

“It’s not important! That was merely an outlier! Those days of obsessive, destructive behavior are over, see?” Mei grins as she gives her professor a thumbs up. “From now on, it’ll be completely legal and safe testing! Like you said, we’ve got no reason to stray from the path of the law.”

“Right,” Izuku quickly adds. “And I said I’d help, but Mei, you can’t kidnap me whenever you feel like it. Think about what you want to focus on and narrow it down to a couple machines. Clear out the messages in your phone and email, and we’ll set up an introductory meeting.”

“You got it, champ!”

This seems to have mollified Majima enough, but the glare towards his eccentric protégé doesn’t waver. “Get to class,” he says at last. “I’ll walk with you.”

Izuku breathes a sigh of relief as he’s freed, while Majima walks Mei off to her classroom.

“Oh, Midoriya,” Majima calls after him. “If you’re looking for Toshinori, you just missed him. He isn’t feeling well. He’s taken the rest of the day off.”

Izuku nods and gives him a strained smile. “Okay, thanks.”

He checks his phone and immediately sees an apologetic text from Toshinori. He’d been on his way to the train station but had a dizzy spell and stopped to rest in a garden at a nearby Shinto Shrine. Izuku hurries out of the building as fast as he can. The shrine is within walking distance from the school, just a couple of blocks away, nestled in a grove of trees in the city. It’ll take him 15 minutes if he hurries. Izuku texts Toshinori quickly and tells him to stay put. He’ll meet him there.

This wasn’t entirely out of the ordinary. His mentor hadn’t been in good health since his first day at UA. The time Toshinori now spent at UA was minimal; he was a professor in title alone. For a legendary researcher, this was a soft retirement. He had full permission to teach classes and manage the labs. When he couldn’t meet his scheduled appearances, he’d leave notes for Aizawa to pick up the slack. It was due to his stubbornness alone that Izuku still had the opportunity to study under him.

Growing up, Izuku had always admired the researcher. In his youth, Toshinori’s interest in neglected tropical diseases inspired him to travel to dangerous locations all over the world. Along with his smarts, he had incredible courage and charisma that allowed him to befriend nearly everyone he met around the world. When first starting out, he’d recorded his lessons and adventures in an online blog. Toshinori would beam into the camera with unbeatable enthusiasm, no matter where he was or what he was working on.

By making his research available to the public before it was ever published and setting time aside to make videos explaining his process, Toshinori gained an online fanbase rather quickly. He would work tirelessly to document his discoveries and brief the viewers on the basics of medicine, often receiving a fair share of criticism for oversimplifying science for public consumption. But to a child, or anyone with a hunger for knowledge, the videos were merely a stepping-stone into further research.

Izuku had watched all of them almost religiously. He’d spent many days practicing survival strategies out in the wilderness and burying himself in books, dreaming of the day he could travel and make groundbreaking discoveries all over the world.
Izuku’s unquenchable thirst for learning absolutely everything and his enrollment in accelerated programs led to him applying to colleges when he was barely a teenager. UA was his ultimate dream school. He’d struggled to balance his time and pushed himself for years to make that dream a reality. If only he could have told his younger self that the same man he admired as a child would one day be his mentor.

Meeting Toshinori as his teacher had been like a dream. Looking back, Izuku had been a poor balance of an overly polite fanboy and a blubbering mess when finally meeting him in person, but it hadn’t mattered. The man hadn’t treated him like a child. He had encouraged him to keep at his studies and spent countless sleepless nights going over his notes. He owed Toshinori everything. If Izuku were truly honest, Toshinori had been more of a father to him than anyone he’d ever known.

But the strapping young man Izuku idolized was no more. Naturally, he’d aged. The time Toshinori spent abroad in his adventures caught up to him. When Izuku was in his third year at UA, Toshinori was diagnosed with cancer. The cancer had acted like a wasting disease and eaten away at any semblance of physical identity. His age and the reckless activities he’d done in the field finally caught up with him and made him unrecognizable to the public. Once the disease took over his lymph nodes, it was over. He’d stopped seeking chemo and surgery. All that remained were the embers of the unmistakable fire behind his sunken eyes.

Izuku walks through the garden now, trying his best to keep calm. It’s a warm day with a pleasant breeze that ruffles his hair. If the circumstances were any different, he’d have loved to feel the wind caress his face. For now, the mask remains firmly fixed to his head.

When Izuku finally spots Toshinori, he breaks into a full sprint. The man is sitting upright on a bench near the path leading up to the torii gate. His messenger bag lies at his feet and a walking cane stands propped against his leg.

“Are you alright?” Izuku pants, coming to a slow beside his mentor.

“Yes, I’m fine. I had a moment of weakness at school. It came back a couple minutes ago, but I’m all right.”

“You should have called an ambulance,” Izuku tells him firmly. “You’re not in any condition to muscle your way through your illness.”

“No, that isn’t necessary.” Toshinori casually waves a hand in the air. “I really am feeling better than I was an hour ago. I apologize. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Izuku would press the issue, but he knows his teacher. Arguing over this would be a waste of time. Toshinori would rather not take medical attention for himself if he could help it. Izuku sighs bitterly. “You should have at least called a cab.”

Toshinori sheepishly rubs the back of his head. “Probably.”

Izuku scans his face the best he can. Toshinori looks disproportionately thin and tired as usual. His face is slender and hollow as always, but the sudden weakness his mentor experienced frightens him. Izuku doesn’t want to think the worst, but he can’t help it. Zaba combined with terminal cancer would be a cruel diagnosis.

The lines around Toshinori’s eyes wrinkle in amusement. “It isn’t Zaba, I’m sure,” he says as if reading Izuku’s thoughts. “It’s a natural part of my decline.”

Decline. That’s one way of putting it. It doesn’t make Izuku feel any better. He shifts
uncomfortably on his feet.

“But I’m glad we can meet here,” Toshinori continues. “It’s a nice day. Truthfully, in my condition, being in good company and among nature is the best medication I can receive. And besides, if you wanted to go over your notes now, there’s less chance of us being interrupted.”

Izuku is more than happy to oblige. He takes a seat next to Toshinori and fetches his notebooks from his backpack. It’s mostly quiet, with the sound of traffic in the distance. They have the park mostly to themselves. Under the gentle sunlight and shade from the branches above, it’s easy to get into the right mindset. Izuku takes out his notes and runs through the outline of the experiments he’d like to run during the next couple of months. It’s difficult not to feel excited as his mentor reviews his progress from the beginning.

Toshinori gives him a sincere grin once he’s finished. “Very impressive. You should be proud. There aren’t many who would willingly face danger for the slim chance of a lead. You’re leading an exciting project. The timing of your return couldn’t be more perfect. There’s a conference coming up two months from now. Not to rush you, but if you can put together a presentation on what you’d like to expect from your findings on the island, you might be able to gain support from the community. Perhaps you’ll be able to revisit the island sooner than you’d think.”

Izuku nods. It would be the best-case scenario, but in order to meet it, he’d have to work fast. “I’ll try my best. Even if I was initially discouraged, I’m not giving up.”

“Without the danger and treacherous conditions, it must have been a nice break from all of this. I assume you’ve already seen the blocked stations near the marina? It’s getting worse outside the city. More towns have been evacuated. You haven’t yet returned to the lab, so you may not have heard.”

“ Heard what?” Izuku asks cautiously.

“There was an outbreak at young Ojiro’s hometown. His family was evacuated and placed in an evacuation center. He spent any time he could visiting them while you were away.”

Izuku clenches his teeth. The town evacuations had only started within the past year, but ghost towns were just another effect of the disease.

“The collection of photos in the lobby has grown as well,” Toshinori says quietly. “I never expected to outlive some of my students.”

Izuku fidgets uncomfortably as the words wash over him. He doesn’t know what else to say. He’d had this horrible thought as well, but would never have said it aloud. How could he respond? He couldn’t fix it. He couldn’t stop the cancer or the spread of the virus. There wasn’t anything he could say to make it better. He takes a breath and turns his attention to the gardens.

“I talked with Tenya over lunch,” he says, hoping to change the subject. “He’s putting up a good fight. He mentioned he’s working hard in his negotiations.”

“Yes. I hear Ingenium’s latest project is collaborating with other companies to ship out relief to nations who can’t afford medication or sanitary materials. We’re lucky to have such powerful allies. We might not have the cure,” Toshinori says as he reaches for his cane, “but their compassion does help raise morale. We can’t afford to despair.”

“I know,” Izuku agrees as he tucks his notebook back into his bag. “Did you want to pay the shrine a visit?”
Toshinori shakes his head. “I haven’t been well enough to pray in months. Visiting the garden is enough.”

“I can visit in your stead.”

Toshinori raises his eyebrows at first before giving him a gentle smile. “Staving off a pandemic would be a heavy burden for the kami, but I suspect that’s the majority of the prayers they receive. I won’t ask you to pass along prayers on my behalf, but I’ll encourage it if you have the time.”

Toshinori takes a deep breath and rises to his feet. Izuku watches his every movement, ready to catch him if he so much as wobbles. Under this new light, Izuku squints at a growing bruise on the side of Toshinori’s face.

“Hang on. Did you fall?”

“Er…” At least his mentor has the decency to look sheepish. “It wasn’t bad! The corner of my desk caught my fall.”

Alright, that’s it.

Izuku doesn’t wait for the rest of his excuse, immediately opening an app on his phone to order a cab. Despite his protests, Izuku stubbornly stays by Toshinori’s side until it arrives. They even get into a brief argument when Izuku offers to join him for the ride home.

“I can make it,” Toshinori insists. “If it happens again, I’ll call an ambulance. You have my word.”

Although Izuku finds it hard to believe him, he reluctantly lets him go. Before closing the door behind him, Toshinori speaks up again.

“Make the most of your time in the lab, but don’t burn out. You aren’t alone. We’re all here if you need us.”

Even with Toshinori’s parting words, he feels empty and almost defeated. Izuku had long ago come to terms with the fact that his mentor would never see him at the height of his career. If he’s honest, Izuku doubts Toshinori has more than a year left.

The Zaba pandemic couldn’t have risen at a worse time. It wasn’t fair. The man was holding on by a thread. Toshinori’s life’s work in medicine would be erased and swallowed up by a pandemic he’d never had the chance to understand. If only he could see something before he left—anything that would hint as a ray of hope.

Izuku turns around and makes his way to the shrine. There’s a lot to think about on the path. He could pray for any of the thousands of problems buzzing around his head: for the disease, for the monster hunting Katsuki’s clan, for Katsuki to keep his position as alpha, for Emiko’s missing mother. He has to go back somehow. But outside of the island, everything depended on finding the cure.

Once he reaches the top of the hill, he performs the ritual. He bows twice, claps twice, and drops a coin at the altar before clapping his hands together in prayer. He closes his eyes and stills his heart. Toshinori doesn’t need to see the disease eradicated and humanity’s recovery, but Izuku wishes he could at least leave this world with hope.

Please grant our lab success in defeating Zaba. And please, at the very least, let Toshinori sensei see the day we make that discovery.

It doesn’t feel right to ask the Kami for anything more. He bows and turns back to school.
Izuku punches in the code for the lab. After a moment the machine chimes cheerily and the door unlocks with a click.

A checklist hangs overhead as a reminder to his team of the strict lab’s strict protocol. Special measures were taken to ensure all samples or strains of Zaba were completely contained in the lab. Nothing was brought in, and nothing made it out. Izuku runs through it almost entirely on autopilot. Once again, he steps into the full body suit, complete with a helmet. The room is heavily monitored with specialized ventilation to keep the disease contained.

It had been eight years now. The facility had almost become a second home. At the time, Izuku had been the youngest student to be accepted into UA and was anxious to prove himself at the school of his dreams. With Toshinori’s recommendation, he became a member of Aizawa’s prestigious lab group. At first, his team had originally joked that they “adopted” him. But as he thrived in the lab, they joked less and less.

Their early lab work centered on studying prominent neglected tropical diseases. Back then, the Zaba virus was merely an isolated blip in the radar; an anomaly put on the World Health Organization’s watch list. But when the deadly disease began to spread to other countries, panic grew, and Izuku dedicated his career to studying it and finding the cure.

