The Higher I Climb, the Further I Fall

by Maria_Albert

Summary

On the surface, aspiring UA students Shouta Aizawa, Nemuri Kayama, Hizashi Yamada and Tensei Iida have little in common. In fact, the four teenagers appear to be diametrical opposites of one another in a number of very telling ways. It will take dramatic and challenging circumstances to bring these four together and the unique strength of character of each of them to forge what will one day become, within the hallowed halls of UA, a legendary and lasting friendship and perhaps something more, that not even a determined and infamous villain with a personal vendetta could shatter.
Please leave Kudos and Comments, so I know whether you like this story and would like to see more. Point of view or time changes are marked by "0 0 0". The story title and many of the chapter titles are inspired by Tasmin Archer’s song, “The Higher You Climb”, because it fit my story so perfectly. I highly recommend her work!

I know in our real modern day Japan, guns are a rarity, but remember, the crime rate there is also low. In the Boku No Hero world, there are hundreds of petty crooks using quirks to mug, rob, vandalize and cause general mayhem, in addition to the more dangerous villains. Quirks that are perfectly suited for such crimes would likely not be as useful for protecting the perpetrator from being caught, though, and the cities are teeming not only with police, but with heroes. Very few of those heroes are bulletproof. It stands to reason that guns, the notorious equalizers, would be in much greater supply and availability in their reality. Gas, explosives and other weapons would also be sold on the black market and used for the same reason.

In our reality, Japanese middle school children wear uniforms. They don’t in Aizawa’s middle school for reasons that will be made clear later in the story. Also, the type of neighborhood he lives in sounds more like an American inner city, but the reasons for that are similar to those above: their Japan is a more dangerous and unstable place, thanks to the abundance of people with quirks on both sides of the law, and the rest of everyone, who are just trying to get by, trapped in the middle of it all, while their stores and businesses are smashed, goods are stolen, cars are crushed, and homes are randomly burned. So yes, it’s a beautiful, wonderful time to be alive, with heroes everywhere, but it can also be terrifying, and there are indeed slums, in spite of the cities’ best efforts to keep things sane, safe and in good repair.

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Dedicating Our Lives to the Supreme Sacrifice

The 5:15 am train thundered by Shouta Aizawa’s studio apartment window, serving its job as his alarm clock, as it did every morning. But this time the fifteen year old student had already been up since coming home from his second job at 2:00 am, unable to wind down enough to catch even his usual grossly inadequate and desperately needed three hours of sleep, because today wasn’t simply another school day, in spite of the test. His entire future hung on the outcome of today’s Hero Exam.

He rose from the futon on the floor, promising for at least the sixtieth time since his old frame broke to buy a new one, as soon as he could afford to. He looked accusingly at his narrow student desk. Unfortunately, school supplies were still claiming the number one spot of importance in his finances, closely followed by training supplies, including first aid equipment and his eye drops, his cell phone bill, and then food, with sleep a distant fifth. The cell phone was a necessary evil: without a TV and cable, or a computer and the internet, none of which he could afford, his only link to the news, to heroes and villains and the current events that shaped them, was his phone. At least he’d finally paid off the final installment of the legal bill that had been hanging over his head for so many months.

Shouta headed to the rice cooker, hot plate and micro fridge on the narrow freestanding cabinet against the left wall that functioned as his kitchen. He’d carefully saved his last egg to make egg on rice for breakfast this morning, because he knew he’d need the energy, especially since he was out of tea, and wouldn’t be able to purchase more anytime soon.

After cooking himself breakfast, he showered, using the last of his shaving cream and his new razor to shave, because he needed to give a good impression. After toweling himself dry and combing his shoulder length wavy black wet hair, he towel dried it again and studied his face in the cracked and water stained mirror, sighing at the bloodshot whites and the dark circles under his eyes, which looked even worse than usual. With an accepting shrug at the knowledge there was nothing he could do about them, aside from making sure he had his precious eye drops with him, he headed back out into his combination living room, bedroom and kitchen.

He opened his tiny bureau and stared at the contents. On the stubby clothes bar in the narrow hanging section hung the gray suit and white dress shirt he’d worn to court, both for his father’s trial and his emancipation hearing, and also the blue button-down shirt he’d worn with the suit to his job interviews since. Folded in the top drawer were the two identical black tracksuits he wore for training, beside his socks and underwear, also both black. His whip was coiled under them.

His gray, black and navy blue long sleeved T-shirts were in the middle drawer, and his three pairs of jeans, also gray, black and blue, in the bottom one, together composing the nine outfits he alternately wore to school Monday through Saturday, mixing the coordinating colors so he could wear every item twice before doing laundry on Sunday, without appearing to wear the same clothes every day or even every week. The kids he’d see today, though, had never even met him. No doubt most of their middle schools had a dress code with uniforms, unlike his own. And quite likely no metal detector and armed guards at the entrance, or barred windows on the classrooms either, as his had.

With a snort of derision, Shouta pulled out his tracksuit and dressed and then tied on his black trainers, in lieu of the battered black combat boots he preferred and wore every day to school. He debated tying his hair back in a ponytail, but he hated confining it, and the effect when he used his power was much more dramatic when his hair was loose. Regretfully, he left the whip he used in training and carried for protection on the way to and from his night stock clerk job behind. Weapons unfortunately weren’t allowed at the Exam, and he didn’t want to risk breaking the rules by bringing it onto campus, or risk someone taking it, if there wasn’t a locker to put it in prior to the Exam.
He looked at his battered phone. It was just approaching 6:00 am. He had three hours to take the two buses and train that would get him to the UA campus by the 9:00 am Exam start time, including 30 minutes to spare, in case of unexpectedly heavy traffic or villain attack.

Shouta headed to the door, unlocked the triple locks and carefully locked up again, automatically setting the subtle system of wires that constituted his homemade alarm system, which would alert him to anyone having broken into his apartment in his absence. No one had tried lying in wait to kill him since he changed his name and moved to his new apartment, but he wasn’t about to take foolish chances.

He made his way down the street, projecting his usual aura of, “If you come near me, I’ll kill you,” while keeping a cautious eye on his surroundings, because inevitably there would be one or more assholes either too stupid or arrogant to read his body language, or realize he was completely impoverished and not worth robbing, and he was a far less intimidating figure in his tracksuit with trainers than in faded jeans and combat boots.

Thankfully it was too early in the morning to have to run the usual gauntlet of drug dealers he encountered in the evening, on the way to his second job. At least even then most of them realized by now he wasn’t interested, but a few of the more persistent ones apparently thought he’d suddenly become as self-destructive as he looked, or more likely, misread his bloodshot eyes, dark shadows and anemic paleness as him being a junkie in need of a fix, instead of an overworked student with an annoying quirk, late night job, and a chronic case of malnutrition due to poverty. If he had money to burn, he’d use it to buy food, not drugs.

He made it to the bus station without incident and hoped any potential villains who might delay his bus were still sound asleep. Smothering a yawn, Shouta enviously wished he was too.

Sixteen year old Nemuri Kayama awoke to the soothing environmental alarm sound of a rumbling thunderstorm at 6:00 am, stretching languidly under her black satin duvet in her Western style King bed, her prize possession, which took up nearly every square centimeter of her tiny bedroom. Some day, when she was a world famous hero, she’d have a bedroom large enough to do her beautiful baby justice. As well as a very well appointed dungeon, just for show, to freak out her friends and admirers, and scare off creeps, because in actuality, her mom was the only Dom in the family. Nemuri just loved playing the part, in public.

She headed into her bathroom, grinning at her reflection. “Looking beautiful as always,” she said in pride and satisfaction. Not everyone could roll out of bed and look as hot as she did. At least her worthless father had given her a good set of genes, before heading for the hills, in pursuit of someone “younger and more exciting” to spend his mid-life crisis years with instead of her mother.

Her mother, the formerly respectful and meek, traditionally minded loving and dutiful wife Nemuri’s father had insisted upon and then jilted, who had ended a successful psychiatric career to marry him, had surprised all of them by taking that limp-dicked bastard to court and squeezing every last yen he had out of his philandering hide, instead of quietly fading into the woodwork as they’d both expected. Then her mother had restarted her once again thriving psychiatric practice, although this time as a private practitioner, instead of one attached to a hospital.

She’d also started exploring suppressed aspects of her sexuality, freeing herself from a number of former inhibitions thanks to her vanilla ex-husband, and found a gorgeous, tanned, blond American gymnast named Kenneth who was half her age to spend her newfound wealth and sexual attentions on, and then gave Nemuri a sizeable chunk of change to start her own household with.
Nemuri had left the only home she’d ever known six months ago, and had never looked back. Or spoken to her father since, though she and her mom were far closer now than before, when she was under her father’s controlling thumb and oppressive heel. Nemuri swore she’d never let a man, woman or other sexual partner or partners dominate and control her the way her father had subsumed her mother. Either they’d have an equal partnership, or she’d be the one in charge.

She was already hungry for breakfast, but she contented herself with the knowledge that she would grab a cup of coffee and a sinfully gooey pastry at her favorite coffee shop and wolf it down on her way to the train station. Thankfully, a short train ride later and she’d be at what would soon be her new school.

After taking a leisurely bath, the water lavishly dosed with both her favorite bubble bath, *Passion’s Promise*, and complimentarily scented bath oil, *Sin with Me*, she dried and curled her hair in a teasingly flirtatious wave, then applied a minimum of make-up, focusing on both her lips and eyes, ignoring the rule of making one or the other the focus of attention. Both would be a distraction in different ways. She added a dusting of glittered bronzer to the curves of her breasts for the same reason, with a smirk.

She dressed just as she would for any day at the mall, braless, in a white spandex V-neck crop top, which accentuated her nipples nicely and showed as much skin above as below, a pair of black fishnets, skintight black leather booty shorts, and her favorite pair of thigh-high black leather boots, the eight centimeter high platform soled ones she could run in, if she needed to. She added a black studded leather choker and a pair of leather bracelets to each arm. She looked longingly at her coiled bullwhip and flogger and pouted, but prospective students weren’t supposed to wear costumes or bring any weapons to the UA Hero Course Entrance Exam.

Quick as mercury, her expression shifted, and she grinned, adjusting her top so another centimeter of cleavage showed, and then thrust her ass out in a pose to ensure no cheek was actually showing, but that all eyes would be glued to either her tits or her ass in hope. Those weapons no one could take away from her.

She was surprised when her phone rang. Very few people had her number, and they all knew to never call her before noon during the summer. She grinned as she saw the call was from Momminatrix, and accepted the call.

“Hey Mom. I can’t believe you actually stayed up all night just so you could call me like you threatened to,” Nemuri answered, as she flipped through the most recent pages of her latest sketchbook, eying her finished fashion pieces in satisfaction, before turning to a blank page and picking up a pencil. One day her personal line of leather and lace lingerie was going to be as well known as she was.