His team worked in shifts, but ever since the Zaba disease reared its head, they’ve been working intensely against the clock. It was taxing and exhausting work. The past few years had given him the chance to grow both mentally and physically. Now he was about the same age as the rest of his colleagues. And since he dedicated a good amount of his time to the gym, no one would guess Izuku had been a precocious prodigy just by looking at him.

While Toshinori had recommended him for the lab, Aizawa Shouta was the lead scientist. The scruffy, older man would step in between lectures to keep tabs on their experiments and the lab equipment, as well as answering any questions they had.

Izuku peeks through the window, but Aizawa isn’t anywhere to be found. Izuku can’t think of any classes his professor has and decides he must be on break. It wasn’t like his professor to skip out on work. Hell, Izuku hasn’t seen Aizawa be late for any event once.

As the senior members of the lab, Nejire, Tamaki, and Mirio lead most of the projects, while Aizawa oversees them. They had been there when he first started. Ojiro, Tokoyami, and Mineta had joined within the last two years and were closer to Izuku’s age. They were an odd assortment of different personalities, but it made working together interesting.

A couple of them lift their heads up from their work and Izuku gives a friendly wave as he moves to his desk. While Aizawa is nowhere to be seen, the rest of the team is fully present. He gets about halfway to his desk when he turns to see his lab partners rapidly finishing up their work and running over to meet him.

“So, how was it?” Tamaki asks.

“What did you see?” Nejire exclaims, clasping her hands together in excitement.

“Was anyone on the island?” Tokoyami questions.

“Were there any traces of civilization?” Ojiro asks, before he’s pushed aside by Mineta.

“Were there any babes?” Mineta demands.
“Alright, give him some room to breathe, guys!” Mirio laughs. “But seriously,” he says as he props himself against Izuku’s desk with both of his arms. “Tell us everything.”

He hadn’t expected to jump right into work anyway. Izuku grins and retells his story, mostly a reiteration of what he’d told his friends at lunch. Just as before, he stresses the danger of the island and how it was not to be trifled with.

“Can’t say it’s much safer here though, right?” Nejire asks when he’s finished.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Izuku agrees. “Any news from your end?”

“Still slowly mapping out the virus,” Tamaki says with a shrug. “Same old. There is some good news. Cutting ourselves off from air and sea travel might finally be paying off. We’ve been keeping an eye out on Zaba reports from labs around the country. For the past couple of months, there hasn’t been another major mutation.”

“It could summon its dark energy and start again, but for now, we have an advantage,” Tokoyami agrees.

“Tamaki,” Nejire pouts as she pokes his shoulder. “Why didn’t you mention your new project?”

“Yeah, tell him what you told us,” Mirio says encouragingly.

“O-oh that,” Tamaki mutters as he shrinks away. “No, I’ve barely even started.Bringing it up now is stupid.”

“Nonsense!” Nejire cries as she pushes him forward.

“Go on!” Mirio says as he pats his back eagerly.

“Well, y’know. I-it’s still early,” Tamaki mutters as he glances at the floor. “And I’ve only just gotten started. One of the newer train mutations seems to specifically target newborns. B-but I’ve been looking into collaborating with a stem cell lab. If it works, we could potentially use it to slow the virus’s progress in neonates and young children born with the disease. It’s not the cure, but it’s something.”

“Hey,” Ojiro says with a dry laugh. “If it’s progress, it’s progress.”

Izuku glances at Ojiro worriedly. Even with the protective suit and mask, Izuku can tell his team mate is tired. Dark bags have settled under his eyes.

“Ojiro,” Izuku murmurs. “I heard about your hometown from Toshinori sensei. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s alright,” Ojiro says with a shrug. “I mean, it’s not, but to make a difference, being here is the best place I can be. So we’ve just got to make it count.”

“Right.”

“Hey, Midorya,” Mineta chimes in. “Now that you’re back, would you mind looking over some data I collected from a recent sample?”

“Oh, sure!”

Mineta untucks his laptop from under his arm and opens it on the desk. He minimizes a program, but instead of data for the disease, a window for a video appears underneath. Displayed in mid frame is a pretty woman with perfectly styled platinum blonde hair and purple eyes smiling coyly.
at the camera.

Mirio is the first to pounce. He yanks the laptop and spins it around to show the rest of the team.
“AHA! What’s this, you slacker?”

“Hey, watch it!” Mineta shrieks.

Ojiro arches his neck and frowns at the open video on his partner’s laptop. “That doesn’t look like research,” he says accusingly.

“Yeah, speaking of making it count…” Tamaki grumbles.

“Hey, this is absolutely research!” Mineta cries as he snatches back the laptop. “Don’t you know who this is? It’s Yu-chan! She’s a total babe! An angel! Her body’s 100% real! And her selfies? Very generous.”

“Oh, that internet personality,” Izuku says as he remembers the woman on the billboard the day before. “I’ve seen her downtown. She’s the one advertising the customizable cartridges.”

“That’s her!”

“Takeyama Yu,” Tokoyami says as he nods his head. “A bubbly blonde on the surface with a dark side, desperate to hide away. She wears a mask to conceal the true nature beneath.”

“Takeyama?” Ojiro balks. “As in the Takeyama family that owns Takeyama Corp.?”

“Those scumbags,” Tamaki mutters darkly. “They’d never outright say it, but a dependent populace on their trademarked drug is their dream. There’s no profit in a complete cure. If they can find a way to milk the entire population of their money for treatment, they’ll do it.”

Izuku frowns. Out of all the companies Tensei and Tenya had negotiated with, Takeyama Corp. was the most stubborn. They were a notorious giant in the pharmaceutical industry, known for their countless monopolies. Medical companies were either with Takeyama Corp. or about to be bought by them.

“Oh, Yu-chan!” Nejire exclaims as she shuffles over to the desk. “I love her! She’s a UA alumni, you know!”

“See? So this is technically work related!” Mineta insists.

“It’s really not,” Ojiro groans. “So, you’re slacking off and wasting time ogling the enemy?

“She’s on our side! Her father’s staunchly against giving away free medicine for the cure and disowned her for speaking against it. And now she’s showing support for our lab!” Nejire says defensively. “Leave her alone! She’s cute and she’s also contributing to our cause! Weekly videos are just how she stays afloat.”

“Afloat,” Ojiro deadpans as Yu cackles and swings the camera around for a tour of her spotless, luxury apartment. The backyard is decorated with roman columns and a sparkling outdoor pool. “That’s not the word that comes to mind.”

“Cute, right?” Mineta says smugly.

“Super cute!” Nejire agrees with a thumbs up.

Tamaki frowns. “You say that for every girl.”
“All girls are cute, Tamaki! Hey, Mirio,” Nejire cries suddenly. “You’re with me! Yu’s cute, right?”

“Nah, that personality’s not for me,” Mirio says with a shrug. “Vain and insincere isn’t really my type.”

“Hey, things could turn around because of her!” Mineta says hotly. “She’s building up the pressure on her old man and undermining the company’s image. More people support her crusade than his corporate bullshit. Maybe we can finally get them to invest in our efforts. I mean, hell. We’ve got the government backing it. Who could say no to this?”

He presses play and Yu’s haughty voice bursts from the speakers. “It’s thanks to all my fans that I’m able to live my life! But remember, this isn’t just about me. Have a talk with someone you know. Ask what you can do to contain the virus! And don’t forget, 40% of your donations go directly to helping Zaba researchers!”

“Sorry, I’ve been staring at screens all day,” Ojiro mutters. “I must be reading the numbers wrong. How many followers does she have?”

“40 million and growing strong!” Mineta says proudly.

“Th-that’s the size of a country!” Ojiro sputters. “You realize that, right? Do you guys see how insane that is?”

Izuku rubs the back of his neck. “Ah, well... for an internet celebrity, that’s not really out of the ordinary.”

“Are you serious?”

“Ojiro, you don’t spend a lot of time on the internet, do you?” Nejire sighs.

“With the fate of humanity hanging by a thread, you shouldn’t be goofing off on the internet to begin with,” growls a low voice from behind the group. Izuku cringes, along with the rest of his team, before slowly turning to face the source of the comment—their bedraggled head scientist.

Aizawa’s face is twisted in a malicious grimace. He gives them a piercing glare with bloodshot eyes. “Does our survival mean that little to you? ALL OF YOU. Get back to work.”

The group gives a chorus of apologies before scrambling away from the desk and scuttling back to their stations.

“Hey,” Aizawa says as he nods in Izuku’s direction. “I heard you were meeting Toshinori. Have you had a chance to talk with him?”

“Yeah, we finally sat down outside of school. He mentioned a conference is coming up. I’m starting my experiments today, but I’m hoping to have something ready in the next few weeks.”

Aizawa gives a low hum. “They’ve been quiet recently, but Shiketsu is onto something big. Most likely they’ll unveil their findings at the conference this month. Due to the gravity of the situation, they’ve encouraged a sort of open science environment, meaning we shouldn’t be hiding our findings. Competition in labs is part of the nature of our work. Whoever does manage to crack the virus goes down in history. Our team will be presenting an Abstract based on Mirio’s thesis. Since you qualify as one of the authors, I strongly suggest you attend.”

“Yeah, I’ll be there. I’m looking forward to it.”
Aizawa dismisses him and Izuku returns to his desk. It’s right back to the old routine after that. Izuku pages through his notebook and opens the program on his computer. He busies himself with the months’ worth of data he’s collected, but focuses on the exact numbers needed to grow the Deku plants.

He sorts the containers of soil he’s collected and separates some for analysis. He also arranges the photos he’s taken of the plants and pins them to a bulletin board. He’s still going over his plan when Mirio knocks on the desk and flashes him a smile.

“Need a hand?”

Out of everyone in the lab, Mirio had easily become his closest friend. He’d nearly taken the role of a big brother and was someone Izuku could depend on for sincere opinions and advice. His warm and fun-loving personality was a blessing, both in and outside the lab.

“Sure! Want to help me with the greenhouse?” Izuku asks. “I don’t have much, but I’m going to attempt to grow the Deku plants in the island soil first.”

“Deku? Is that really its name?”

Izuku shrugs. “Well, dekiru is more accurate. This Deku means it’s trying it’s best against impossible odds.”

“Aah, I guess I can see that.”

“A-anyway,” Izuku says as he scratches the back of his neck bashfully. “You might remember that I’ve tried growing plants in the past from the original seeds we had in our collection. Unfortunately, they wouldn’t take root. They don’t have a problem growing on the island, so I’m hoping that the new generations I farmed while I was there are a bit hardier. I’ve been analyzing the weather since I landed, so this time we’ll have a good idea of the sort of climate they can grow in. Here’s some of the activity I observed,” Izuku explains as he shows Mirio the model on his computer. “We’ll have to mimic those conditions exactly.”

With Mirio’s assistance, Izuku unpacks the seeds, plants a couple in soil from the island, and the remainder in soil from the mainland. He sets the temperature on the thermostat and adjusts the humidity.

“And that’s it?” Mirio asks.

“Over the next couple weeks, we’ll be watching them closely. Once they grow and we have enough, I can start testing infected animal models on their response. If this works, it could change everything.”

Mirio tilts his head at the loamy soil. “So, you really think this is the answer?”

“The enzymes from the original seeds were more than enough to convince me of their potential. If the plants can grow in our soil, we can farm them! With Ingenium’s partnership, we can easily mass produce and distribute the medicine to anyone who needs it.”

“Well, I hope you’re onto something. Finding the cure is great and all, don’t get me wrong, but if you can somehow upstage Shiketsu in a month, that’s a double win as far as I’m concerned.”

They work until about dinnertime, at which point Izuku and Mirio make their way out of the lab. His phone has been filled with text messages.
One is from Tenya and the rest are from Mei. Tenya’s message is short and straight to the point. He has something to show Izuku when he has time tomorrow afternoon. They make plans to meet in UA’s library, then the interaction is over.

Mei’s messages are a mess. She goes back and forth between wanting to show off something new or wanting Izuku to test something at Inegnium later that week. It looks like she had rapid fired her thoughts all at once. He scrolls through them to the most recent once.

-IVE FINALLY DECIDED. COME MEET ME IN MY STUDIO, TONIGHT!

He replies with a simple agreement.

-Sure, sounds good.

And then immediately after it comes another message in all bolded letters.

-WONDERFUL!!!!!!!!!!!! MY BABIES ARE SO EXCITED!!!!!!!!!!!!

“Wow, that’s a lot of exclamation points!” Mirio says from behind Izuku’s shoulder. “Sorry, didn’t mean to pry. It’s pretty obvious someone wants your attention. Is that Hatsume?”

“Yeah, I’m meeting up with her after this.”

Mirio raises his eyebrows. “You’re done developing equipment for the island, right?”

“Well, for now. I sort of banged up the stuff I borrowed, so I’m making up for it.”

“Making up for what?” Mirio scowls. “You don’t owe her anything.”

“I know, but I want to do this anyway. Honest,” Izuku insists. “It’ll be fine,” he adds with the most convincing smile he can muster.

“Okay,” Mirio says cautiously. “But if she starts overstepping her boundaries, get out of there.”

Overstepping or not, Izuku knows from now on he’ll have to deal with whatever chaos Mei dishes out. Still, despite everything, he could already feel his curiosity gravitating to the pull of whatever she had in store for him. If he ever hopes to return to the island and survive Katsuki’s clan, he’ll need all the help Mei could possibly give.

“I’ll be careful,” Izuku promises as he gives him a wave goodbye.

“Make good choices!”

***

Izuku makes his way to the studios for graduate students. Mei was one of the few in UA to have one all to herself. It was either that or Majima would have to put up with her inventions cluttering his office. The choice was a no brainer.

Izuku barely raps his knuckles on the door when Mei rips it open.

“WELCOME!” she exclaims happily. “Right on time, as usual!”

“Y-yeah. I don’t have much of a reason to be late.”

“Well, regardless!” she says, eagerly rubbing her hands together. “I’ve got so many things for my
dutiful assistant to help with!”

Izuku smiles weakly. “You act like you don’t have anyone working under you.”

Mei waves a hand dismissively. “I have Ingenium’s employees and the undergrads, sure, but they don’t have the same spark!”

Izuku remembers Majima’s warning from earlier and clears his throat. “This isn’t going to be like before, all right? There are going to be some rules. This is temporary. All the testing stays at the lab, I’m not on call, and nothing goes with me back to my dorm.”

“Yes, of course. Well, come on in!”

Izuku stretches to peek beyond the doorframe at a pile of assorted metal machinery precariously stacked nearly to the top of the ceiling. Mei dances past, humming as she begins sorting through a couple machines she’s separated from the rest. One wrong move could send the tower toppling down. He makes a mental note not to touch anything.

“So, what do you think of my collection of old babies? Do you recognize some of them?”

“Yeah, a couple,” Izuku admits.

When he steps inside, Izuku catches a whiff of something rotten. He stifles a gag and notices a couple of stuffed trash bags, a sleeping bag, a pillow, and some leftover take-out containers. A couple of dirty dishes have been stacked in the corner, caked with a hardened residue from meals long ago. Mei was a bit of a slob, sure, but she had never before allowed her lab to be this disorganized.

When he remembers Majima’s odd message from the day before, suddenly it clicks. “Hang on, do you have a home? Are you actually living here?”

“Between the lab and Ingenium Inc., there’s no need to be anywhere else!”

“What about the dorms?” Izuku asks. “What about an apartment? What do you do at night?”

“Work mostly! There’s a sleeping bag under the desk for when I crash,” she says. “It works for Aizawa sensei, right?”

“Yeah, for naps! It’s not like he lives at school.”

“It’s fine! It doesn’t bother me! I have a deal with the janitorial staff and security,” she says with a nod. “We have a rotating schedule of ordering take out. Nice guys, all around.”

“Mei, you’re homeless.”

Mei scowls and pulls the goggles over her eyes. “I’m not doing it just ‘cause I’m quirky and cute, all right? I had my sights set on this one place, but the neighborhood got infected and the complex was shut down. Statistically, this is my best bet. Chances of that happening somewhere as regulated as UA or Ingenium are incredibly low.”

“I guess that’s true…”

Amid the mess of wirings and half put together machines, he eyes a familiar heating device and an advanced version of futuristic roller blades. A prosthetic leg and pair of arms poke out eerily from the pile. He examines every angle and determines if he’s careful, he won’t cause an avalanche.
Cautiously, he pulls at the metallic limbs and reveals a dismembered mechanical arm that stops right at the elbow.

“These are less complete than I remember,” he mutters as he inspects the stray wires at the end. He pinches at the severed copper wires. They look as though they have been cleanly sliced by a blade.

“It’s a mess, right?” Mei says as she puts her hands on her hips. “It’s horrible, you know? I’ve been forced to take apart my precious babies to make something new! I thought about what you said, and I’m taking inventory on what I have. There used to be more, but of course you’ve seen my lab at my prime! Ever since the last strain broke out, our funding’s been slashed!”

“That must be tough,” Izuku says as he tests the flexibility of the mechanical wrist.

“It is!” Mei cries as she paces back and forth in front of the machines. “I can focus on technology for assisting advancements in medicine, but that gets stale! What about weapons? What about space travel? None of it’s getting the attention it needs! There’s not much else in this pile that would get a passing glance now that everyone’s hyper focused on Zaba! That’s all anyone talks about!”

“Er, yeah,” Izuku says awkwardly. “Saving humanity is kind of important.”

“Well, there’s nothing wrong with that of course! But you get what I mean. It’s limiting my creative flow! You guys better fix it soon.”

If only it were that simple. Izuku feels his irritation rising but holds his tongue. He decides to get Mei back on track instead. “So, the pile?”

“Right, yes! So! Besides all this,” Mei says as she pulls out a tablet from the pile. “I’ve also been working to improve the boosters as well as the anti-gravity equipment you had before. To do it, I’ll have to recycle. The old stuff is inspiring me to take on the new! I should have you zipping around, fast as a bullet in no time!”

“You’re awfully cheery,” Izuku notes suspiciously.

“What’s there to be upset about?”

“Is this a trick question? I warned you about the state the ship is in. It’ll be here tomorrow and it’s worse off than the gear, I promise.”

“Oh, I’m over it.”

Izuku raises an eyebrow. “Really?”

“Sure, sure. Having a beat-up ship is better than you not coming back at all. Here, put this on,” she says as she shoves a helmet into his chest. “Looking back, I’m glad you’ve returned. All the main ports have shut down, but a few reports have been coming in of small, private submarines going missing.”

“Since when?”

“Since... I dunno. A couple months ago? It’s not big news, so you won’t see it as a major headline, but the tech industry is keeping an eye out. Anyway, I’ll just be happy to reunite with the first baby to EVER make it out of the storm! That’s a win! I wonder if I can get an interview sometime? In these times, I’ll need all the promotion I can get!”
A wave of panic hits Izuku. “Promotion? From who?”

“Everyone!”

“You don’t think they’ll want to investigate the island, do you?

“Oh, probably! Before you and me, no one’s been able to get in and out again. They’ll need more proof, I’m sure. After the repairs, or even a new model, all I’ll need is a few more traceable test runs to prove I was able to beat the storm.”

“DON’T!” Izuku cries suddenly. “I-I mean, don’t get your hopes up,” he explains as Mei blinks at him. “The ship is still pretty beat up.”

“It’s nothing I can’t handle, I’m sure! Now let’s get to work! We’ve got a full pile to work through!”

“THE WHOLE THING?”

“I was really struggling, so I determined it would be best if we narrow it down together!”

Izuku’s shoulders sag. Thoroughly working through the pile would take weeks—but he had made a promise. If there was even a chance something in this room could aide in his future adventures on the island, he’d have to take it.

“Alright,” he sighs as he returns the arm to where it was. “We can start by sorting them based on what they do and prioritizing them from there.”

Izuku refuses to try on anything until they have a plan. There was nothing more draining than Mei’s unfocused enthusiasm with her babies. With no real preference to guide them, Izuku decides to start at the top and have Mei categorize each machine by what it did and its priority to test.

In the span of a couple hours, Izuku is poked, prodded, shocked, and nearly zapped by a gun that Mei swears was nonfunctional. As the day ends, Izuku notices individual pieces of technical armor. So far, he’s pulled out arm bracers, shin guards, and a plated torso that appear to be part of a set. Izuku digs some more to find a helmet made of the same metal with the same green accents. Once assembled, they would look like a futuristic body suit of armor.

“What are these?” he asks.

“Oh, that? It’s part of a project for space travel. It’s built from a material that’s able to withstand extreme temperatures. And when I say extreme, I mean it! I’m talking the glaciers of Mars and the storms of Venus! With these, it won’t matter to explorers if it’s windy or hot or cold!” Mei casts a brief, forlorn glance in the direction of the armor. “It’s too bad though. Like I said, no one’s super interested in space. These days it’s all about medical or transport-based commissions. I’d say that’s a low priority.”

He remembers Todoroki’s icy stare and the glacier he formed in seconds by using just one of his quirks. He turns over the leg bracer thoughtfully. “Is it really not worth it?”

“They’re a little dangerous,” Mei explains. “They’re a similar model to the boosters you borrowed, but there’s some major kickback I didn’t have the chance to reduce. For fun, I’ve been working on a mode that will allow the pieces to communicate with the user. This way you can summon the armor from far away distances. It can fall on and off and reassemble itself at the push of a button.”

“Oh!” Izuku cries excitedly. “Like Positive’s hero suit!”
It was from a super hero comic series he’d read years ago, Positive, Hero of Justice. It was the story of an eccentric billionaire who secretly developed technology in his spare time to fight aberrant monsters. He lived balancing his life of business between his secret identity under the guise of the armored hero, Positive. With the series still going strong, Izuku considered himself lucky enough to own some of the original issues.

“Yes! Exactly like Positive!” Mei says excitedly. “It was first mentioned in Issue 7 and I had to see if I could pull it off!”

“Well, actually it was first mentioned in Issue 3 and it didn’t appear until Issue 7,” Izuku mumbles. “But close!”

“Isn’t this neat?” Mei gushes. “Isn’t it endlessly exciting to know we’re at the point where we can start breathing life into fictitious technology? I’m so glad I’m alive in this era!”

Izuku grins. “Same here. Creating technology for super heroes is the dream job, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, well,” Mei’s smile fades slightly. “It’s just a dream, and with these materials in high demand, this baby will likely be scrapped for something else here. There’s no point in asking you to test it.”

Izuku just can’t allow her to put the armor aside. If it was functional, and could withstand the extreme temperatures Mei described, he’d need its protection.

“Why not?”

There’s a moment of silence before Mei whips around and is suddenly in his face. “WHY, INDEED? What a fantastic suggestion! That’s the sort of attitude I’ve been missing!”

“S-so, that’s okay?” Izuku stammers as he awkwardly steps back from her. “I can try them?”

“Of COURSE!” Mei cries. “I mean, I’d have to complete the set and work out the kinks, but why would I ever say no? Do you think you’d get some use out of them on the island? Is the weather on the island just as treacherous as the storm outside?”

Izuku hesitates. He’s been trying not to think about returning to the island with Todoroki as the new alpha, but as much as he believed in Katsuki skills in battle, he can’t rule out that possibility. “Yeah, sort of,” he mutters. “I just want to be prepared for the worst.”

“Well, whatever you’re facing and wherever you’re going, I guarantee this’ll protect you! All of my equipment has been carefully constructed to protect its soft, squishy human center. After all, you’re looking at the engineer who’ll build the equipment to get humans to Mars and beyond!”

***

Izuku stumbles back to his dorm late that night feeling exhausted. It takes a good amount of willpower not to drop everything as soon as he steps foot inside. He flicks on the light and settles his things on the floor. The light reveals a tidy, two-bedroom dormitory with a living room and small kitchen. Thanks to his high grades and scholarships, he has the place to himself.