“I hear pages turning. You’re sketching, aren’t you? When are you going to send me another one of your designs so I can have Jezebel make it for me? I promise to take better pictures this time. Kenneth was just too excited to keep his hands steady. But I got to punish him for it, so it all worked out well,” her mom said with a grin in her voice.

“I love how happy he makes you. And I’ll send you another one soon. Just make sure no one but your seamstress and Kenneth get to see them. I don’t want anyone stealing my designs. But in answer to your question, yes, I’ve designed more than a few others with you in mind. You’re my inspiration,” Nemuri admitted, as she sketched. Literally, every time she heard her mother’s voice, ideas flooded her, and she needed to make sure she captured them all on the pages of her book.

“And you’re mine. I love what a confident, self aware young woman you are. And that you want to become a hero. I’m so proud of you,” her mom praised. “But I don’t want to make you late. I just
wanted to tell you that, and to let you know I’m thinking about you. I’d wish you luck, but you know that we each make our own luck. I love you honey.”

“I love you too mom. Say ‘hi’ to Kenneth for me. I can hear the poor thing panting in the background. I’m sure he’s been a good boy and deserves a special reward for waiting patiently this whole time, while you’ve been waiting up to talk with me,” Nemuri teased with a grin.

“Good things come to those who wait,” her mom replied, switching to English, which Nemuri knew fluently too, thanks to both her parents speaking it alternately at home just so she’d be bilingual, to give her an edge on her education.

Nemuri hung up quickly, because apparently English and the puns her mother used were a special trigger for Kenneth, and she loved how good he was to her mom, but Nemuri really didn’t need to accidentally hear again how good her mom was for him. Then she laughed as she looked down at her drawing and saw she’d made a rough sketch of a man’s thong, slave bracelet, slave collar, and leather harness this time, instead of something for her mother. Apparently Kenneth was inspiration for her too.

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Hizashi Yamada woke to the comforting keyboards of the latest pop hit, “Let Me Be Your Hero”. The sixteen year old was lying horizontally across his twin bed again, for some reason, but thankfully this time his head was still on the bed, though he could feel his long, blond hair trailing to the floor. It was his feet that were dangling on the floor this time. He hated it when he accidentally slept upside down and all the blood rushed to his head, giving him a horrible headache when he righted himself in the morning. He counted that as a good omen.

Even though it was only 5:00 am, an hour before he usually woke for school, and the sun hadn’t even risen yet, he eagerly jumped out of bed, as energized as if it was any morning, and began humming as soon as he turned off his alarm, until he pulled a love song up on his phone, “Be My Villain”, hating to spend even a moment in silence, without music. The familiar wave of guilt hit him, now at sixteen dulled to a foam sledgehammer, instead of the real kind, the way it had hit when he first realized as a toddler that he’d accidentally deafened both his parents and the midwife with his birth cry, as one of the few children unfortunate enough to manifest their quirks in their infancy, long before they had any chance of being able to control them.

“You’re not going to think about that today. You promised,” he scolded himself aloud. He looked accusingly at his phone. “It’s your fault. No songs about pining after villains, not when you’re testing to become a hero.” He searched until he came up with a hero oriented hard rock song, “Break These Chains”.

“Much better. Now, first you need to take a shower and then fix your hair. Then once you’ve done that, you need to be sure you still want to wear the outfit you picked last night, or whether you’d look better in one of the other six you laid out, to be safe. Then you’re going to have a big breakfast, and take the train to the school.”

He guided himself like that every morning, the sound of his voice a soothing comfort in the too quiet house, and the instructions helping keep him on schedule, because he had a tendency to take too long fixing his hair up just right or changing clothes too many times, or falling too deeply into his music to notice the passage of time, almost making himself late for school. In all honesty, it was usually the smell of his mom cooking breakfast that kept him on track at all.

After showering, blow drying and gelling his hair to sculpted perfection, he put on the first outfit, and admired himself from all possible angles in the tri-fold full length mirror. Frowning, he stripped it off
and tried on his second choice. Then his third, four, fifth, and finally his last, consisting of his iconic faded black Pink Floyd “Dark Side of the Moon” T-shirt, a pair of soft, faded baby-blue acid-washed jeans with artfully worn holes in both knees, and his black motorcycle boots, the ones with the heavy chains draped across the front, not the ones with the buckles, or the zippered pair. He studied his reflection and then added his favorite black leather biker jacket, in spite of the weather report, because fashion was far more important than petty concerns like heatstroke. Besides, it was leather, so it and the boots sort of counted like armor, right? Without actually breaking the rules and being a costume.

He heard a loudly clanging bell from down the hall and belatedly realized that he’d been smelling breakfast for a while now. With a quick scan around his room to make certain he hadn’t forgotten anything, he headed for the kitchen.

“Good morning, Mom, Dad.” He signed enthusiastically, before giving his mom a good morning kiss on the cheek. She hugged him, as tactile as he was, and then jumped at an unexpected bright light.

“Dad!” he signed in exasperation as he saw his dad grinning over his latest picture.

“I needed a photo to commemorate the big day, of you going off to pass your Hero Exam,” his father responded, with an unapologetic smile.

“He won’t be passing anything if he doesn’t hurry up and eat,” his mother gently scolded.

Hizashi obediently sat down, grinning at the American breakfast his mom had prepared, pancakes, bacon, fried eggs, toast, milk and juice, all his favorites. He heaped his plate and began eating ravenously.

“Slow down! You don’t want to make yourself sick,” his mother scolded.

Yeah, maybe that was a good idea, because he tended to get both loud and queasy when he was too excited, both of which could be disastrous.

“Did you remember your sign?” his father asked, as if reading his mind.

He felt his face flush with heat. “I’m sure I won’t need it, my control’s gotten much better lately,” Hizashi protested, but without quite the confidence he felt he should have.

His father didn’t sign a word, he just gave him “the Dad look”.

Hizashi felt his blush deepen, and he bolted up from his chair and ran back to his room to get it.

He looked at the well worn sign with a resigned frown, clear tape reinforcing previously smudged and wrinkled white cardboard with black marker stating “I’m sorry! It was an accident!”, attached to a tongue depressor. He carried it to the kitchen and made a show of tucking it into his jacket.

This time he got “the Mom look”. “We would have trusted you to bring it. You didn’t need to make a production out of showing us,” she scolded gently.

Which made him feel about five years old. You’re not ready for this. You’re going to get too excited, and what if you yell and hurt someone, even deafen them? Recently he’d only broken some windows, set off car alarms and made dogs bark, and he hadn’t permanently hurt anyone since he was an infant, and of course he didn’t remember deafening his parents, and…

His stomach heaved and he slapped his hand to his mouth and ran, barely making it to the bathroom,
the toilet, before vomiting up his breakfast, shaking, his vision tunneling as he gasped for breath, because there wasn’t any air, he couldn’t breathe, and…

The soothing hands on his back grounded him the way nothing else could. They confused him at first, feeling like neither his mom or dad, until he realized it was both of them together, squeezed into the bathroom with him, which meant they both felt guilty and blamed themselves for upsetting him, when of course, it was his own fault, for eating too fast, and too much, and letting his stupid insecurities get to him.

That knowledge gave him the strength to stand, to flush and turn to the sink, signing he was fine now, as he filled a cup with water and washed out his mouth, spitting into the sink, then got out his mouthwash again and rinsed with that too, the refreshing but too sweet mint replacing the nasty taste of vomit in his mouth. He forced a believable reassuring smile to his face, one he’d faked a number of times in the past, different than the fake smile he always wore at school to try to look more likable, like someone you’d want to be friends with, not the weird hearing kid in the deaf kid school who was there because of his quirk, so he wouldn’t hurt his students or teachers.

He had to be good enough to get into the UA Hero Program, so he could help people with his quirk, to atone for what he’d done to his parents and Okazawa-san. “I’ll make you proud of me,” he swore, silently as always.

“We’re already proud of you, Hizashi. And we love you. Now run along. You don’t want to miss your bus,” his mother signed back, as his father nodded in agreement.

“I love you too,” he signed, and then he hugged them both, clinging to them for a few extra moments, before heading for the door.

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Fifteen year old Tensei Iida jolted awake with the first beep of his alarm and instantly muted it, to reduce any chance of it waking his baby brother Tenya, whose nursery was in the room between his own and his parents. Then he jetted off his bed with a calculatedly brief and silent burst of turbo power from his elbow vents, congratulating himself on the increased precision of his control, as he landed smoothly on his feet.

His oldest brother, Taro, had been right. Using his turbo engines for everyday activities not directly related to his hero training was definitely helping him master the control issues that had been plaguing him since he first manifested his quirk. Taro’s boosters were in his thighs, Tani’s were behind his shoulder blades, like their father’s, and Taizo’s were in his lower back, so each had challenges mastering their quirks, though Tani had the easiest road, as in almost all instances, his father’s advice worked on the first try.

Taro, Tani and Taizo were 25, 22 and 20 respectively, each established heroes in their own right but integral parts of their parents’ agency, Team IDATEN. Tensei had become somewhat contentedly resigned to spending his entire life the often overprotected and doted upon baby brother, the one who, as everyone was fond of telling him, was the unexpected but happy surprise of an older couple who had not anticipated having another child.

He grinned, remembering the stunned look upon brothers’ faces at the family meeting his parents had called 11 months ago, where they announced that his mother was pregnant again, with another boy. She was just past her first trimester, having waited to tell anyone but their dad, as the risk of miscarriage was much higher for a 47 year old woman, no matter how physically fit and young looking, than it had been for a 32 year old.
Tensei, a carefree and happy person by nature, had not stopped smiling for weeks at the thought of having a baby brother. He was no longer going to be the baby of the family. He’d finally have a tiny precious brother he could dote upon, teach, and lovingly tease, the way his brothers did with him. And as the three of them all had their own homes, now, he would be the one his baby brother saw the most often, the one his parents relied upon. He couldn’t be happier at the prospect.

The reality had proven even more wonderful than he’d hoped. Tenya was the perfect baby, quiet and compliant, when it came to eating and sleeping, but also keenly alert and intelligent, inquisitive and completely fascinated by everything around him. Just thinking about his 4½ month old precious brother, Tensei couldn’t resist the urge to creep into his room to sneak a peek at him, though a glance at the baby monitor on his nightstand clearly showed he was smiling in his sleep, dreaming soft, sweet little baby dreams. Sometimes he was almost too perfect. If he were fussy, Tensei could pick him up and cuddle him, but he couldn’t justify doing that when he was sleeping so peacefully. But perhaps he could very gently rub his silky soft baby belly for luck, as if he was a tiny Buddha.

Grinning, he headed for his door, snuck down the hallway, and then crept into his baby brother’s room. He was hovering over the crib when he heard the disembodied whispered lovingly amused voice of his mom chastise him, “Tensei Hiro Iida, don’t you dare wake your brother.”