While he locks the door and removes his shoes, a small robot rolls up to greet him. It shovels away the shoes and dutifully places them next to his other pairs. The machine’s round, flat design resembles a basic vacuum robot, but the circuitry inside allows it to act as a personal assistant—one that was stringent on deadlines and planning. The robot patiently waits as Izuku considers his order.
“Set bedtime for 11pm.”

The machine beeps in response, then scoots away. He’s given himself two hours. That was plenty of time.

The little assistant is just one of the many machines that inhabit his space. A strange host of gadgets sit around the kitchen counter, all of them invented by Mei for an easier cooking experience. Some of his favorites are the machines capable of multiple functions. He can’t ever see himself doing without the microwave that heats and cools food or the blender that chops and cooks food at the same time.

The dorm hasn’t changed much since they broke up. It’s been over a year but motivating himself to throw any of them out is difficult. A couple machines he’d even made himself under her discerning eye. Ridding himself of them would feel like a betrayal of sorts. It’s difficult to toss anything that’s been called a ‘baby’.

To compromise, he’d patiently waited for them to malfunction and stop working on their own before replacing them. He’d already devoted a small cardboard box at the foot of his computer desk to her broken down inventions. It had become a graveyard for them.

Mei never liked to have her things remain broken for long. When her lab was running at its highest capacity, she would be flittering around, checking on each of her creations. Everything had to be in tiptop shape and running at full capacity.

Izuku has absolute faith that she will lose her mind when the brutalized ship arrives on campus. He tries not to think about it. Just returning alive from the storm would be enough to attract attention. Maybe the media would be too focused on the Zaba pandemic to notice. Hopefully by some divine miracle, he can somehow convince Mei to be low key with the success of his trip.

But if he really wanted to discourage any future expeditions to the island, he could destroy the ship before it was delivered to the lab. If the damage couldn’t be studied, it would be risky to build newer models from scratch for another adventure. If he went through with it, he’d just have to convince Mei to drop any projects pertaining to the island.

Maybe then, Katsuki’s clan would be safe. However, if he wanted any chance of surviving the journey and out running the monster in the water, they’d need all the data they could get. There was nothing he could do about it now. He’d just have to wait for Mei’s assessment.

He digs through his things and carefully removes a wrinkled sheet of paper he’d stored away when leaving the island. It reveals a painted explosion. Izuku holds it, eyes admiring the line of action and burst of color Katsuki had painted along the edges. The energy in the orange and yellow strokes matches the explosions the naga had set off perfectly.

Izuku takes some tape and gently applies it to the back of the paper. He goes to his bedroom and hangs up the artwork on a blank section of the wall near his bedside. He stands back to admire the picture and awkwardly scratches the hair at the base of his neck. The quality of the paper wasn’t the best and it had gained a few wrinkles from being exposed to wind and traveling in his bag. It might look a bit shoddy, but one day he’d like to have it framed. For now, he’s just glad to have something of Katsuki’s to keep for himself.

He sits down at his computer desk in the bedroom and absentmindedly flexes a hand grip while his computer boots up. Before the trip to the island, he’d read over every weather report he could find. He’d studied the currents and winds and presented Mei with the data needed to test the resilience of her technology in the waters. Almost all meteorologists and historians agreed that the storm around
the island had churned for centuries due to some unknown source of power. It was one of the great mysteries on the planet. And, like any unsolved mystery, plenty of stories accumulated over time.

Back then he had mostly ignored the fantastic tales around the island, seeing them as irrelevant to the mission. Throughout history, there were always whisperings of civilization in the center of the storm and how the natives trapped themselves in their isolation. Any serious academic study on the peoples’ existence would be enough to get laughed out of any serious institution. You may as well have tried to prove the existence of Atlantis. The legends of the civilization within were more of a cautionary tale of hubris and isolationism. Experts agreed that any mention of the civilization was allegorical and purely fictitious in nature.

But knowing what he did now, Izuku might be better off searching for clues in the island’s history. He opens his browser and researches legends of mermaids and naga. It seemed that nearly every culture had some story of fish folk. Tales and art of them were scattered across nations around the world. Naga, however, were less common. But knowing that the naga dwelled on the island protected by a fierce guardian, this only made sense.

Before his trip, Izuku dismissed the ancient artwork featuring endless fantastical amalgamations of fantasy that manifested from man’s primal fears of the unknown. But now, after what he’d seen, who was to say what was true and what wasn’t? The medieval monsters and their endless combinations of fishlike beings with lion faces, or the faces of humans, or the twisted faces of pigs, dogs, chickens, cows and sheep were plentiful. All of them were commonly depicted as terrorizing sailors and sinking ships.

Other common hits contained the usual tales of Hans Christian Andersen’s little mermaid, tales of fishermen who reeled in man-headed fish that brought about calamity, and stories of humans devouring mermaid’s flesh to grant themselves immortality. There were plenty of legends of sea monsters as well, but nothing quite matched with the lore of the island.

Among the legends were a fair share of modern hoaxes and false sightings. The number of clickbait videos for snake people and merfolk were bottomless. People were desperate to believe in the supernatural.

He finds artwork in a similar style to that which he’d seen in the temples. Many pieces come close, but nothing quite matches.

What can I do to narrow the results?

Katsuki had said merpeople worshiped the moon but slimming his results to the moon and the merpeople brings mostly disappointment. His next finds are mostly new age fantasy artwork for tarot cards or renaissance fairs. He narrows the search further to archaeological findings, and instead finds old metal coins and amulets decorated with variations of snakes and water. These were commonly featured in art and history museums. Coins like these had been once commonly traded in ports across the sea for good luck in stormy weather by sailors. The coins were widespread and without a clear origin. Most people attributed them to sailor culture. But what if it was something more? What if the symbols had originated from the island within the storm? What if its people had once opened its ports and traded with outsiders?

What strikes him now is a recurring motif depicted on the older coins and amulets of a serpent coiling around the three phases of the moon. It’s different from the moon serpent he’d seen carved on the foot of the guardian’s altar back on the island, but it’s too similar to be unrelated. The images had been copied and traded back and forth on little amulets around the world, but none of the variations he finds come close to the detailed, carved artwork of the island, which featured the phases of the moon on each of the serpent’s scales and drew attention to the grace of his imposing
body curling in the crashing waves.

Along with the waves, he discovers a large number of the early stamps featured fiery embellishments. The flames twist in plumes as borders along each piece. They were absent in more recent pieces. Perhaps ancient artisans didn’t see the point of including fire on a talisman meant to protect human sailors from the rain and waves.

But the original inclusion has to be important. Based on what he’s discovered, it was a fair assumption to believe the older the piece, the more likely it was to be an original work from the people in the storm. After all, fire had to be significant to the merpeople’s culture in at least some way. For cold-blooded creatures, it only made sense that they would be sensitive to temperatures. At the very least, Katsuki seemed to appreciate the warmth of any campfire Izuku built. He had also summoned the flames at the altar with the alien language that fell from his lips.

What would it mean then, for one of them to have a fire quirk? And what did it mean to have an ice quirk that could harm a cold-blooded creature? Shouto had both hot and cold. Izuku ponders this and frantically picks up a notebook to scribble down his thoughts. He’d need further investigating.

He then opens the UA’s library catalogue to look up a couple of books on mythology and art history of island regions close to the storm. He was already meeting Tenya at the library tomorrow afternoon, so he might as well pick them up then. He clicks and adds them to his cart to pick up the next day.

Izuku signs off and diverts his attention to his bag. Mysteries and speculation were all well and good, but he had real physical proof after visiting the island and meeting one of the natives. He removes a small box and opens it to reveal the two vials of venom. The pure venom vial glitters in the light. Izuku quietly marvels at the off-color amber liquid inside. He could do some minor experiments with it in the safety of his private lab in the second bedroom of the dorm, but nothing beyond that. He’d need to be careful. He could test how the venom behaves on samples of human and animal cells. He’d have to pick a couple to start, but which?

As he turns the vial thoughtfully in his hand, he hears jingling outside his door. He dismisses it as a neighbor stumbling home from a bar, but when the key grinds into the lock his stomach lurches. Who the hell was opening the door? Tenya and Mirio had spare keys if they were house sitting or needed to get something, but they would have asked for his permission long before barging in.

The first lock in his front door unlocks with a click. Izuku soundlessly places the venom back in the container and rushes to the door. He flicks off the lights and waits at the other side of the wall. The door swings open and he waits until the intruder has taken a couple steps past the foyer before he slams into the intruder and pins them to the wall.

“OW! HEY!” shrieks a familiar female voice.

“Mei?” Izuku cries in disbelief. “What’re you doing here?”

“Jeeze, you scared me!”

“ME?” Izuku shrieks. “You’re the one who broke into my dorm!”

“There’s breaking in and then there’s letting yourself in!”

“YOU DON’T LIVE HERE!” Izuku snaps. “This is absolutely a break in! Why are you even here?”
“Hey, so you know that baby we made for spelunking?”

A memory of a levitating orb flashes in Izuku’s mind. The machine had advanced AI and could assist in exploring areas that could induce sensory deprivation. If he remembered correctly, it was sitting at the top of his cabinet in the mini lab.

“Yes…” Izuku says carefully.

“I need it. I’m going to use its internal wiring as a reference.”

Izuku sighs heavily before letting go and turning on the light switch. Mei looks just as messy as before. She must have come straight from the lab. She hadn’t even bothered to change out of the same tank top, torn jeans, and gloves.

“You could have done anything other than this! Texting? Asking me in person? Knocking on the door? Have you been going in and out of my apartment this whole time?”

“Well, I lost the keys until recently, so not really. If you know where it is just let me-”

“No, I’ll get it,” Izuku says as he snatches the key ring from her hands and twists the spare from the key ring. He tucks it into his pocket before giving it back to her.

“Don’t do this again,” he says firmly.

“Alright, sorry,” Mei mumbles as her eyes fall to the floor. When she spots the machines in the box by the counter her demeanor brightens instantly. “Oh, did they stop working? If you want, I can fix up the machines in the kitchen so-”

“Nope! I can figure it out myself,” Izuku says as he shoves the requested machine in her arms and pushes against her shoulders, leading her out the door. “If you’ve already cleared out your voicemail, your texts, and email, use them if you need me. GOODNIGHT!” he yells and slams the door.

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Izuku has another dream of Katsuki. It isn’t nearly as coherent as the one before, but he wakes up strewn in his sheets with the reminiscent tingle of claws gently cupping under his chin, and the nickname Katsuki had for him ringing in his memories. A chill runs down Izuku’s spine, and he runs his fingers gently along his neck and shoulders in little circles as he chases the sensation. He hasn’t felt this lonely in years.

He lies in bed staring at the ceiling, wondering if the dreams will fade away with time as the last of the venom leaves his system. It was only to be expected. When would he have the final dream? Days? A week from now?

The sun has barely begun to rise, but Izuku can’t bring himself to fall back asleep. He has too much on his mind. Today the ship arrives on campus. He begrudgingly drags himself out of bed and prepares for another day at the lab.

He’s the first one there. After a couple hours of crunching data, he takes a break and stops in the greenhouse. It’s still too early to expect anything from the plants, but it doesn’t stop him from checking. He cups a hand around the base of the mask as he yawns, then glances at the clock on the wall and sighs. Just one more hour and he could break and meet with Tenya. It was early, but Tenya was notoriously a morning person.
There’s a gentle knock on the window and Izuku turns to see Mirio beaming outside in the hallway, motioning for him to come over. Izuku waits as the machines spray him down before disrobing from the full body hazmat suit and meeting him outside.

“Surprise!” Mirio exclaims as he hands over a disposable coffee cup. “The usual stuff, right? Spicy chai tea? Thought you could use it. It sounds like you haven’t really caught a break.”

“Oh, wow. Thanks!” Izuku says as he takes the cup in his hands. “You didn’t have to.”

They walk to the cafeteria and sit across from each other in the clear barrier. Aside from the few custodial staff cleaning up, they have the room all to themselves. Izuku removes the mask to take a sip and is pleasantly surprised by the sweet caramel and the spiciness that follows.

“Oh!” he exclaims.

This is...

It’s the same coffee he’d treat himself to as a pick me up—but now it’s also the same flavor as the venom that haunts his dreams. Katsuki had mentioned the flavor of the venom would be tied to the memory of a meaningful meal. When he presses the lid to his mouth again, it’s impossible to think of anything other than meeting Katsuki’s lips with his own and having those strong arms wrap around his sides. He feels warm from head to toe as he gulps it down. It’s odd, but it’s about as comforting as he’d remembered. Maybe even more so.

“Good?”

Izuku takes another sip and sighs. “Yeah, it’s perfect. Just like I remember.”

“Well, yeah. I hope so! It’s only been like a month.” Mirio frowns. “You look a little down today. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“O-oh, yeah,” Izuku stutters as he adjusts himself in his seat. “I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Dude, you survived the island. I don’t think you get how incredible that is. And now that you’ve returned, immediately the day after, you’ve already thrown yourself right back on the saddle of being Hatsume’s guinea pig. Like, without a care in the word. The last time you did that, you were dating.”

“Huh? I-it’s not like that!” Izuku blurts. “I’m indebted to her. It isn’t romantic in the slightest!”

“You sure?”

“Of course! I’ve moved on,” Izuku insists. “It’s over, but, admittedly, she might not totally understand what our partnership means.”

Mirio rests his chin in one of his hands and glares. When it becomes clear that he won’t let this go, Izuku sighs and continues. “Last night she broke into my dorm for one of the machines we worked on together.”

“Are you serious?” Mirio cries in disbelief. “I told you that if she oversteps-”

“We’ve talked about it, don’t worry. She knows now that she can’t just waltz back into my life like nothing’s changed. I don’t think she meant any harm by it. She’s not very good at interacting with people.”
Mirio makes a non-committal sound in the back of his throat. “Have you cleaned out the rest of her things from your dorm?”

“Well, not everything. There are a few machines I use still.”

Mirio raises an eyebrow. “Babies you made together?”

“Please don’t say it like that. If I have a machine she needs, I’ll let her borrow it, and vice versa.”

“So, joint custody?”

Izuku blanches and gives him a pained smile. “I know you’re kidding... but when you put it that way-”

Suddenly, an explosion rumbles through the building. The windows shudder and the fire alarm blares to life. Izuku and Mirio clean up their station as fast as they can, before readjusting their masks.

“Well, speaking of Hatsume’s babies…” Mirio says as he power-walks to the door.

“It might not be her this time,” Izuku mutters with a sinking feeling in his gut.

“I doubt it.”

They evacuate with a sea of students outside as teachers work to regroup their classes in a confused murmur. Izuku and Mirio find the rest of their lab standing with Aizawa in a cluster near one of the cherry blossom trees at the main walkway. Izuku looks up to see a steady stream of black smoke billowing from the window of the engineering department.

“Aaaand what did I tell ya?” Mirio says as he gestures at the building. “Called it! It has now been zero days since there was an explosion in the engineering department,” Mirio jokes when they meet up with the rest of the lab.

“Haven’t had one of these in a while,” Tamaki grumbles.

“Wonder what set it off this time? They’ve gotten better at preventing them lately,” Nejire says as she watches the smoke curl into the sky.

Izuku mentally goes over all the machines he had tested with Mei before. Under a watchful eye, none of them seemed particularly unstable. Explosions these days were rare. Majima had adjusted to Mei’s erratic work schedule and gotten managing her down to an art. For something of this magnitude, the team would have had to be incredibly distracted. There was only one possible cause.

He braces himself for the worst before breaking from the group to find Mei as quickly as possible. Izuku hears the shouting from the engineering class in the crowd before he sees them. He navigates through the sea of students to the center of all the noise. The majority of the teachers and staff from the other side of the building are soaking wet from the sprinklers in the lab and glaring at one person in particular.

In the middle of it all, Majima stands waving his arms, looking red faced and furious. “How in the hell did you just let an explosion rip though the lab during a project you were directly overseeing? How could you miss something like this?! The interns started yelling for you as soon as they saw
the smoke! Hatsume? HASTUME, I’M TALKING TO YOU!” he bellows.

“LOOK, I GOT DISTRACTED IS ALL!” Mei retorts. “I didn’t expect the ship to arrive when it did! Do you have any idea how it feels to have one of your greatest achievements returned to you in tatters?”

“THAT’S NO EXCUSE! You’re responsible for spotting and catching mistakes before they happen! Someone could have gotten seriously hurt!”

“WHERE IS HE?” Mei screeches as she ignores her teacher and shoves a random student out of the way. “I KNOW HE’S OUT HERE! MIDORIYA, SHOW YOURSELF!”

The two of them were already making a scene. If Izuku says something, he’ll get pulled right into it. But if he doesn’t, Mei will just find him and attack like she did before.

“I’M RIGHT HERE!” Izuku shouts as he marches to them both. “Quit pushing people around!”

Mei whirls around to face him with her face twisted in rage. “WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU DOING? Did you see what happened to my baby? It’s STRAIGHT UP ABUSE—that’s what it is! Do you realize how close you came to sinking? Do you know what material I used for the inner layer? Tungsten! The claws of whatever did this managed to scratch it! And don’t even get me started on your steering! The breaks and steering mechanisms were nearly fried! Were you trying to kill yourself?”

“I didn’t have a choice! With that thing on my tail, I couldn’t exactly follow proper protocol!” Izuku argues defensively.

“ARE YOU KIDDING ME?” Mei wails as she pulls at her hair. “I can’t have interviews with my baby looking like this! This can’t bring me the head turning headline I needed!”

“That’s what you’re upset about?” Izuku cries in disbelief.

“Do you think just because we broke up that you can destroy the babies we made together without consequence? DO YOU EVEN CARE?”

“OF COURSE I CARE!” Izuku bellows. “I’ve never stopped respecting you or your work! I had to shake it. I didn’t have a choice!”

“I can’t believe you! You are so unbelievably selfish!”

The last line sends him reeling. “SERIOUSLY? You’re the one who blew up the lab and forced the entire school to evacuate over something I warned you about! I thought you were over this!”

“Oh, what?” Mei shouts as she throws her arms in the air. “You want me to pretend like nothing happened to my baby? Like everything’s fine?”

“I’ve been nothing but honest with you from the start! I told you why and what I had to do! If you’re just going to yell at me, I’m leaving.”

Mei starts yelling again, but Izuku tunes her out and storms off without a word. Having her agitated and acting out in front of his classmates brings back nothing but old memories. Working with her was like being caught up in an unpredictable whirlwind. He’d known her long enough to know better. While Mei excelled in working with machines of any type, he’d learned to expect her not to have normal interactions with other people.
He’s barely cognizant of where he’s going and realizes halfway on the path that he’s on the way to the library on campus, which is fine. He’d rather not jump right back to work. Out of all the places he can decompress and hide out, the library is his best bet. Izuku finds himself grateful that he’d agreed to meet Tenya there the day before. He checks the time and sees he’s not supposed to meet with his friend for another hour.

Izuku takes a deep breath. Still, there was a bright side to all this. Mei couldn’t advertise her success with this current model. At the very least, it was one less thing to worry about while he works in the lab and plans his return to the island. She’d have to design something better with proven results.

Izuku picks up the books he’d reserved from the front desk and cozies himself at a desk behind a tall bookshelf. All of a sudden, he feels like a kid again. His mood brightens as he leafs through old black and white lithographs of mariners and krakens.

While he buries himself in mythology, time passes quickly. It only feels like a little while later when his phone buzzes with a text from Tenya, asking where he is. Izuku hurriedly places the oceanography books over the titles for mythical creatures and sends a reply text. In a few minutes, he spots Tenya’s tall muscular frame near the front desk. Izuku stands up and waves him down.

“I thought I’d find you with oceanography books!” Tenya says in lieu of a greeting. “Researching the island?”

“I can’t be too careful,” Izuku explains. “There’s always a chance I had overlooked something.”

“Right,” Tenya agrees as he takes a seat across the table and settles his briefcase at his feet. “Not that I doubted your ability to collect information, but I started researching the storm too. Anything to make sure your mission was successful. Although,” he says as he adjusts his glasses, “even with all the data we have, there are certain things we just couldn’t have anticipated.”

“Yeah,” Izuku mutters.

“That was quite the commotion this afternoon. I wasn’t there for the incident, but Mirio filled me in on what happened.”

So, he’d already heard about their altercation. Tenya had probably seen the ship’s condition as well. How could he not? Mei was one of Ingenium’s best engineers. Tenya had granted her permission to design the ship in his headquarters the first place. And now Izuku had gotten into a fight with her in front of the whole school. It was incredibly unprofessional, but as Izuku replays the interaction in his head, he can’t imagine the situation going any better than it had.

Tenya’s tone is patient and reserved. His face brims only quiet curiosity. Tenya isn’t frustrated with him, but Izuku still feels that he’d let him down in some way. The apology is out before he can think. “I’m sorry. I warned her, but I didn’t expect Mei to-”

Tenya holds up a hand to silently cut him off. “There’s no need to apologize! It wasn’t your fault,” he explains. “Like I said, it’s impossible to prepare for everything exactly. All we can do is learn from this. We expected the ship to arrive in its condition, but Hatsume can be… abrasive.”

Izuku pauses as the words sink in. He laughs dryly. “You can say that again.”

“I’ll talk to her. The project isn’t exactly overseen by Ingenium, but I’m still her boss. That sort of behavior is inexcusable.”

“Thanks.”
Tenya tilts his head at Izuku’s book pile. “And I see you’ve been reading up on mythological creatures too! Which means you must have seen some of the art or ruins on the island, right?”

Izuku blinks in surprise and hurriedly glances at his book pile to see one of the mythology books with its spine fully exposed. “O-oh, yeah, well...”

“There isn’t a lot of material out there, but I found a source who adamantly believed the merfolk and half snake creatures were worshipped as deities in whatever culture once thrived there.”

“Really?”

Tenya gives a nod, encouraged by Izuku’s interest. “I discovered an archeologist who held onto the belief that an island existed in the center of the storm as well: Reika Hashimoto,” he explains as he produces a black and white photograph of a young woman dressed in a button down with her hands folded across her lap. He then opens his briefcase to hand over a stack of papers.

Each page has been carefully highlighted and marked with multicolored tabs. Izuku is amused to see strings of notes are written neatly in the margins. Tenya has also painstakingly collected photographs of various artifacts and clipped them to the related passages. Vases, pieces of murals, and carved figures are scattered between each page. All of the art was similar to the ones Izuku had found while searching the night before. He expected nothing less of his diligent friend.

“Like many others, Hashimoto wasn’t taken seriously in the field while chasing after the island,” Tenya continues. “But she didn’t stop even when proving the existence of her ’Atlantis’ eclipsed the rest of her work and ruined her reputation. Although, ‘Atlantis’ isn’t accurate. Since the people worshiped monstrous deities of the ocean and merpeople, she dubbed it ‘Anthemoessa’, after the home of the sirens in Homer’s Odyssey, due to the land’s nature to lure anyone who dared come close to their deaths.

Her findings suggest that the natives of the land once briefly traded with civilizations of the ancient world. She tracked down original artifacts that she believed belonged to the people in the storm which were traded before the storm manifested.”

“But that’s impossible, isn’t it?” Izuku asks as he flips through the notes. “How could she have known the difference? The art and style were mimicked and copied by artisans all around the ancient world. The original style was lost.”

“True! The people of the island were a tremendous influence. A couple of pieces were authenticated in that they were made of a certain material. The soil had a certain fingerprint, so to speak. A dead giveaway is a rock that appears in a couple center pieces,” Tenya explains, pointing to the smatterings of glinting black rock that appeared on some of the artifacts. There isn’t much to each piece, but they stand out as small details.

“Obsidian?” Izuku guesses.

“Not quite. Something more durable, almost like a black diamond.”