He felt his face flush with heat at being caught, and belatedly realized that the baby monitor didn’t magically just show Tenya, the camera was focused upon the entire inside of the crib, and anyone leaning over it. He lifted his hands with a shrug that implied, “Who could blame me?”, and then with a devilish grin darted his hand into the crib and very slowly and gently rubbed Tenya’s soft, round little baby belly.

“Tensei!” his mom scolded, but as usual, she sounded exasperated and amused, rather than annoyed or angry, and he could hear his dad chuckling.

“Don’t you dare encourage him. What is it with the Iida men, that they just can’t keep their hands to themselves?” his mom complained, not sounding at all put out by it.

“Turn off that speaker and I’ll remind you how much you really don’t mind that,” his dad challenged playfully.

“Tomi Kazuo Iida, don’t you dare give me that look. Tenya is only 4½ months old and we have to help Tensei get ready for his Exam, and I would have already started breakfast if you weren’t such a shameless cuddler,” his mom chastised softly.

“That’s the beauty of Taro running the agency, knowing I can take a full six months of paternity leave with my beautiful wife and darling new baby boy I helped her create. I can indulge in all the cuddling, snuggling, and hugging I want without feeling guilty about work, all of which are integral parts of both a father’s and husband’s duties,” his dad reminded her.

Tensei risked sneaking in another belly rub, while they were distracted with one another, not because he needed more luck, but how could he leave this morning with only a single rub of that precious tummy?

“Tensei, you need to get dressed, honey. Come downstairs when you’re done and breakfast will be ready and on the table for you,” his mom encouraged. “And you need to get dressed, Tomi, so you can drive him to the test.”

With a last lingering look at Tenya’s sweet sleeping face, wishing he’d thought to bring his cell phone in so he could take a few dozen new pictures, he reluctantly turned and headed for his own room. Not that he wasn’t excited about the Hero Exam – because who wouldn’t be – but he was
pretty confident he’d do well enough to land a slot in Class 1-A of the Hero Program, just as his three older brothers had, and his dad before them. That particular family record was one of the few he’d never dream of breaking.

After showering and blow drying his hair, he pulled out the custom designed and tailored skintight black coverall that IDATEN’s Tech Support had made for him, the same style his brothers wore under their hero armor, which was similar to a professional racecar driver’s coveralls, but more impressive. The specially developed material wasn’t only fireproof, well beyond their specs, protecting against anything short of a welding torch, but also insulating, waterproof, and even bullet and blunt force impact resistant as well. The only thing it wouldn’t be any real protection against was a blade, but very few villains ran around with knives or swords, preferring to use either their quirks or firearms. The top collar could even extend and pull over his face as both a temporary gas mask, or a mask to conceal his identity, or protect his face, and the back collar could pull up into a hood to cover his hair and protect the back and sides of his head. His father had assured him that they weren’t breaking any rules by him wearing it, but it might give him a critical edge during the Exam.

He pulled on the custom black briefs and socks that went under it, and then the coveralls themselves, zipping it up. It clung to him like a second skin, molding to every muscle, and had special holes for his vents in each elbow, unlike his brothers’ and fathers’, which had holes in the back or legs, dependent upon the person. He wondered where little Tenya’s vents were going to appear. It would be so cool if they were on his elbows, too! Then he’d be able to teach him all the tricks and tips he’d learned, specific to his own vents.

Tensei made sure the matching gloves and goggles that completed the outfit were in the pocket made for them, and then added his cell phone and ear buds into the special pocket built for them as well. He’d also be able to slip a couple of water bottles into some of the extra tool straps that were sewn into the coveralls. Their Hero Support team had eagerly planned for every possible need and contingency of their heroes.

He made sure his hair still looked good and then took off at a run, out his door, down the hall, and down the stairs, taking them two at a time and jumping down the last six. He would have used his engines, but his mom and dad had a strict, “No turbos in the house” rule, thanks to Taro both breaking his arm and putting a sizable hole in the wall when he was six, well before he had mastered either turning or braking.

His parents were already both in the kitchen, and a delicious smelling breakfast of broiled fish, steamed vegetables, fruit, jasmine rice and green tea was already at his place. But best of all, Tenya was there, in his father’s lap, awake, his bright blue eyes shining, his chubby little cheeks bursting into a happy smile, and his stubby little arms reaching out eagerly towards his favorite brother.

Breakfast forgotten, he reached for the baby.

“Oh no you don’t, young man,” his mom argued, darting between them, not even needing to activate her speed quirk, but instead relying on one of her Mom Powers. “Breakfast first and then baby hugs.”

Tensei pouted, using his best puppy eyes on her, but his father laughed. “Sorry, son, but you’re not the baby of the family anymore. That look is no longer your special secret second quirk. Tenya’s now inherited that power, he’s the one who can break our hearts just by looking soulfully at us and wrap us around his tiny little finger, he just doesn’t know it yet, do you, Tenya-chan?”

All three of them looked at the baby, and to their devastation, happy, gurgly little Tenya suddenly looked like his little soul was being crushed. His lower lip was quivering, as he reached out both arms towards his brother. “Te-te!” he cried out, almost a sob.
They stared at him thunderstruck.

“Did he really just ask for Tensei?” his mom asked dubiously.

“Te-te te-te!” Baby Tenya demanded, ignoring the comforting bouncing of his father’s leg, his arms starting to wave almost frantically, but in jerky little uncoordinated baby movements.

“Hey, Robo Bro, calm down, your big brother loves you,” Tensei assured him, as he lifted him out of his dad’s arms.

Tenya immediately started grinning and cooing happily, the uncharacteristic temper tantrum gone as if it had never been. Tensei laughed, grinned at his parents’ astonished expressions and then looked down proudly at his devious little brother. “Masterful use of the puppy eyes, Tenya-chan,” he whispered mock confidentially, loud enough for his parents to hear, winking at them conspiratorially.

“I warned you this one was going to be a particular handful,” his mom told his dad, still stunned looking, but smiling.

“We’re in for another arm breaker, aren’t we?” his dad bemoaned with a mock sorrowful shake of his head.

“No, more like a heartbreaker, right Tenya-chan?” his mom teased.

Instead of laughing and cooing like he expected, Tenya unexpectedly looked incredibly serious. Tensei half expected him to solemnly nod in agreement, or perhaps argue that he would never do such a cold and callous thing as to break anyone’s heart.

He sat down with Tenya on his lap, thanked them for the food, and began eating left handed, while holding onto his brother with his right.

“Someone’s going to be distracted at the Exam,” his mom teased, but then she grew serious. “Don’t be, alright? I know it’s a test, and it’s theoretically safe, but there were some pretty serious injuries the year Taizo took his test, when that building unexpectedly collapsed onto half a dozen students. If it wasn’t for Recovery Girl… I know they review the Exam and fine tune it every year, but accidents happen. Don’t let thoughts of coming home to Tenya distract you, alright?”

Now was Tensei’s turn to look serious. “Don’t worry mom. I’ll be careful. Nothing bad will happen to me, I promise.”
Shouta Aizawa stared up at the Pro Rescue Hero Lighthouse in disgust as he finished outlining the rules of the UA Hero Course Entrance Exam from the raised stage to the auditorium’s captive seated audience of hundreds of anxious and eager potential students. Shouta should have known the Exam would be set up to work against him. *Everything was always* against him.

He’d clawed and fought his way through elementary and middle school, through his father’s indifference and his mother’s abuse and neglect, then later through the stigma of his father’s trial, the bullying and death threats and anonymous attacks resulting from his father’s conviction, through their forced relocation to “protective” housing, through his emancipation from both those outstanding role models of parenthood, through his evening and night jobs, as he scrabbled to pay his rent and feed himself, while fighting through his exhaustion to simply stay awake long enough to complete his schoolwork, to maintain the A average he needed in every single course simply so he could be allowed the privilege he needed in every single course simply so he could be allowed the privilege of taking the UA Hero Course Entrance Exam, in order to finally escape his past and hopefully qualify for a scholarship, so he could quit his jobs and focus on his studies and become the hero he had always needed to be. But there was no escape.

His entire life had been a constant uphill battle, so of course, like Sisyphus, just when he’d seen the light of hope at the top of the mountain, they’d handed him an even bigger boulder to push up to the very top, just so they could watch it flatten him as it rolled back down. Of course there would be giant robots instead of students or even Pro Hero teachers as the sole opponents in the UA Hero Course Entrance Exam. Because he had a quirk that only worked on people and he didn’t even have his whip, because they weren’t allowed to bring weapons into the Exam, they were supposed to rely solely upon their quirks to fight. All he had now were his self-taught fighting skills, the strength and dexterity of his life-hardened body, and his wits.

Worse, to add salt to the wound, he had to listen in mounting annoyance to his fellow competitors’ disembodied voices excitedly boasting about how perfectly their quirks were suited to the test, as the students began standing, and started waiting for the aisles to clear enough so they could make their way to the designated exits from the packed auditorium. He kept seated, not because he’d given up, because he’d still do all he could to pass, but because it would be a number of minutes before his part of the row would be able to exit into the choked aisles.

“I’ll crush every one of them with my super strength.”

“I’ll punch them to pieces with my invulnerability.”

“Not if I melt them, first.”

“I’ll rust them all into dust.”

“Not if I reach them first with my super speed, and make a cyclone around them.”

“Yeah, well I can just vibrate them apart with a single touch.”

“All I need to do is yell!” another voice cried excitedly, and dozens of hands went to ringing ears, Shouta’s included.

This time Shouta could see the person, sitting three rows in front of him, from both the direction of
the glares of the other kids, and the sight of a wide-eyed blond-haired boy with his hand clapped over his mouth.

“What the hell, asshole?”

“Yo, fuckface!”

“Are you trying to deafen us to take us out of the competition?”

“You heard the rules and you broke them.”

“You’re not allowed to use your quirk on school grounds, except during the Exam!”

“You blew it, loser. You just disqualified yourself.”

“No great loss.”

“Yeah. With that lame-ass power, you don’t belong in UA, not even in General Studies.”

With each vicious and cruel statement, the boy looked more and more panicked, guilty and desperate.

Shouta was about ready to intervene, because the last thing he needed was for these bullying assholes to start getting violent, and gang up on the loudmouthed idiot, when it was becoming increasingly apparent the quirk use hadn’t been intentional. But then like a rubber band snapping, the kid’s hand plunged into his leather jacket.

Shouta shot to his feet, visions of the Shibuya Station Tragedy flashing through his head. He vaulted across the chair backs, because the teachers might have scanned and searched them for weapons before entering, but if this kid had something, a bomb or grenade or gun, in addition to his quirk, and was unstable and had snapped, or maybe even been here intentionally to ambush the Exam, a proto-villain wanting to make a name for himself by going down in a blaze of glory and taking a concentrated audience of proto-hero kids down with him, but had lost his nerve and acted sooner than planned, Shouta wasn’t about to die without trying to stop it while saving as many kids as he could.

He activated his quirk to nullify the kid’s as he put him in a chokehold, his right hand darting around the boy’s wrist, yanking it out of his jacket to reveal the weapon, stopping the twist just in time not to break bone when he saw he’d been pulling out not a weapon at all, but a small, well worn sign saying, “I’m sorry! It was an accident!” – because it was belatedly clear this idiot kid simply had poor quirk control and shouldn’t even be here – when a cloud of purple dust enveloped them both, and Shouta felt all the strength leave his body.

As Shouta fell down on top of the boy he realized the two of them, and from the sound of it, at least two dozen other kids, maybe more, had just become the victims of a quirk, an attack he’d failed to see, because he’d been too focused on what he thought was the only threat to be aware of his surroundings, an accomplice, a villain, a Pro Hero belatedly intervening, or-

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Nemuri Yamada looked at her handiwork with the sinking feeling of someone who had meant to help, but had definitely made things worse. She’d only intended to knock out the two fighting boys with her somnambulist quirk, not over three dozen other kids.

As she stared down at them, someone with an incredibly well muscled body quite literally rocketed
over to her: he was using some kind of jet propulsion quirk that looked like it came from his elbows. He was covered head to toe in black, even his head was fully covered, with goggles over his eyes, so he must be one of the Pro Heroes proctoring the test, because the students weren’t allowed to wear costumes.

She belatedly realized he wasn't stopping, that he was about to ram into her, and she dove to the side.

He overshot her, and headed full speed towards the far wall, gaining altitude rapidly to avoid crashing into any of the other students, dozens and dozens who were panicking now, some yelling, some screaming, many running for the exits, as others were turning towards her, flames and water spouts and tentacles reaching over the crowd to come for her.

“Oh shit,” she whispered, and then made a pre-emptive strike, sending out another puff of sleep dust, thickly laced with her pheromones, downing the nearest ones who were attacking her.

But then, out of nowhere, Rocket Man came back, slamming into her before she could dodge this time, and now they were both flying over the sea of panicked kids, but they were heading for the wall, and this time it didn’t look like he was going to recover fast enough. “Let go!” she demanded, panicked, struggling, punching him, blowing her dust in his face, but he appeared to be immune to everything, even her quirk, though the kids under them dropped like stones.

Then, unexpectedly, at the last instant, a jet of thrust shot out from just his left arm, enough to spin him around in a complete 180, just before they hit, his body cushioning her from the worst of the impact, she realized, a split second before she blacked out.

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One minute Tensei was listening to his fellow potential students bragging about how well their powers were suited to the test, and the next, there was an ear splitting shout, “ALL I NEED TO DO IS YELL!” and then an angry babble of voices, as dozens of students collapsed in their seats, cupping their ears.

Fortunately, Tensei wasn’t near enough to the quirk user to be affected by it. He winced in sympathy. He doubted the wildly gesturing blond haired boy had intended to use his quirk, but intended or not, he’d just broken the rules they had each signed off on as part of the Exam. Quirk use outside the training grounds where the Exam was taking place would result in immediate disqualification from the Exam. That unfortunate boy had just gotten a zero on the test, and lost his chance to enter the Hero Program this year.

It didn’t sound like the students around him were nearly as understanding or empathetic. There were angry yells and slurs.

Tensei began wading through the crowded aisle, angling towards what looked like it would soon become an altercation, scanning the crowded auditorium as he did so for intervention by some of the Pro Hero teachers, but the only one he saw was Lighthouse, and he was surrounded by students apparently distracting him with questions. Most of the other teachers were probably either posted outside the exits to direct the students, or already at the Exam site, getting prepared to proctor, to ensure no one was injured too severely during the test.

He looked back towards the irate students, hoping things had calmed down, but just the opposite was the case. A black-haired boy in a black tracksuit leapt over the chair backs, his eyes glowing red, hair floating eerily, as he attacked the blond, not just using whatever his quirk was, but grappling him, punching him in the stomach, or oh no, did he have claws, or a knife, was he actually killing him?
Tensei yanked the collar up and over his mouth and nose, and the hood over his head for protection, and his goggles on to cover his eyes, so he could still see at top speed, and then immediately activated his quirk, cursing himself for not doing so before, but he hadn’t realized the boy was in deadly danger.

He rocketed towards the pinned and helpless blond, even as he and the boy in black were almost immediately shrouded by a cloud of purple dust. Suddenly they as well as dozens of other students began dropping like flies.

*Gas, it’s gas!*

As his stomach clenched in fear for the fallen students, Tensei held his breath, in case the fabric of his suit wasn’t enough protection, confident that he was going fast enough that he’d punch through the cloud in seconds, intent on tackling the trampily dressed girl who’d hopefully not just turned the fight into a massacre.

*Is she a villain, working with the black-haired boy? Are they here under false pretenses, to attack the students, to destroy the UA’s reputation, or kill the teachers? But that boy collapsed too, from the purple gas.*

He lunged at the girl but missed as she expertly dove out of the way, and he realized he was flying too fast to turn before hitting the opposite wall, and desperately turned some of that forward momentum into vertical ascent, thankful for the vaulted ceiling.

He flew upwards, and skimmed past the wall in a broad, sweeping turn, with only millimeters to spare. Then he dove back downwards, and towards the girl again.

This time, she didn’t evade fast enough.

He wrapped his arms around her, tearing her away from the mayhem she’d caused. The auditorium had erupted into chaos, with kids screaming, pushing, fighting to get out, to escape from the gas, too many funneling into too few exits, while others, true heroes, ran to the fallen students, heedless of the potential danger to themselves, needing to help.

The girl was cursing, kicking, struggling, but he had clamped her arms tightly to her body, and she was landing only glancing blows which he scarcely even felt as impacts, thanks to the armored coveralls. He shot out a jet of power, to turn, to slow and land and… his right vent misfired.

It was jammed, flooded, overwhelmed, and they were heading for the wall!

If he activated just the left they’d spin out of control, and if he dropped his prisoner at these speeds, over the chairs, he could easily break her neck. The only option left was to let out a split second burst with his left vent – if he did it just right, he’d spin and take the impact spread out on his back and legs, which would protect her.

“Sorry, Mom,” Tensei apologized as he broke his promise about not getting hurt, activating his left vent for the split second solo burst, and spun like a top, as he planned, praying he wouldn’t break his back as well as his promise, that he hadn’t just paralyzed himself, as his world exploded.

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“Come on Taro! Why can’t we take a shift off, just this once? Tensei’s Exam is today, and you know Mom and Dad are holding a surprise party to welcome him back after taking it. We all know he’s going to pass with flying colors,” Taizo Iida urged.
“We can’t take the shift off because of Mom and Dad. The only reason Dad agreed to take a full six months of paternity leave off was because I agreed to run IDATEN while he was out, and the two of you agreed to step into my shoes, alternating as Ingenium, and only using your own hero names, Eruca and Missilis, while the other one was using mine. Besides, what if something unexpected happens, and Tensei knows he messed up and isn’t going to get into 1-A, or even pass at all? You know the test changed five years ago, just after you took it, that it got a lot tougher for people with a speed quirk, that it favors strength and destructive quirks now,” Taro Iida argued.

“Don’t say things like that! Are you trying to jinx our baby brother?” Taizo scolded.

Taro grinned. “He’s not the baby anymore, remember? Although from what Mom texted, Baby Tenya’s growing up pretty fast. Only 4½ months old and already trying to call our Little Tensei by name.”

Taizo grinned back. “Yeah, looks like Tenya-chan skipped right over ma-ma and da-da. It’s a shame Tani’s on patrol. I bet he’s dying to kid Dad about it, after reading Mom’s text.” Dad said he didn’t have a favorite, that he loved all his sons equally, but they all knew he and Tani had always been especially close, because Tani’s quirk engines were in exactly the same position as their Dad’s.

“Do you think-.” He stopped mid-word as Mari, their father’s Executive Assistant and Taro’s fiancé, flung open the door and ran into the room without knocking, pale and wide-eyed, and headed not to Taro, but to the wall mounted TV and turned it on without a word.

Taizo’s heart stopped. “What’s happened? Is it Tani? Or Mom and Dad?” he demanded, expecting to see some nightmare scene of a villain battle Tani had somehow lost, or of their parents’ house, demolished in a villain’s vengeance attack, in spite of their security system. He frowned, uncomprehending, staring at the screen. “That’s not… what…?”

A frazzled, frightened but determined looking reporter was speaking. “...to you live this breaking story of a villain attack in progress at the prestigious UA High School. The School has gone into lockdown mode, slamming down their steel shutters and activating their aerial defense system against attacks. You can see here dozens of panicked students fleeing from the auditorium, before the shutters descended, trapping them inside school grounds.

“Today was to have been the Entrance Exam for the next generation of hopeful heroes, but it has instead turned into a tragedy, to carnage, as these exclusive cell phone images our network received show dozens of students falling victim to an alleged villain’s poison gas attack, in a terrifying reprisal of the Shibuya Station Tragedy nearly a year ago today, when teenager Ren Kotara’s attack upon schoolmates who had bullied him resulted in the tragic collateral death of 216 additional civilians, over two thirds of whom were students on their way home from school.

“Eye witness reports here-“

Taro grabbed Mari by her biceps. “Mari, call Tani, he’s closest, get him over there, now, tell him everything you hear!” he demanded, and then he shot out the door. “Masano, activate every sidekick, get them to the UA, now,” he commanded to the operatives in the dispatch hub, his voice fading rapidly.

“Tensei,” Taizo whispered, horrified, momentarily too stunned to move.

It was hearing Mari’s voice, calm and level, after she’d looked so frantic before, overriding dispatch and patching directly to Tani, reporting everything they’d seen, what she was now watching, that galvanized him enough to act. Taizo shot out of their father’s office, Taro’s temporary office, heading for the equipment room, his suit storage locker.
Taro was already putting on the final pieces of his armor when he arrived. Taizo would have argued that Taro wasn’t supposed to go in the field anymore, not till their Dad returned, but this wasn’t just another villain attack, this was Tensei, their baby brother, he could be dying, he could already be… No! Stop it! This is Tensei we’re talking about. He’s smart, fast, strong. He’ll be fine. He’s a hero. And there are hundreds of other students there too. They need you to be focused.

Still, Taizo’s hands were shaking so badly he could barely fasten his right vambrace. Because their little brother was a hero through and through. Which meant in a villain attack, Tensei would put himself right in the middle of it, to save as many kids as he could, regardless of the danger to himself.

“Please keep him safe,” he whispered in prayer, even as Taro jetted off, not waiting for him to finish donning his armor.

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“Honey, can you get the step ladder and hang this for me in the arch leading into the room?” Suzu Iida requested, holding out the custom made silver and black, “Congratulations, Tensei!” banner and a roll of clear postage tape, balancing baby Tenya on her hip.

“Sure,” her husband, Tomi, agreed with a grin, but instead he launched into the air and hovered by the doorway.

“Tomi! What are you, five? You know the rules. You helped me make them after Taro broke his arm: no quirk engine use in the house,” she scolded, exasperated, even as Tenya shrieked and clapped in delight, staring up at his dad.