Izuku rubs his chin thoughtfully. He had seen the artifacts in the temples of the island but didn’t have the chance to study them up close. It was possible they shared this trait was well.

“She claims the truly authentic artifacts were stolen from the tombs of royalty. The pieces were made of clay that was likely traded with outside the island. However, the inconsistencies throughout time may have been due to a split on the island,” Tenya pauses, nudging his glasses higher up his nose. “Look here, at one point, they branch apart. One style is stiffer and flatter,
resembling the art of ancient Egypt. This one only features the merpeople and the half snake deities.”

He points to a couple of images he had photocopied and assembled together. The illustrations all feature the merpeople at an altar of some kind. A series of giant mercreature looms in the background, perhaps as island guardians, or even gods.

“It leads me to believe this is a signature of sorts for their devotion. The other style is more fluid and features the tribe themselves,” Tenya says as turns to a similar collection of images from before. These feature the humans interacting with the naga and merpeople. Some even feature the humans hunting boar together with the naga. “Interestingly, despite these stylistic differences, the origin and time period appear to be the same.”

“Maybe the clans on the island split in half,” Izuku mutters as he recalls the dead locked away in the depths of the underground temple. “For some reason, maybe one side couldn’t live with the other.”

Tenya nods. “That’s one theory, certainly! Based on the timeline we’ve assembled; all evidence shows contact with the island ceased after the split a couple thousand years ago. I don’t know how useful all of this could be to you, but if there was even a chance this could find aide in your journey, it was time well spent.”

“This is incredible! These are only a couple decades old,” Izuku says excitedly as he looks over Hashimoto’s reports. “She could still be alive! Did you find her? Were you able to schedule an interview?”

Tenya’s expression darkens. “I’m sorry to say that isn’t possible. In a fit of madness, she sold everything she owned to commission a submarine and braved the waters of the storm herself. She sailed off and disappeared without a trace. Before her departure, her family and friends say it was impossible for her to talk about anything else. Some say it was the curse of the island’s spell.”

“Oh…”

“I admit there might be more to that superstition than I thought. Even researching the island myself was eerily enthralling. Once I started, it was difficult to stop.” Tenya gives Izuku a knowing smile. “But most importantly, I wanted to show you something today. I attended a private auction. A few of the featured artifacts originated from Hashimoto’s collection. There were some pieces of artwork and jewelry, but they proved to be popular pieces. I was outbid.”

“I see. Well, you can’t win them all.”

“Taking photographs on site was prohibited. However,” Tenya says as he removes a box from his briefcase and extends it to Izuku. “I was able to win this.”

Izuku carefully opens it to reveal an artifact about the size of a brick, made of intricately carved stone with flecks of silver that shimmer in the light like scales. It appears to be some sort of advanced puzzle box.

“May I?”

“By all means!” Tenya exclaims. “I have gloves if you would prefer.”

Izuku gingerly puts them on and carefully picks up the artifact with both hands, but is still surprised at the unexpected weight. He turns it over, scrutinizing every mark, every inscription or crack. Along the edges, the object appears to be many pieces hinged together at the center. The
box is loosely put together, and when he presses along some of the corners, he discovers some give to the pieces. He’s cautious not to pry too hard along the edges.

“What is it?”

“No one is certain,” Tenya admits. “But, judging by its design, it has the potential to fold and open into something else.”

“Like what?” Izuku asks brightly.

“As of today, no one has been able to solve it. I’ve tried myself, without success. I’d hoped maybe with your visit to the island, you might have picked up a clue of some kind. You’re welcome to borrow the artifact in the meantime. I trust you’ll be careful.”

“Yeah…” Izuku breathes as he runs a finger along its edges. It had to be important. Its function and purpose may have eluded humans, but perhaps it meant something to Katsuki’s pack. “Thank you,” Izuku laughs softly. “You said you had a surprise and you weren’t kidding.”

“Midoriya, I’m not the superstitious sort in the slightest, but if there was ever such a thing as cursed land, this island is it,” Tenya says gravely.

“I know. I can’t exactly argue against that. Honestly, I’m a bit nervous to make the return.”

Tenya grimaces. “In my research, besides you, there were no records of anyone approaching the island and coming back alive in the last few centuries. However, there may have been an exception. One man, a treasure hunter, skimmed along the outside of the storm fifty years ago. He disappeared for decades and was presumed dead, until a ship found him, old and half dead and floating among the wreckage of a boat. He couldn’t recall his name, who he was, or even how he got in the ocean.”

“Amnesia?” Izuku guesses.

“A wise assumption, but it isn’t so simple. Amnesia would imply that the condition is temporary, but that wasn’t the case. Nor could he build any new memories from the day he was found. Each new day he would wake up as a blank slate. Word spread of his rescue and his family recognized him immediately, but despite being reunited with his relatives, the man showed no signs of familiarity with them. When he passed away, an autopsy was performed. No lesions, shrinkage, or abnormal growths of any kind were present in his brain. It was as if his memories and his identity were erased.”

“They didn’t find anything?”

“Well, while he was alive, his family noticed he developed a bit of a tick, where he would subconsciously rub the back of his shoulder. It seemed inconsequential at first, but when his family asked about it, he became increasingly defensive. Finally, his family called a doctor and sedated him. They found a mark on his skin, right behind his shoulder.” Tenya pauses to produce an old photograph and an artist’s sketch, of a small magic circle with intricate lines and arcane writing just, like the ones Izuku saw at the altar. “It appears to be a tattoo of some sort. Its origin is unknown, but seeing it now, I can’t deny that it might be connected to the culture on the island.”

Izuku feels a chill travel up his spine. He can’t place it, exactly, but the mark is unsettling. The naga were capable of using spells and magic. Could they wield curses as well?

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees. “That is strange. I think you’re on to something.”
“I realize this is off topic from your research,” Tenya sighs. “But with how close you came to sinking, I cannot allow you to continue your mission without considering every piece of information available.” Tenya adjusts his glasses. “If you hadn’t returned in a month’s time, I would have asked Hatsume to design a ship for me as well and gone after you.”

“W-what?” Izuku exclaims. “You can’t! Why would you-”

“Humanity is in grave danger. And despite UA’s connections and prestige, nothing’s saved us so far. You’re Toshinori sensei’s best student and one of UA’s brightest. This dilemma needs your innovation. Toshinori sensei said it himself, we can’t afford to lose you in this battle.”

“H-he said that?”

Tenya nods, his expression severe. “I’m sure you’ve noticed the trends. Not just with the deadly nature of the new strain, but with public opinion. There’s a counter movement gaining momentum. We’re slipping.”

Izuku bites his lower lip as he remembers the man he pinned down and forcefully brought to the hospital. Tenya was right of course. Just from his return he’d already seen the movement alive and well. Resistance to quarantine facilities would only increase as the disease continues to spread.

“Of course, no one wants to be taken away. I don’t like any of this,” Izuku says quietly. “But that’s just the way it has to be.”

Tenya hums in agreement. “Hopefully, it won’t be much longer. We can only pray that Takeyama Corp. will cooperate with Ingenium and combine our efforts to find a cure. My family is trying our hardest to make sure that once the drug is made, it will be accessible to everyone.”

Ensuring the cure would be freely available was incredibly noble of Tenya. Izuku hadn’t wanted to pry into his friend’s financial situation, but the cost for such a venture had to be a major blow to the family. He has to know.

“Hey…” Izuku murmurs. “I don’t know the details, but being involved in this global charity organization is risky, isn’t it?”

“We’ve all made our peace with it,” Tenya says plainly. “In this life, money and wealth aren’t guaranteed. I’ve talked to Ochako as well. After this is over, we’ll live modestly and support ourselves in our careers. It won’t be the life we pictured, but we’ll be happy and can raise our family without the fear of the disease. If we’re to lose everything, this is a worthy cause. But don’t worry about me. This is my battle,” Tenya says with a new fire in his eyes. “Do you believe in yours?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I’m counting on you. If you truly believe you have the cure, even if it isn’t with you now, then I know you can bring it back to us.”

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Izuku tosses and turns as he tries to escape a whirlwind of dreams. One moment he’s in an thick, endless jungle, surrounded by slithering bodies, swaying trees. Pairs of glowing eyes peer out from the leaves everywhere he looks. He’s completely surrounded. He runs without thinking, towards the beach and the crashing waves of the ocean. The blistering winds scream in his ears and the rain pelts against his eyes. He winces, and the dream resets.
He’s suddenly deep in the caverns below with the ruins, the dusty bones of the forgotten, and the endless loops of magic carved into the island. He can feel it now, the great storm itself churning against the rocks with an energy as real as life itself. The circle and runes light up at his approach, webbing down the halls and floors. The magic reaches out to him but he steps back and turns to run, only to see the entire cavern bursting with the light. He looks down in time to see it spread to his feet, and suddenly it’s crawling all over him, like a brilliant, living tattoo. It crawls over his hands, curls up his arms, and engulfs his eyes and body in a radiant light.

Izuku jerks awake with a gasp and his heart pounding in his ears. He sits up rigid and shaking as he stares intensely at the other side of the room. He can almost see the fading glow from the circle in his dreams. He clutches the back of his neck and breathes. He tries to reason with himself it was all a nightmare born from his research.

I’m not in danger, Izuku tells himself. They’re only stories and artifacts. You’re home now. They can’t hurt you.

But when he remembers the cursed treasure hunter who lost his mind, his stomach knots. He’d seen the magic in person. It was as real as anything, and there was so much he didn’t know. What if the treasure hunter had seen it as well? What if witnessing it firsthand was all it took for a human to be cursed? Izuku threads his fingers through his hair and along his neck. Was it possible he’d been cursed as well? Did he have a similar tick? How often had he been grabbing at his neck? Suddenly, all he wants to do is check himself in the bathroom.

But that was just nerves. Nerves from a nightmare born of all his secrets and deepest fears. Why would his skin be marked? There was no way he’d been hit with the same curse. It would be obvious by now. He’d already been checked into the hospital. With the pandemic in full swing they would have noticed the slightest signs of illness or odd behavior.

For now, Izuku shoves down his fears and forces himself to breathe. He walks to the kitchen for a glass of water. He needs to focus on his work and figure out how he’ll return to the island. But there was no telling when that could be or what modifications would be needed to get him through the storm and the monster alive.

He checks his phone for anything from Mei. Nothing. But after yesterday’s meltdown, he isn’t surprised. He plays around with an app on his phone until the morning hits a decent hour and the sun sends a dim orange glow across the apartment. He takes a chance and sends a text to Majima.

Izuku doesn’t wait long for the response. The professor is an early riser and delivers some good news. Mei has forgotten about Izuku for the moment and has devoted her spare time to fixing and salvaging the ship. In all likelihood, it would consume her schedule for the next couple days.

He’d like to spend his time doing something constructive—that would help distract from his worries around the monster and his newest anxieties around the magic of the island. After eating a light breakfast, he texts Ochako and lets her know he needs a break. She had wanted to hang out with him.

- I’m busy today, but I’ll be volunteering this afternoon if you want to help out!

-Sure, Izuku replies. It’s been a crazy couple of days. I could use a change in scenery.

-Oh, yeah, I saw the ship! Mei was freaking out, so I had to sneak over for myself! Tenya’s blaming the damage on being tossed around in the vicious currents, but I think he’s way off base.
-What do you think it was?

Ochako sends a combination of smirking and laughing emojis. -It’s gotta be a sea bear! It just latched onto the side and started punching! Maybe it even trained in forbidden undersea martial arts!

Izuku snorts as he texts her back. -Well, it certainly felt that way.

He makes plans to spend his morning assisting his team in the lab and then goes to meet up with her that afternoon.

Ochako volunteers at what had once been the city’s convention center. Now, it had been converted into the largest Zaba Containment Center in Japan. If hospitals were seen as halls of judgement, containment centers were seen as prisons.

No matter the hour, there was always a rally outside the building. The protesters who assembled were in a constant cycle. Izuku mentally prepares himself for them the best he can, but when you see children carrying posters asking for the release of their parents, it’s difficult not to feel something.