“Yes, sweetie, Daddy can fly. Keeping him from flying has always been the problem,” she complained, without heat.

“You secretly love it when I’m a naughty boy,” Tomi teased.

Suzu felt her heartbeat speed, even as she cupped her free hand over Tenya’s left ear. “If you get done quickly enough, and Tenya takes his nap, I’ll show you naughty,” she flirted right back.

Her cell phone rang, and she glanced at it, frowning when she saw Mari’s name, and answered. “Mari, let me guess: Taro’s decided he needs to work instead of come to the party but is too chicken to tell me himself?” Suzu teased.

“No, I… I was right. You don’t know, yet. I’m so sorry, I didn’t want to be the one to have to tell you, but I realized it would be better than finding out from the news and- Not now, Yuki! I’m on with Iida-san,” Mari snapped harshly, as Suzu literally felt the blood drain from her face. “No, yes, of course I want to… Suzu, please hold for a moment…” Mari asked, and then her voice was replaced by the soft strains of a classical wood flute, their office’s hold music.

Tomi had descended. “Which son?” he asked tersely, his words echoing her thoughts, as she tucked the phone between her shoulder and ear and then thrust Tenya at him. As soon as he safely had hold of Tenya, she activated her own superspeed quirk and raced to their home theatre, for the first time regretting not having a TV in the living room. She flicked on the huge wallmounted flatscreen to the local news, needing to know which son – Taro, Tani or Taizo – was hurt, or worse. Please, please don’t be worse.

A female reporter was speaking, “…from the cell phone images you’ve already seen, at least three dozen teenage victims, but from eye witness reports, as many as a hundred total student applicant casualties so far, in what appears to be an ongoing villain attack at the prestigious UA High
"School."

Oh God. Tensei. It’s Tensei. The students. Children, they’re killing children.

“As you can see, heroes have been streaming in from all over the city, many of them beating the first responders who have also begun arriving in droves. We’re now seeing multiple heroes from individual agencies: in front of me are Titania and Sylvan from ECO Corp.; Maximus, Romulus and Remus from Coliseum Enterprises; and Ingenium, Eruca and Missilis from IDATEN, as well as over four dozen IDATEN sidekicks, by far the largest presence by a single agency, fueling the fire of speculation that one of the hero candidates trapped within the school might be the second youngest Iida son, whose name we cannot release, as he, like many of the young hopeful students here, is 15 and still a minor.

Suzu heard the familiar, comforting roar of Tomi’s engines as he darted into the room, and then he was beside her, hugging her. “Tensei, villain attack at UA, IDATEN’s there. Tenya?” she asked, providing the maximum information in as few words as possible, embracing him back.

“Crib,” he replied tersely and then was silent, and she started listening again too.

“-street behind me is choked with police cars, ambulances and fire trucks, but so far, to the outrage of those arriving, as well as a number of desperate parents who have contacted our station hoping to see images of their loved ones, none of the first responders or even the heroes have been able to enter. What was once thought to be the impenetrable fortress gates of the school now remain locked against all attempts at assistance. We now return you to our studio where… wait! They’re opening! Kenji, are you still filming?” she demanded, as a lone figure stepped out of a small door that appeared in the huge metal plate blocking the entrance.

“Principal Masayama! Can you tell us what’s happened?” the reporter urged.

The aging hero scowled at her. “Are you certain you wish to hear? I assure you, while admittedly a bit overdramatic, it won’t be half as ratings worthy as the story you’ve concocted of a villain attack against the school. Given their ages and inexperience, I can’t blame the students for jumping to such an erroneous conclusion, but as adults, I would have expected a more rational approach than such sensationalization of what, if it were true, would have been a tragedy and not the media circus you’ve turned this into.”

Dozens of outraged voices clamored with questions.

“We’re still investigating to determine the motivations behind the incident that occurred, but the outcome is clear. I am certain you will all be relieved to hear that, contrary to the damaging and incendiary rumors you reporters have been spreading, no one has died. 103 students were rendered unconscious by three separate uses of a student’s quirk, but they are completely unharmed. 117 other students sustained minor injuries, from pushing, shoving and trampling of those trying to exit the auditorium. Another student sustained somewhat more serious injuries, but only a single student was seriously injured, when his quirk apparently failed to function properly.

“The remaining 632 students were physically unharmed. They will be released to their parents’ care as quickly as possible, unless they voluntarily indicate they would like to speak to one of our counselors, and of course, our counselors will be available at whatever future time they might have need of them. The Exam has been postponed, and will be rescheduled within the month, following a complete investigation of the incidents of the day, and any necessary remedial action in regards to our processes and procedures, to ensure such an incident does not happen again.”

There was another clamor of questions, primarily among them the name of the seriously injured
“He is a minor, so we will not be releasing that information. We are in the process of contacting his parents.”

As if on cue, Tomi’s cell phone rang. Suzu looked at him in dread, as he held the phone up like it was a snake and might bite him, and she saw him pale. He put the phone on speaker as he answered the call which she now saw was listed as UA High School Administration. “Tomi Iida speaking,” he answered curtly.

“Iida-san. This is Acting Vice Principal Koichi Hanasei, of UA High School. I’m calling about your son, Tensei. There was an incident in the auditorium prior to the start of the Exam, and unfortunately, he was injured,” the man apologized. “As per the emergency treatment agreement you signed as part of the paperwork for the Exam, he’s being treated in the campus Infirmary by Recovery Girl, and it is hoped that he will make a complete recovery.”

Hoped, not “he’s expected to”. Oh God. “This is Suzu Iida, Tensei’s mother. What is the nature and extent of his injuries?”

“Now that he is receiving treatment, they are not life threatening, but we’d rather not go into too much detail on the phone. We strongly urge that you come to the school. In answer to your question, he was injured while attempting to subdue a student during an altercation with other students, when his quirk apparently misfired, and they both impacted the wall at an accelerated velocity, though he bore the brunt of the impact, unintentionally shielding the other student,” Hanasei reported.

“I assure you, Vice Principal, that if my son had any control at all of his quirk at that point in time, selflessly shielding the other student would have been completely intentional,” Suzu snapped, her temper flaring at the implication otherwise.

“I didn’t mean to upset you further. We can make arrangements for transportation for the two of you to-“ the man began, but Tomi cut him off.

“I’ll drive myself and my wife as close to the school as we can reach and then we’ll go by quirk from there. We’re both Pro Heroes. We deal with traumatic injury as part of the job. Our other sons are also Pro Heroes, and they are far closer than we are. They are waiting outside your school doors as we speak. I want you to immediately contact Ingenium, Eruca and Missilis of IDATEN, my sons Taro, Tani and Taizo, and escort them to their younger brother. He needs to be with family. But first you’re going to tell us exactly what Tensei’s injuries are,” Tomi demanded.

“I… yes sir, of course,” Hanasei agreed, completely overwhelmed and flustered sounding. “I don’t know all the medical details; you’ll need to speak to Recovery Girl for that. I know that he hit the wall on his back at a high velocity. Apparently even though students were told not to wear uniforms to the Exam, the coveralls he was wearing had been engineered to withstand an impressive amount of blunt force trauma, protecting the wearer. We’ll be reassessing our policy on protective gear, separate from costumes, as well as other safety and security issues because he… um… likely wouldn’t have survived the impact otherwise.

“Before he was treated, he had a severe concussion, a number of cracked ribs in his back, hairline arm and leg fractures, and some organ and soft tissue damage, but the strongly reinforced spine on the garment protected his backbone – it was bruised but not shattered, as it otherwise would have been. So… um… on the whole he was rather lucky. Of course, without Recovery Girl’s treatments he’d be looking at months of hospitalization and then more of physical therapy, by the time the casts came off, but he will endure significantly less with her treatments.”
The idiot actually made it sound like they should be grateful he’d been injured at their school.

“We’ll be there as soon as we can, but we don’t want to hear our sons were delayed in seeing their brother, is that understood?” Tomi demanded.

“Yes sir!” the man all but squeaked.

How someone so timid had been promoted even to the Acting Vice Principal was astonishing, and Suzu would certainly be researching that, as well as what had happened to the Vice Principal and how long the school had been without a competent one.

Tomi ended the call and immediately dialed Taro, again on speaker.

“Dad! Mari’s been trying to get both of you. Mom isn’t answering her phone, though the line’s still active, and your line’s been busy,” Taro answered, sounding anxious and upset, instead of coolheaded and composed, the way he’d always been, regardless of the danger.

“Sorry, son. We were watching the news and on with the school. I need you and your brothers to go to the front gate. Acting Vice Principal Koichi Hanasei is going to let you inside, to see Tensei. He’s alive, but it’s serious, there are fractures and soft tissue damage, but no mortal wounds, thanks to his armor lining protecting him to a certain degree. Your mom and I are on the way, but we have to bring Tenya to Mari to watch at IDATEN first, and traffic is probably gridlocked in half the city from this, so we’ll be a while. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

“Understood. We won’t leave his side,” Taro promised, sounding shaken but determined.

“We love you son. See you soon,” Tomi concluded.


“We’ll be careful, I promise,” Tomi replied and then he ended the call.

“We need to get Tenya. He’s probably howling up a storm by now, I’m sorry, but I could tell you needed me, so I made sure he was safe, but then I left, while he was crying, he could tell something’s wrong,” Tomi apologized, even as he pulled her into his arms.

As much as Suzu needed the hug, she was about to protest that Tenya needed her, until she realized the hug was as much for Tomi’s sake as hers, that he was shaking. She wrapped her arms around him.

“He’s still alive, Tomi. Nothing else matters. We can deal with any injury, even permanent effects, if we need to. I can’t say we’ll make sure nothing like this ever happens to him again – he’s training to become a Pro Hero – but we’ll do everything in our power to make certain he and the rest of the boys always come home,” she promised.

Tomi nodded, still holding her, and cleared his throat a few times. “I know. I love you Suzu,” he whispered gruffly into her ear.

“Come on. Tenya needs to see his mom and dad and hear his brother’s going to be okay,” Suzu urged.

Tomi took a deep breath and pulled away, and then he jetted and she raced up the stairs.
Ingenium, Eruca and Missilis jetted to the doorway, as soon as a timid and overwhelmed looking figure in a suit opened the door behind the Principal, who was explaining to the gathered press the procedure for parents to pick up their children from the school, completely ignoring the myriad questions reporters were asking.

“Acting Vice Principal Koichi Hanasei? I’m Ingenium, Taro Iida, and these are Eruca and Missilis. You spoke to my parents about letting the three of us in to see our brother,” Taro greeted.

The man bowed in greeting. “Yes. Please, follow me,” he replied, turning back around and all but fleeing the bright lights surrounding the cameras.

They entered the school grounds and the Vice Principal quickly closed the door behind them. “I’ve been here six years, and we’ve never had anything like this happen before. The Exam is always a bit exciting, sometimes there are injuries, but nothing too serious, we’re careful to fully proctor the test, to intervene if the students appear to be in mortal danger, though I admit, there have been a few close calls, but they weren’t even at the Exam site yet, they were still in the auditorium, and Lighthouse was the only Pro Hero still in the room, everyone else was outside the exits, guiding students, and it’s just a nightmare, something like this happening, and then those reporters, descending like vultures, they seemed almost gleeful, when students, our future students, were injured, and it’s just awful.”

“Why didn’t you allow first responders and Rescue Heroes to enter school grounds?” Taro demanded, his normal diplomacy flying out the window with his outrage at being kept from seeing Tensei, from not being allowed to assist the other children.

“We already have dozens of Pro Heroes on staff, they were right outside the building, they ran inside as soon as they saw the students fleeing and screaming, even as Argos – he was the one viewing the security monitors – radioed what had happened. The teachers stopped the panic and restored order, they ensured the safe evacuation of the auditorium for the ambulatory students, allowing our Recovery Girl to assess and triage the most seriously injured students, with assistance from the Rescue Heroes.

“As soon as it became clear the gas used was merely knockout gas, that the majority of the students affected were already waking up and suffering no apparent ill effects – we reviewed the file of the student who had attacked them to ensure there were no deleterious after affects – Principal Masayama realized that having additional Heroes not affiliated with the school on the grounds would just cause more chaos and panic the students further. Our primary concern was treating the students who had been injured – particularly your brother, as his injuries were the most severe – as well as the student he had apprehended, who was also injured, the one who launched the gas attack,” Hanasei claimed, as he led them to the building Taro knew contained the Infirmary, from his own attendance at UA.

Taro would have jetted past the man, but he was afraid there might be teachers on guard preventing unwanted access. He hoped there would be, but considering how incompetently they had bungled the Exam and the aftermath of the altercation so far, there might well not be. But he couldn’t risk getting on the administration’s bad side, at least for the moment. Any other time seeing the school he trained in would have aroused fond memories, but right now, all Taro could think of was that they’d allowed his baby brother to be attacked and injured in a place where he should have been safe.

“Have you ascertained why that student attacked the others? The Principal claimed it wasn’t a villain attack, but how can you be so sure that a villain wasn’t posing as a legitimate aspiring student, that
they weren’t using the Exam as a means of access to the school, to a number of aspiring Heroes. Do you have a telepath on staff?” Tani questioned.

“No, but it was nothing like that, I assure you. The altercation centered around four students, including your brother, but it doesn’t appear that any part of it was intentionally malicious. I don’t believe I’m at liberty to say anything more about it, though, since two of the four students are minors, they’re fifteen, and considering the injuries and potential legal liability,” Hanasei added nervously.

“You almost got our baby brother killed, and you’re worried about lawsuits?” Taizo demanded angrily.

“No! Of course not! I just meant… I understand that you’re justifiably upset right now, but we’ve done nothing but act in our potential students’ best interests, I assure you, and… here we are,” Hanasei finished, in clear relief that they’d arrived at the Infirmary. He opened the door and ushered them inside the Infirmary Waiting Room.

They were greeted by a familiar tiny middle-aged woman frowning sternly up at them, one Taro recognized instantly, the mere sight of whom started to calm the frantic beating of his heart. She wouldn’t be frowning up at them if Tensei was still in danger. She wouldn’t have even left his side, not for a moment.

“Helmets off in the Infirmary, Taro, Tani, Taizo, you know the rules, though the three of you didn’t seem to mind bending them, while you were here,” Recovery Girl scolded.

Taro popped the catch on his helmet and took it off, and could hear his brothers doing the same, while his eyes remained locked on Recovery Girl. “Forgive us, but we need to see Tensei immediately,” he apologized. Any other time he would never have been so impolite.

Her frown immediately softened. “Of course. He’s asleep; the healing took a lot out of him. I don’t know whether you know the extent of his injuries or not, before my aid,” she fished.

“Our father said there were fractures and soft tissue damage, but we don’t know more than that, other than his armor lining coveralls protected him, to a degree,” Taro stated, dreading what he might hear.

“Indeed they did. I can’t tell you how relieved I was, when I saw them and realized what they were, once I realized the extent of the impact damage he could have suffered,” she added, sounding suddenly older than her years. “I had to cut them off of him, in order to treat him without harming him further, but they can be replaced. I want you to know I’m diagnosing a complete recovery for him. There shouldn’t be any lasting effects. He’s young and strong and healthy, he should be able to bounce back from this unscathed, unless he does something foolish and injures himself again before fully healing. I trust the three of you and your parents won’t allow that to happen,” she challenged.

“We’ll protect him,” the three of them swore simultaneously, word for word.

She smiled, and reached up and patted Taro on his armored breast plate. “You always were good boys, even if there was a bit of the hellion in each of you. You’re definitely Tomi and Suzu’s children,” she said with a fond smile, and a twinkle in her eye.

Then she looked serious again. “I’m going to keep Tensei-kun here for a while, unless you insist on moving him to a hospital, which I don’t recommend. I can do more for him here, and since he was injured on school grounds, it is my obligation to do so. Even if he weren’t, I’d try to insist upon it. The worst of his injuries was a serious concussion, but I’ve already treated him for it. Thankfully he didn’t experience either convulsions or seizures, and thanks to my treatment, he shouldn’t have any of the usual potential physical effects, such as headaches, motor control or balance impairment,
dizziness, nausea, or any visual or auditory issues.”

Just the thought of Tensei suffering from any of that made Taro ill.

“I’m afraid I can’t say for certain about any cognitive or emotional effects he might have. You may see signs of memory loss, particularly of the time directly before the incident, and also confusion, disorientation, inability to focus his attention, and his speech may be slurred. He might also exhibit rapid or unusual mood changes: he might be irritable, or tearful, restless, or lethargic, or just unusually emotional. His sleep patterns and ability to function normally might be affected. But you need to know all those are normal, that they should go away over time, and hopefully within three weeks or so he’ll be completely over any adverse affects.

Taro swallowed and nodded. *Even if he’s like that, it should be temporary. Please be alright, Tensei.*

“I can’t warn strongly enough, however, that an additional concussion would severely exacerbate the damage. So do everything in your power to ensure he isn’t harmed until he’s fully healed. That means no training and no quirk use, especially not with the quirk he has. Understood?” she questioned, her eyes boring into his.

“Yes, Recovery Girl-sama. No training and no quirk use. No car rides, except to come home, we won’t risk him being in even a minor car accident. I’d lock him in the house and not risk letting him cross the street or walking around where he might become the victim of a random villain attack, if I knew he wouldn’t escape, that it would be bad for him,” Taro swore.

“Alright then. As for his other injuries, he had nine cracked ribs in his back, hairline fractures of each of the major bones in all four limbs, and extensive soft tissue damage – not only contusions on his skin, but bruised muscles and organs, most notably his liver, kidneys and spleen. I had to leave the bones as is, for now, I focused my power on his head and organs, but he’ll receive additional treatments as soon as he’s up to them. Just so you’re prepared, when you see him in his soft casts.

“Normally I’d insist two visitors at a time, but I know you’ll be well behaved and you’ve waited long enough to see him. He’s in here,” she guided, taking them past the door to the Infirmary general treatment room, which only had two beds, with closed curtains around both, to one of the four critical care rooms, which Taro knew had full life support equipment.

He held his breath as he entered the room, and let it out in a relieved rush. Tensei didn’t look nearly as terrible as he feared he would. He wasn’t hooked up to any life support equipment, not even an IV, and his head wasn’t bandaged. His arms and legs were under the blanket, so he couldn’t even see the casts. He had expected him to look wan and pale, but he honestly looked like he was merely asleep.

Taro walked over to him, slipped off his glove, and gently caressed his cheek. “Don’t you dare get hurt and scare us like this again, Baby Brother,” he accused softly, his voice roughening as he held back tears of relief. He saw Tani and Taizo touch him too, needing to feel he was warm and alive, the way he had.

Taro gasped as Tensei’s eyes fluttered open and looked up at him, unfocused, but alarm swirling in their deep brown depths, as he struggled to sit. “Tenya? What happened to Tenya?” Tensei demanded anxiously, but his voice was slurred so badly Taro could barely understand him, even as Tensei hissed in pain.

“Whoa, calm down, Tensei,” Taizo ordered, as he pressed against his chest, as Taro gripped him gently by the shoulders and pushed him back.
“Tenya’s fine, Tensei. He wasn’t the one who was hurt, you were,” Taro soothed as he tried to pin him without hurting him.

“Don’t you dare try to sit up, young man. Lie back down this instant,” Recovery Girl scolded, making her way to his bedside.

“Someone said my baby brother is hurt,” Tensei insisted, as he struggled to sit.

“When I said Baby Brother, I meant you,” Taro explained, frustrated and worried.

Tensei frowned, looking confused as he sank back down. “Not the Baby Brother. Tenya is the baby now,” he argued.

“Tenya’s the baby, but you’ll always be our Baby Brother,” Taro argued.

“Back up now and let me examine him,” Recovery Girl instructed.

Taro and the others reluctantly complied. At least she hadn’t ordered them out of the room. Taro clicked the audio recording feature on his cell phone, as they listened anxiously as she tested his vision and motor reflexes, and then asked questions about his family, the date, current events and then the incident in the auditorium. Taro recorded the verbal exam because he wanted to be sure he wouldn’t forget any mistakes or inconsistencies in Tensei’s answers, because he was honestly too worried to think straight right now, the tension that had released before back with a vengeance.

Taro was relieved to hear Tensei’s voice get stronger and clearer as he spoke, and that he remembered the names of the three of them, and their parents, as well as Tenya’s, even if he hadn’t seemed to recognize them before. He even remembered what had happened in the auditorium, the actions leading to his injury, which he described in detail. Tensei’s voice grew terse and alarmed as he described the altercation and then the gas attacks. “The other students. The gas. Was it lethal? Did she kill them?” Tensei asked, his voice quavering and shaky now.

“No, Tensei-kun, she didn’t. It was only sleep gas. The effect is only temporary. All but one of the students affected are already awake, and he’s still asleep for other reasons, and in no danger. No one died. There were some injuries from students pushing and shoving one another trying to flee the gas, but they were mostly minor. You were actually the most seriously injured, and you’re going to be fine. You should also know that if you hadn’t acted as you did to protect her, at the risk of your own health, the young lady who used the gas quirk wouldn’t have escaped with the minor injuries she did.

“You and she and some of the others acted like true heroes, trying to protect your fellow applicants, even if it didn’t work quite as intended. She never meant to knock out more than the two who were scuffling, but it’s hard to control an area effect quirk like hers, particularly in an enclosed space with bystanders in immediate proximity, under stressful conditions. Those are things you’ll learn, when you go to school here,” she said with confidence, as if there was no doubt Tensei would be in the Hero Program.