One cluster of protesters along the block looks particularly radical. They are marked with the well-known symbol of the Live Free Die Free movement: a bright red, three-winged angel looking skyward, with half its face dissolving into ashes. The emblem is proudly waved on flags, boasted on bandannas, and openly worn on their jackets. But what really sets the group apart from the others are the intimidating masks that completely hide their appearance. Each of them wear eye lenses with metallic sheen, that give them an almost insect-like appearance.

The anonymous masked group could spell trouble, but so far, the protests have been peaceful. The lead organizers have stressed civility above all else. Like the hospitals, police make regular rounds. While the protests are usually calm, they tend to escalate whenever burial teams arrive to collect the bodies. As awful as the situation was, the protocol for alerting families of the death of a loved one and arranging a sanitary disposal of the body is as efficient and humane as it can be. Not a single funerary arrangement is performed without consent of the family. Once all the required documents have been signed, the bodies are wrapped in hazmat body bags, and the trucks transport them to a designated crematorium specifically designed to eradicate all traces of the virus.

Once the infected were diagnosed, relocating was mandatory. However, centers weren’t their only option. If they chose, the sick could sign up to participate in Zaba experimentation labs. There they would donate the rest of their life and body to researchers. Those who agreed were given payment that was passed on to their families. There was no guarantee of survival, but to some, taking a final stand against the disease was preferable to simply surrendering to death.

Guards are clustered outside the doors fully dressed in containment gear as they monitor the queues of visitors and assist the newly arrived patients. Their very presence was imposing enough, but some argued that security was too light. There could be more, but tightening security was fairly controversial for a building that wasn’t meant to be seen as a prison.

Izuku stands suited up in the same high-grade anti-plague equipment he’d first used in his return to the city and lines up in the visitor’s queue with people dressed in similar equipment. At the door, he hands over his bag to security for a search that is mandatory for all visitors. Afterwards, he’s guided through a metal detector. He passes as expected, but he still has to present an assigned visitor ID before proceeding.

Due to the spread of the disease, visitor ID’s are limited and made available to two close friends or
family members when a loved one is admitted. This helps ensure that only authorized individuals trickle in. Izuku flashes the guards his badge. However, thanks to his position in the Zaba research lab, Izuku’s visitor and UA ID are enough to let him bypass the more intensive screening process further along the line.

Beyond security, volunteers dressed in white and yellow plastic move around a maze of beds and patients. You can tell the sick apart from the healthy with just a glance. Inside, the sick are no longer required to wear masks, but the healthy are completely covered. No one took any chances in the Zaba Containment Centers.

Patients are housed in temporary rooms formed by plastic dividers. Newborns and young children have specialized wards all to themselves. However, due to the contagious nature of the disease, and in an effort to prevent family members from isolation, most centers have a department solely devoted to keeping track of relatives.

The newest strain of Zaba is particularly merciless to the young and old. Infected adults will almost always outlive infected children, while the elderly tend to pass away within weeks of a confirmed diagnosis. Entire hospital wards and nursing homes have been wiped out.

While the entire building was essentially a hospice center, those on the higher floors had specialized nurses on duty. Patients in the advanced stages of the disease are kept in another ward on the second floor for end of life care. This is done by design. The sick in the final stages are difficult for the new patients to see.

A nearby elevator dings and the doors slide open. Izuku watches as a med team emerges, rolling a covered body down the hall. The veteran orderlies in nearby stations hardly pay the passing stretcher any mind. One of the younger orderlies nervously looks up from the cart and follows the stretcher with her eyes. When her name is called, she quickly turns back to her superiors.

There’s a high turnover for just about everyone involved; the patients, the guards, the volunteers. You can only steel yourself for so long. The same terrible thought rushes unspoken between them all in a relentless undercurrent.

You could be next.

It isn’t long before Ochako waves him down among the other volunteers and aides in the lobby. Just seeing her smiling face is enough to brighten anyone’s spirits. Izuku can’t help but think the patients are lucky to have her.

“So, you met up with Tenya?” Ochako asks, as she trots alongside him.

Izuku nods. “I knew he had something, but I wasn’t prepared.”

“Neat, right? He was really looking forward to telling you! Did you see the artwork? With all the mermaids, snake people, and magic? It’s so pretty! I’d like to believe they’re real.”

“Yup, it’s something alright.”

She suddenly gives him a playful nudge on the shoulder and winks. “You’d tell me if you saw anything, right?”

“Oh! Y-yeah!” Izuku laughs nervously in an effort to keep his composure. “Of course! You’d be the first to know.”

“You alright?” Ochako says with a questioning smile. “You seem kinda out of it.”
“Oh, y-yeah! Sorry,” Izuku mutters as he refocuses his thoughts. “I didn’t sleep well and it’s just hit me how I’m so used to locking myself in the lab. It isn’t that I forget this is happening, but there’s definitely a disconnect from the suffering. I wish I could volunteer more of my time. This is a good break.”

Ochako laughs. “I wouldn’t call this a break! We do need your lab work and I’m glad to see you, but this probably isn’t the best way to unwind. If you need to stop for any reason, just let me know.”

“Right,” Izuku agrees. “How are you holding up?”

“You while mean working here? Well, seeing the later stages of the disease is frightening, but they need us. Besides, having this experience is jump-starting my career. Physical therapy and neurodegenerative diseases go hand in hand, right? I like talking with patients the best. We had a survey last week and I learned a whole lot about what we can do to make things better. Maybe someday I could even open my own clinic.”

They pass a bulletin board that has been decorated with flyers and reminders for monthly events. To boost morale, the centers promote classes run by volunteers. All sorts of activities are made available. Young healthcare professionals flock to them. There are craft lessons, trivia, board game nights. All of it is to keep the patients busy.

Izuku turns around and, from the corner of his eye, he notices two men following an equal distance behind them. Both have been given special clearance badges to their hazmat suits. One is a huge, hulking figure. The other is smaller in stature. Every step he takes is nearly soundless and he has an almost undetectable presence.

“Oh, don’t mind them,” Ochako says when she notices him looking back. “Tenya’s hired them to watch me.”

“Ah, I should have known.”

“He worries too much,” Ochako sighs. “No one really recognizes me with the mask on. If anything, the body guards are a dead giveaway.”

While Tenya was hardly a celebrity, the prestige of Ingenium Inc. and his family’s wealth were enough to attract media attention in their private lives. When Tenya proposed to Ochako, a commoner who had been accepted into UA on scholarship, journalists pounced on the story. Ochako was suddenly thrown into the spotlight until they were finally married. When he saw how jarring the effect was on his wife, Tenya did all he could to keep a sense of normalcy in their lives. Thanks to his diligence and the influence of his family, any unwanted attention from the tabloids had mostly subsided.

“It’s better safe than sorry.”

Ochako rolls her eyes. “No one’s gonna try anything.”

“I think it’s sweet.”

“Yeah,” Ochako laughs dryly. “It’s sweet until it interferes with my job. Y’know, they used to hover so close they’d intimidate the patients. We’ve compromised since. Now they just keep a wide following distance.”

Izuku makes eye contact with a patient typing in bed on a laptop. Their eyes meet and the man scowls. Under law, employers cannot fire employees for getting sick, even during a pandemic as
widespread as Zaba. After being relocated to the centers, some patients insist on working and supporting their family until the very end.

“It’s been a while since your last visit, so we’ll stay on the first floor today,” Ochako says, snapping back his attention as she ticks something off her clipboard. “I’ll take notes of our duties, so don’t worry about that.”

Izuku nods. He steps aside as an aide helps a patient walk across the floor to a walking circuit that has been marked around the building’s perimeter for an exercise routine.

“Everyone’s so strong,” Izumu murmurs. “I’m impressed. I bet they’re glad to have you.”

“This is nothing! I’m not a full-fledged doctor or anything—well, not yet—but I want to help people when I can.”

“It’s nice you have the guards, but you don’t always go alone, right? I thought Tenya volunteers sometimes, too?” Izuku asks.

“Um, well, he comes in on his off days. I hate to say it,” Ochako says as she fidgets with her hands, “but to the patients, he can come off as abrasive.” She suddenly lifts her hands defensively, looking panicked. “It’s not on purpose!” she explains. “He definitely cares and wants to help, but it’s so raw here and the stress gets him, especially when he sees the kids. We have a system, where I’ll take care of the kids and he’ll do the parents. And if he needs to relax, we switch!”

“Well, I’m glad he’s supporting you,” Izuku tells her genuinely.

Ochako glances sideways, her smile turning shy. “He doesn’t want me working here.”

Izuku blinks in shock. He’d always imagined them as an unstoppable power couple. Tenya, the wealthy, kind hearted spokesperson for Ingenium Inc., and his plucky, physical therapist wife, who tirelessly tended to the victims of the disease.

“R-really?”

“I have the guards and follow all the precautions, he makes sure of it, but it’s not exactly safe. Still, I can’t just pretend that this isn’t happening. The disease is killing us, but we’re losing a part of ourselves by separating the sick from their families.” Ochako gives a gentle sigh. “I started helping back when the disease was just an unknown, a challenge in medicine. And now it’s mutated into something horrific. I understand he’s concerned for my safety, but I can’t walk away from this.”

“I had no idea,” Izuku murmurs. “I’m sorry.”

"It’s okay! We’re dealing with it the best we can. Just one day at a time!”

They head into a room with donations from the public. They have a wide variety of snacks, books, magazines, board games, and toys. Books are organized in stacks based on genre and reading level. They pick up a cart and load it up with a variety of supplies, before rolling it down the hall.

Inside Contamination Centers, wheelchairs are luxury items and, due to the nature of the disease, in high demand. There are never enough wheelchairs and walkers. While patients are forbidden from going outside, it’s important that no one feels trapped. Volunteers and staff rotate the equipment on schedules in an effort to encourage all patients to exercise and explore the center.

“So, we’ve been assigned this ward here,” Ochako explains as she taps the map and flips to patient profiles. “They’ve been helped this morning, so we’ll be mostly just be checking in and switching
out any items they’d like to return. A bit of warning. This first stop is a family. The dad was already immunocompromised prior to admission, so he’s worse off than his daughter. We might transfer him upstairs in a couple weeks.”

Ochako knocks politely on the screen before stepping forward. Izuku assumes the withered man reclined in the bed is the father. Two girls that look to be about the same age glance up from whatever game they were playing with their dolls and watch them expectantly.

“Hey, there everyone!” Ochako says brightly. “Mr. Tanaka, it’s nice to meet you! I’m Uraraka Ochako! We have you down for some exercise this afternoon. Is now a good time?”

“It’s as good as ever,” he says meekly.

Ochako’s report said that he was 30, but with the wasting in his face and arms, he looks more middle aged. Ochako unfolds the wheelchair and brings it to his bedside.

“Would you mind checking in on the kids?” Ochako asks Izuku.

“Not at all.” Izuku crouches down to their eye level and extends a hand. “Hi, I’m Midoriya. What’re your names?”

The more outspoken of the two steps forward and manages to shakes his hand with a loose grip.

“I’m Ayaka and this is Suki,” explains the girl in pigtails of about six as she nods her head to the shy girl next to her with a bowl cut.

Izuku glances back as Ochako helps the father into the wheelchair and guides him out the door for a stroll around the building.

“So, was that your Dad?” Izuku asks, turning back to the girls.

“He’s my dad,” Ayaka explains as she holds onto her friend’s hand and absentmindedly swings their arms to and fro. “Suki lives next door. Our neighborhood got sick when we picked up Zaba at camp. Mommy was out of town for work, so we came here with Daddy. Mommy visits us sometimes. It’s usually in the evening after work.”

“Oh, I see.”

“My parents are both here,” says Suki. “They were sent to another center at first, but we all got together in this one. It’s not so bad. There’s no school and I get to see Ayaka every day now!”

“Hey, can you read to us?” Ayaka asks Izuku suddenly.

“Sure.”

“Okay,” Suki says to both of them. “But I’m picking. Ayaka picked the book last time.”

Izuku watches her gait as the girl crosses the room. She’s able to walk, but her movements are stiff. He mentally notes that she’s still in the early stages of the disease. While her motor skills would only decline, the quality of life for her is still relatively high. Bending her knees correctly takes time, as if the muscles can’t quite understand the orders from her brain. Her legs finally fold beneath her so she can crouch before the books. She pulls out each one and silently judges them by the artwork on the cover. After a moment her face lights up as she finds the book she was looking for.
“I want this one!” she cries as she stumbles back across the room.

“Careful! It’s not a race,” Izuku says as he outstretches his arms. Instead of taking the time to sit, she practically throws herself in his lap and triumphantly hands him an issue of Positive, Hero of Justice. The cover shows the armored hero valiantly challenging spaghetti-like alien invaders as they descend from their spaceships. It’s one of the older issues. Judging by its worn pages and dog-eared corners, the book was well loved by its owner.

Izuku smiles at the cover. “Oh, Positive, huh? That’s a good one!”

“Put it back,” Ayaka orders. “We’re supposed to pick a book.”

“Comic books are books!”

“Are not!”

“Comic books are absolutely books,” Izuku says seriously. “If they weren’t, they wouldn’t have ‘book’ in the title.”

“Well, it’s obviously for boys,” Ayaka argues.

“Nu-uh!”

“Hey, c’mon,” Izuku interjects. “Super hero stories are for everyone. It doesn’t matter if you’re a boy or a girl. We can read it together.”

Ayaka grumbles but doesn’t argue. Both kids settle on either side of his lap as Izuku opens the book. He starts reading normally, but when he shifts voices for the different characters, the girls exchange glances and giggle. From then on Izuku can’t help but do the voices for each character and enthusiastically mimic the sound effects on each page. By the time they reach the end, the three of them are fully engrossed in the story.

“Wow, you really love Positive, huh?” Ayaka says.

Izuku chuckles rubs the back of his head nervously. “Yeah. I, um, grew up with these myself.”

“You should come over again. Nobody reads like you do.”

Ochako returns and wheels the father back in the room. Izuku helps her place him back in the bed. Ochako takes a seat in one of the nearby chairs and checks a few boxes on her clipboard.

“Okay, Suki was checked earlier today. Ayaka it’s your turn for a checkup. How do you feel?”

“Fine. I get sleepy faster and I can’t raise my arm.”

“Let me see,” Ochako says as the girl extends her arm and rests her hand in Ochako’s palm. “Can you move your fingers for me?”

Her face stills in concentration. After a moment, Ayaka’s face contorts and her eyes become glassy. “I can’t.”

“Alright, that’s okay. If that gets any worse, you tell one of us, all right?”

“Yup.”

When Ochako finishes the checkup, she rises to her feet and goes to take a step forward, but
pauses. She tries to take another step, but wobbles dangerously. Izuku lunges forward and steadies her in time.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine. Thanks,” she says as she rearranges her footing.

“Does this happen often? You shouldn’t push yourself while you’re-

“Low on blood sugar!” Ochako yelps as she cuts him off suddenly and begins enthusiastically flexing her arms. “I know! Gotta remember to sit down and have a complete meal! We shouldn’t be intruding any longer, right? Let’s get the cart loaded and finish up.”

She’s clearly hiding something, but Izuku doesn’t press the issue. After cleaning up and leaving a couple books behind, they wheel out the door.

“Izuku, can we talk for a second?” Ochako asks when they’re out of the patients’ earshot. “The breakroom’s at the end of the hall.”

She’s able to walk well enough, but Izuku still motions to the guards to keep a closer distance. He can’t help but notice another aide sneak a glance at them as they walk by.

Once they’re in the break room, Ochako pants slightly and sinks into the folding chair at the table. It’s about the size of a living room with a couple tables and a fridge that no longer has food. There are some warning signs reminding the employees and volunteers to never, under any circumstance eat in the building.

Izuku pulls out a chair and sits next to her. “Are you sure you’re okay? What happened back there?”

“It’s alright,” Ochako says with her voice strained. “I just need a break is all. The baby’s decided to kick box my guts.”

“What about your low blood sugar?” Izuku asks. “Being hydrated is important, but do you need something to eat? Should we call it a day?”

“No, it’s all right. I’m not hungry. Eating isn’t the problem, it’s the baby.”

“But you said-”


“Who? You mean the patients? The staff?” Izuku asks, voice a hushed whisper as he briefly glances around. “Are you hiding your pregnancy?”

“I keep it from the patients, yeah, but management knows. They kind of have to. If I feel weak or if the baby starts kicking, I tell patients I’m anemic or have low blood sugar. The suits are bulky enough, so I can get away with it. I don’t want to draw attention to myself.”

“That’s ridiculous! You’re expecting. You have to take care of yourself and the baby. They have to understand that.” Izuku pauses, his brow furrowing in thought. “Do the volunteers harass you?”

“Oh no, nothing like that!” Ochako reassures him, waving a hand dismissively. “I’ll get the occasional glare, but that’s all! I lie just to not attract more attention than necessary, but there’ll be a point where these suits can only hide so much and I’ll have to retire from then onward. Honestly,
I’d rather no one here know at all.”

“What? Why would you...?”

Ochako smiles sadly. “Izuku, you have to know. There’s a stigma now. Most women these days would never carry to term. Having a child in these times isn’t just stupid, it’s irresponsible.”

“That’s not any of their business.” Izuku says hotly. “It’s your choice.”

“Still, our timing is terrible, isn’t it? We started trying when we thought we were in the clear. A working vaccine was on the way and Tenya wanted to have kids sooner rather than later. He wanted to be able to keep up with them. He didn’t want to be an “old” dad. And then the old strain mutated. The vaccine was ineffective against it and Zaba spread to affect newborns.”

“But how could you have known?” Izuku counters. “You can’t blame yourself over this.”

Ochako shakes her head. “I wanted to believe things would get better. Tenya insisted Zaba was on its last legs, but it’s only gotten worse. We kept waiting for the perfect counterattack, but it’s not here yet. Every day it’s getting harder. When I have this child, what kind of world will they have? And if either Tenya or I get sick… then what? I’m far enough along now that I can’t... I can’t bring myself to…” Her voice wavers, words faltering as her throat tightens, and she pauses. She swallows and takes a deep breath. “I’m having this child,” she states firmly. “Despite everything, here I am clinging to hope and being selfish.”

“Selfish?” Izuku repeats the word in shock. He leans forward across the table to look her in the eyes. “You aren’t selfish. I don’t want to hear you or anyone else ever say that.”

“Aren’t I, though? I can’t even set foot in the newborn wards. I’ve requested to work just at this level, so I don’t have to see them,” Ochako bites her lip. “I have Tenya, and we’re lucky enough to have access to the best tests, facilities, and treatment available. If anyone can safely have children it’s us. And what do I do? I hide and worry and wish that someone can cure the disease and fix all our problems.” Ochako’s shoulders tremble as she takes a breath. “Is it wrong of me to believe in a future? To wish for things to get better enough so that Tenya and I can live with a family?”

“You and the rest of all of us have a future,” Izuku insists. “Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise. We have the brightest people on earth working together for a cure. We’ll beat it.”

Ochako nods. “It’s not that I don’t believe in you. I’m just... scared.”

“That’s okay. No one expects you to be strong all the time,” Izuku says reassuringly. “We’re all in this together, and here for you no matter what. You don’t need to push yourself or feel guilty for not doing enough.”

She goes to wipe a tear, but her fingers collide with the glass from her hazmat mask. She laughs humorlessly and gives Izuku a half smile. “Stupid glass.”

Izuku slides his arm across the table, takes her hand in his, and gives it a gentle squeeze.

“I didn’t mean to unload everything on you like that,” she murmurs. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be.”

They sit quietly until Ochako’s breathing relaxes and slows, as her bodyguards stand politely nearby, watching them carefully. Izuku would wait forever until she feels better. Had she been holding this in the whole time? Had she told anyone else? She needed this. Knowing his friend,
she’ll probably be embarrassed over this later, but he’s glad she opened up to him. The calm is broken by some vague shouting in the background. A low hum starts outside, almost like a murmur.

Something shatters. Zaba eventually destroys a victim’s motor skills, so accidents weren’t uncommon. But this is different. The noise doesn’t subside—if anything, it gets louder.

Then the noise only crescendos and becomes more unified over time. The protestors are known to start unified songs or chants, but these are louder, with an angry energy. The guards tense. The four of them exchange looks of bewilderment.

“Is there an event planned for today?” Izuku asks.

Ochako furrows her brow and looks at him uncertainly. “Not that I know of.”

They wait, but the noise only becomes more frantic. Confused yelling emerges from outside the door. There’s a second crash, louder this time. They freeze.

Ochako sits up at the table. “What’s going on?”

Izuku rushes to the breakroom door and pushes it open. The air inside the center is thick with panic and confusion. There is so much noise. Some patients are hiding under their beds. The protestors outside have been whipped into a manic state and have become a churning wave of anger, pounding in the windows. Volunteers are running, managers are ordering them back to their stations. All of the patients who were walking are being escorted away from the windows and back to their rooms.

Izuku grabs the shoulder of a nearby volunteer and whips them around. “What’s happening? What do they want?”

“I don’t know!”

Izuku lets him go and dodges the panicking staff as best he can as he squeezes his way through to the front security desk. He immediately recognizes the leaders as members of the hostile looking group who had gathered outside. On their arms is a blazing red band with a symbol of the resistance. His own terrified expression is reflected back from the metallic eyes of their mask.

The guards at the front do their best to hold them back, but there’s too many. A smoke bomb is thrown in the room. Something pops like firecrackers, and then everyone is running. The entire building quakes under thudding feet.

Izuku watches uncomprehendingly as a patient whacks a volunteer with a pipe. There’s a sickening thud before they slump to the floor, mask spiderwebbed with cracks. Another staff member lies sprawled across the floor. Scarlet blood stains the exterior of his torn suit. Other orderlies rush to their aide and push back against the rebelling patients.

A pang of realization hits Izuku in the chest. The patients are cooperating with the protestors. The protestors from outside are arming patients against the staff and leading the riot.

Izuku swears. As much as he would like to join the staff and fight back, he turns and runs back to the break room.

_I have to warn them._

He dashes back as fast as he can and raps his knuckles on the door. The shorter guard creaks the door open just wide enough to check his identity, before pulling Izuku inside.
“It’s a riot!” Izuku cries.

“What?” Ochako jolts to her feet. “What should we do?”

“You’re staying put,” the larger guard orders as he firmly places his large hands on her shoulders.

“B-but, what about the patients?” she stammers.

“Our job is to keep you safe,” says the shorter guard. “And that’s what we’re doing. Have the police been called?” he asks.

Izuku shakes his head. “I don’t know, I doubt it. It’s still early.”

“I don’t have my phone!” Ochako says. “My bag’s in my locker. I don’t know if I can get it.”

“I’ve got one right here,” the larger guard says reassuringly as he opens a holster on his tool belt. “Try to stay calm.”

“Midoriya, was it?” the other guard asks. “Help me barricade the door.”

“Okay.”

Izuku gathers a chair in each arm and carries them across to the door.

Suddenly, the windows in the breakroom shatter and rioters fully dressed in body armor and helmets burst into the room. Izuku whips around to see a smoke bomb has already begun filling the area with white smoke. One of the guards manages to throw it back out the window.

Through the fuzzy white air, Izuku spots the shapes of Ochako’s body guards. One of them has stepped in front of her defensively, while the other leaps to engage the invaders head on. None of them are even aware of a third attacker who emerges by Ochako’s side with a crowbar.

“Look out!”

Ochako turns her head to view her attacker, but she’s too slow.

Izuku runs to her side. He’s just in time to block the first blow with his arms, but the force knocks him backwards. He’s still stumbling when he receives the second blow to the side of his skull.

His head goes blank and his knees crumple to the floor. He thinks he can hear Ochako screaming for him as everything goes black.
Fun fact: Ochako's body guards are Edgeshot and Death Arms. (I tried hinting at it, but this really isn't obvious. It’s hard to explain how characters look when they’re dressed head to toe in full hazmat gear.)

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