The anger that Taro had felt towards the students who had been fighting vanished with the explanation of what had happened. It had apparently been a series of unfortunate amateur uses of quirks, rather than a nefarious plot or even loss of temper and violent attack. The damage all seemed to have been merely teenagers trying to protect their fellow students from a perceived danger that didn’t really exist.

“Now then, three of your brothers are eager to see you again, now that you seem a little more aware. You can come back to his bedside, just don’t crowd or overwhelm him,” Recovery Girl urged.
Taro was relieved to see that when Tensei’s eyes met his this time, they were focused and aware.

“Taro!” He turned his head. “Tani, Taizo. Why are you all here in your armor?”

“Half the Heroes in the city are here. The erroneous news reports were that there was a villain attack here at UA, that there had been a number of student fatalities.

Tensei looked immediately guilty. “Do Mom and Dad know we’re alright, that it wasn’t that?”

“They know some of it. As soon as we talk a bit, I’m going to call and update them. They’re on their way here, too, but they were home, and not as close as we were,” Taro assured him.

“I’m sorry I worried everyone,” Tensei apologized, looking contrite.

“It’s not your fault, Baby Brother. You didn’t do anything wrong. None of you did, really. It was just a series of unfortunate reactions. Don’t let it upset you. You just stay calm, and rest, do everything Recovery Girl tells you, and you’ll be back home with us in no time,” Taro urged.

“What about the Hero Exam?” Tensei asked, anxiously.

“Don’t you worry about that,” Recovery Girl interjected. “We’re postponing the Exam for at least a month, to reassess all our practices and procedures, and allow everyone to physically, mentally and emotionally recover from this. There are a lot of things we need to do differently, to ensure something like this doesn’t happen again.

“If it helps you feel better, what happened today may well have actually saved the lives of future students. Because clearly, had this been an actual villain attack, the outcome would have been far more disastrous. Our safety measures aren’t even adequate, let alone as exemplary as we’d thought they were. But we’re going to do our best to make the school as attack proof as possible, in light of all we’ve learned today. Now get some sleep, Tensei-kun. You still have some healing to do.”

“Thank you,” he said softly, his eyes drifting shut, as if he’d just been waiting her suggestion to sleep again.

“Thank you, Recovery Girl-sama,” Taro echoed, bowing deeply to her.

“No, you need to learn not to speak at all, when you’re like that, until you’re able to control your quirk,” Recovery Girl chastised, apparently responding to an apology.

“Yes, the Vice Principal was able to reach your parents. They know you’re not injured, and we sent a car to pick them up. They’re on their way,” she replied, to another inaudible question. The loud boy was either whispering now or writing his questions.
“Yes, they know you can’t leave until the police question you, and we explained we don’t think any of you should be arrested for what happened, that it was a series of unfortunate quirk uses and incorrect assumptions. Not that it was any of your faults, really. You all acted out of the best of intentions, trying to protect your fellow applicants,” Recovery Girl assured him, as Taro listened in on their conversation from the hallway, his phone still recording.

“Tell that to Demon Eyes over there, when he wakes up. I don’t think he’s going to be too happy with me,” a girl’s voice stated dryly.

“Yes, well you won’t need to worry about that for a while. It’s likely you’ll already be gone by the time Shouta-kun wakes,” Recover Girl assured her.

“Yeah, but if he gets into the Hero Course he might make life interesting. He looks like the kind of person who’d hold a grudge,” the girl stated wryly.

“You of all people should know you can’t judge a book by its cover, Nemuri-kun,” Recover Girl scolded.

“I bet you wouldn’t say that if you saw me with my whip and flail,” the girl challenged, a smirk in her voice.

Recovery Girl laughed. “Child, I could tell you stories that would turn your hair greyer than mine, about some of my own exploits. But unlike you, I try to keep things strictly PG-13. While I’m here at work, anyway,” she responded, her voice both challenging and playful.

Taro could actually hear a confidential wink in her voice.

The girl laughed. “You and my mom should meet for coffee. You could swap stories.”

Taro guiltily turned off the recording feature and dialed his mom, forcing himself to stop listening in to their conversation, now that they weren’t talking about what happened anymore. He’d already heard more than he’d bargained for. He’s never expected to overhear Recovery Girl of all people say anything like that.

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Hizashi looked guiltily at the sleeping boy in the infirmary bed next to the one he’d been in. He’d looked absolutely terrifying, demonic, deadly, a floating black tangle of hair over fiercely scowling brows and glowing red eyes, but unconscious he looked far different, vulnerable, pale and thin, with dark circles under his eyes, and sharply pronounced cheekbones. And ridiculously, unfairly handsome.

“Oh my God, he’s so hot! Why did I have to do something so stupid in front of him?”

He immediately felt guilty for the selfish thought. At least Aizawa was only asleep. Nemuri had reluctantly admitted that their brief tussle and her use of her power to stop them had caused a panic, that over a hundred students had been rendered unconscious by her power, and over a hundred more injured trying to flee the auditorium, though only one was seriously injured. But even though Aizawa hadn’t been injured, and all the others who had been asleep were awake now, the haggard looking boy in black still showed no signs of waking.

“Yes, you said your power works more strongly on men than women, and since it’s an area effect weapon, you can knock a number of people out at once, that the effect lessens at the perimeter of the burst, and those people wake up first. But if I was at the center of the burst with him, why is he the only one still asleep?” Hizashi asked anxiously, speaking in a whisper so he wouldn’t accidentally
“Relax. It’s not like it’s hurting him any. He’s literally just sleeping. And from what I’m seeing, this guy still being asleep is his own fault,” Nemuri Kayama replied unapologetically. “You don’t get raccoon eyes like that from just a single night’s missed sleep. With how drawn his face is, that’s chronic exhaustion, and how skinny he is, in spite of the muscles, he looks malnourished to me. Unless he just doesn’t have the money to eat, which frankly, from the state of his clothes might be the case, though he could be anorexic or bulimic or something, have some kind of eating disorder.

“That’s very astute of you. Do you have any medical training, or are you merely observant?” the tiny middle-aged woman with the misnomer Recovery Girl who ran the UA Infirmary asked.

“Mom was a psychiatrist and therapist, before she gave it up to marry my dad and have us, and Dad was a surgeon, at the hospital where they met. They both have similar quirks to mine, which they use to anaesthetize patients for surgery, in my dad’s case, or calm them or their families, in my mom’s. So before my dad became a total asshole and ditched us, and Mom spread her wings and I started living on my own, I learned something about both medicine and psychology,” she stated matter-of-factly.

Hizashi still couldn’t even look at her without his face turning bright red; he could feel the heat of it. She’d come to the Exam dressed not in a tracksuit and running shoes, or workout clothes, or even a leather jacket, boots and jeans, but in a low-cut skin tight halter top, that showed as much skin above it as below it, a tiny skintight pair of leather shorts, fishnet stockings and thigh-high high-heeled leather boots. She’d insisted that Hizashi call her by her first name even though they just met, and under such extreme circumstances, and he’d still been too shell-shocked by the complete train wreck he’d caused to argue.

From what Nemuri had told him, panic had erupted in the auditorium after the long-haired boy, Aizawa, attacked him and Nemuri knocked three dozen students out with a single puff of her power, and then another few dozen with each of two subsequent bursts. A number of students were injured fighting to reach the exits, while others activated their quirks and ran towards what they thought was a villain attack, and others thought was a part of the exam.

Nemuri had been completely unapologetic to him about it, but when a short while ago when yet another Pro Hero teacher had come in to talk to them, she’d put on a completely different demeanor, she’d become tearfully apologetic, and completely flustered the stammering, stuttering teacher, to the point he ended up actually apologizing her for upsetting her, as Recovery Girl watched with a small smirk, silently shaking her head at either the man’s foolishness over a girl half his age, or at Nemuri’s award-winning performance.

“Feminine wiles,” Nemuri had confided with a grin, after the man had left. “Works almost every time, unless you’re a gay male, asexual, or have a kink other than big breasted schoolgirls.”

Hizashi, who was bi, had been too busy swallowing his own tongue at her performance to trust himself to even try to speak.

His eyes inexorably drew back to the ominously silent boy on the bed. “So you’re sure he’s going to be alright?” Hizashi asked anxiously, for the tenth time since waking up.

“He’ll be fine,” Recovery Girl assure him patiently, more sympathy in her voice than Hizashi deserved, after repeating the same question.

It wasn’t that he doubted her skills and abilities, he just felt awful for causing the whole mess. After the initial terror and confusion had worn off, upon waking up in the Infirmary, he realized Aizawa
had apparently mistakenly believed he’d been about to do something horrible. He was surprised to find his wrist didn’t hurt at all, he’d was certain it was at least sprained, but Recovery Girl explained she’d already healed it for him.

“This is actually just what he needs. It’s a wonder he was even thinking to take the Exam, exhausted as he is. His body’s energy reserves are ridiculously low for someone his age and in such good physical shape, otherwise. It’s clear he works out or trains for hours each day, to have what musculature he does on such a narrow frame, but proper nutrition and sleep are just as important to health. You young people are all so careless with your bodies, and heroes are simply the worst,” she scolded.

Hizashi wanted to argue that he wasn’t like that, but he’d caused enough trouble for one day. He only hoped his parents could forgive him for terrifying them. He’d gotten to speak with them briefly, and the school had sent a car for them. Nemuri’s mother was on her way as well. But Hizashi had overheard the Vice Principal tell Recovery Girl that they hadn’t been able to reach the emergency contact for Aizawa yet.

After Vice Principal Hanasei escorted Police Captain Saburo Tsukauchi from the Special Investigations Unit to the auditorium, to join a number of detectives already on the scene reviewing surveillance footage and examining the building for evidence, he again tried calling Shouta Aizawa’s emergency contact, for what must have been at least the fortieth time, expecting to once again receive his voicemail. He was startled when the phone was instead unexpectedly answered.

“Yasuo Hashira, Attorney-at-Law,” a man answered efficiently.

“Hashira-san? Thank goodness! This is Acting Vice Principal Koichi Hanasei, of UA High School. I’ve been trying to call you for nearly an hour now,” he accused.

“I was in court, my phone was switched off. I haven’t had the opportunity to review my messages yet. May I ask what this is regarding?” the man asked briskly.

“It’s about Shouta Aizawa. You’re listed as his emergency contact. Are you a relation?” Koichi asked curiously.

“He is my client, but I also have power of attorney for him. You may discuss any matter you would with him, with me. What is the reason for your call?” Hashira asked cagily.

“There was an incident in the auditorium prior to the start of the Hero Exam, and unfortunately, Aizawa-kun was injured,” Koichi apologized. “As per the Emergency Treatment Agreement he signed as part of the paperwork for the Exam, he’s being treated in the campus Infirmary by Recovery Girl. But there is also an investigation regarding an attack against another applicant, as well as an issue regarding unauthorized quirk use.”

“You will connect me with my client, immediately,” the lawyer demanded.

“I’m sorry, Hashira-san, but I’m afraid I can’t do that. He’s not currently conscious. He’s not injured, or in any danger, he’s under the affect of a sleep quirk,” Hanasei hastened to explain, feeling far more defensive than the situation should warrant, but he wasn’t trained for any of this, or prepared, and he was about at the end of his rope.

“I am on my way there. Neither you nor the police will speak to Aizawa-san unless it is in my presence, with my express permission. Furthermore, you will not release his name, his image, or a
description of his quirk to anyone other than the police, regardless of his status as an emancipated adult, unless you want to be incarcerated for violation of the Victim and Family Protection Act. And I assure you, as Aizawa-san’s attorney, I would do everything in my power to see that you received the maximum possible sentence, 20 years, without a possibility of parole. Is that understood, Acting Vice Principal Koichi Hanasei?”

Koichi swallowed and paled. “Yes sir! I mean, I understand. We haven’t allowed the press onto our grounds, and he’s isolated from all but two other students who are in the Infirmary at the moment. He-“

“You are to remove those students immediately, or you will remove Aizawa-san. You will put a trusted Pro Hero teacher with combat ability on guard inside his room, until I arrive, or until he regains consciousness and insists otherwise, to ensure no one dangerous intrudes while he is incapacitated. If any further injury happens to my client, I will hold you personally responsible,” the man snapped. “Barring unforeseen traffic, I will arrive at the school within twenty minutes.”

“You won’t be able to get within ten blocks, I’m afraid, and the traffic in this entire part of the city is likely a nightmare. There are a number of emergency vehicles and press in the immediate area,” Koichi reluctantly confessed.

“If there are press in the immediate area, then Aizawa-san needs to be moved to a windowless room immediately, one without security cameras. In fact, move him to a location preferably made of concrete or brick or wood, if possible, with no exposed metal pipe or other metal structures,” Hashira ridiculously demanded.

“What on earth is going on? Who is he? Why are-“ Koichi asked, but he was again cut off before he could finish.

“His records are sealed by the court. By law, you cannot ask me that question and I cannot and will not answer,” Hashira stated harshly. “Now go protect my client, until I arrive.”

“Yes sir,” Koichi squeaked, cursing the day he ever accepted the temporary promotion, just wanting this awful day to end.
Nemuri was relieved to see Hizashi’s parents were so loving and protective of him, when they came to pick him up. He was a sweet kid, ridiculously awkward, with a few psychological issues apparently quirk-related, like most people’s. She didn’t have a chance to do more than wave goodbye, they were sort of smothering him protectively, as soon as they saw him, but at least she’d convinced him to swap cell phone numbers earlier. She didn’t know if Hizashi would make it into the Hero Program, but even if he attended in the General Studies Program, he was someone she definitely wanted to hang out with. She had no interest in being a professional therapist, but she was enough her mother’s daughter that she loved bringing kids out of their shells and watching them thrive.

It was weird, being the only one left in the Infirmary other than Recovery Girl. Demon Eyes had been carried from the Infirmary by Tempest, using his wind quirk, without waking him, and whisked elsewhere, for reasons unknown, at least to her. She eyed Recovery Girl speculatively. “It’s not just my quirk keeping Demon Eyes asleep, is it? You did something to him,” she accused, certain she was right.

Instead of denying it, Recovery Girl met her gaze levelly, though she had to look up a considerable way to do it. “I provide the care my patients need to recover. That boy needs to sleep. So I’m making sure he does.”

“Even though the police need to question him?” Nemuri challenged.

She waved her hand in dismissal. “There’s no villain to apprehend, no further danger. They can question him tonight or tomorrow just as easily.”

“For old time’s sake, I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that,” a deep voice said from the door.

Recovery Girl spun and smiled, hurrying over to the man standing in the doorway. “Saburo! Thank goodness. If you’re in charge of the investigation, there’s a lot less of a chance things will get exponentially worse.”

The man laughed. “Such a ringing endorsement. I feel honored.”

“Shut up and bring your face down here so I can give you a proper greeting. Don’t make me climb you in front of a witness, when I made a point of telling Nemuri-kun here that I stay PG-13 at work,” Recovery Girl huffed.

The stranger shook his head as if amused and leaned down. Recovery Girl planted a loud, wet smacking kiss on his cheek and sighed happily. “Just like old times, except thankfully you’re not bleeding. So how’s Naomasa? He must be what – don’t tell me it’s really been that long? 21, right? I heard he’s following in your footsteps in more ways than one.”

“He’s still a rookie, but one of our best and brightest, and I’m not just saying that because I’m his father,” he agreed. “Of course, if he wasn’t going to inherit my quirk, inheriting his mother’s was the next best thing for police work. Which actually I need to get back to, as I am leading this investigation. But we’ll catch up sometime soon. In fact, how about over dinner? At our house. This Saturday at seven?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ll bring dessert. Those little Italian pastries you like,” she agreed.

“Wonderful,” he said with a smile. Then he turned to Nemuri.
“You’re here to question me?” she hazarded.

“You’re not questioning her without me there, whether or not she’s legally an adult now,” her mom insisted, from the doorway, just the sound of her voice relieving stress in Nemuri’s shoulders that she hadn’t even realized was there, until it was gone.

“You’re here to bring you to the Principal’s office for questioning, Kayama-kun,” he corrected. “I’m Captain Saburo Tsukauchi, from the Special Investigations Unit.”

“Actually, I’m here to bring you to the Principal’s office for questioning, Kayama-kun,” he corrected. “I’m Captain Saburo Tsukauchi, from the Special Investigations Unit.”

“At least now I know his name: Tensei Iida. But I’ll answer your questions,” Nemuri told the detective.

“Please, come with me,” he ordered, waving them out of the room, and Nemuri and her mom and Kenneth followed.

“Dr. Kayama. Of course you can be present. In fact, given the inflammatory nature of this entire situation, I would welcome your presence, not as a mental health professional, or due to your quirk, but because there have already been far too many misunderstandings with this case,” the police captain stated, apparently having researched her family.

“I don’t think so,” Nemuri replied honestly. “I used my quirk, which was against the school’s rules, but they’re a private building, it wasn’t on the city streets, so it’s not illegal or anything, and I didn’t harm anyone, though they all thought I did. They didn’t realize my gas was only putting people to sleep. Though a student was injured pretty badly, apprehending me, that wasn’t my fault. I didn’t injure him. His own quirk misfired. But I think he took the brunt of the collision with the wall on purpose, that he was intentionally trying to shield me from harm, even though he’d captured me.”


“Of course,” he said, and moved to the side.

“He’s the one who attacked me!” Nemuri stated indignantly.

“Unless you’ve done something criminal, you don’t need to worry about the Iidas,” Recovery Girl stated confidently. “I didn’t know their son Tensei before today, but I’ve known his parents since my own school days, and his three older brothers since theirs. They’re Pro Heroes going back three generations, and the very definition of the word “hero”, noble and chivalrous. Why don’t you go with Captain Tsukauchi and tell him what you know? The sooner he has your statement, the sooner you can put this day behind you and go home.”

“Shouta awoke abruptly, before he even opened his eyes realizing that there was someone in the room with him. His eyes snapped open as he rolled off the futon pad and onto his feet, every muscle coiled and ready to spring, either to fight or run, ready to unleash his power.
“You reflexes are still astonishing. Thankfully, this time you are in no danger. We’re alone here and you’re safe, Aizawa-san,” the familiar figure of his attorney, Yasuo Hashira stated, his empty hands held palms out, in front of him, to show he was unarmed, not a threat.

Shouta scanned the room anyway, needing to identify the layout, the exits. He frowned. There were no windows, and only a single door, it appeared to be some sort of tiny library or book storage room. There were six wooden bookcases, floor to ceiling along three of the walls, crammed full of books on a tile floor, with a futon pad in the middle of the room, for some reason, without a frame.

He frowned, trying to make sense of what he was seeing. “Where am I? Why are you here, Hashira-san?”

“You’re still at the UA. You were here for the Pro Hero Exam, but there was an incident in-“ Hashira-san began.

“The auditorium. I remember. A blond-haired boy with green eyes used his quirk, he angered a number of students. They were starting to gang up on him, it looked like it was going to get physical, violent, and then his hand dove into his jacket. I thought he was pulling out a weapon, so I attacked him to disarm him, but it wasn’t anything dangerous. And then a black haired girl attacked us with a gas quirk, students started falling all around us. That’s all I remember,” he finished, frowning.

“Over 100 students were rendered unconscious by her gas attack. Thankfully, it was merely some sort of sleep gas. There were no permanent deleterious effects. The other students all completely recovered some time ago. But apparently you are both sleep deprived and malnourished, and as such were more susceptible to the effects,” he stated, without censure or accusation, merely summarizing facts. “Also, Recovery Girl, this school’s resident Medical Hero, apparently thought you needed the sleep, so she added her own quirk to the mix, to see that your rest was undisturbed.”

Shouta frowned. “What time is it?” he asked, even as he pulled his phone out of his pocket.

“Don’t worry, it’s not as late as it could have been. I was first notified an hour or so after the incident, a little more than an hour ago. Recovery Girl wanted to let you sleep, but I insisted we wake you, since time is money, and I need to be present while the police question you.”

“Two hours, minimum, of your time, before you’re done,” Shouta stated, fighting to keep his voice level as his gnawingly empty stomach sank to his feet. 44,400 yen. It will be months before I can pay it.

“Don’t let it concern you, Aizawa-san. I’m going to see to it that the UA is the one paying my bill, this time around. You only required my presence due to their incompetence, which well might be proven to be criminal negligence,” Hashira-san stated.

“No. I’ll pay. I can’t risk alienating them. I need them to accept me into their Hero Program. I need a scholarship. I won’t get either if I make them my enemies,” Shouta argued.

Hashira-san frowned and there was the censure that had been absent before. “Recovery Girl told me you’re suffering from the affects of long-term exhaustion and malnutrition. You can’t keep going on like this, Aizawa-san.”

“I’m not. That’s what the scholarship is for. So I can quit one of my two jobs, and cut back my hours on the other, so I have some spending money for non-school related expenses, but my grades don’t suffer, while I live in the dorms and eat meals here. Get them to pay not only for my room and board but for my books and lab fees, uniforms, whatever other school expenses there are,” Shouta insisted.
“Fine, you can be the one to pay my bill, but only starting three minutes ago, when I first woke you. You’re not responsible for what I did while you were asleep,” Hashira-san stated.

Shouta opened his mouth to argue.

“We don’t know how long the police questioning will take,” Hashira-san stated, before Shouta could even begin. “You were apparently put to sleep before most of the chaos. In addition to the 103 students total including you who were rendered unconscious in three separate uses of that student’s quirk, although you all, thankfully, were completely unharmed, 117 other students sustained minor injuries, from pushing, shoving and trampling of those trying to exit the auditorium, to escape from the gas. From what I’ve been able to learn so far, the woman who put the rest of you asleep sustained somewhat more serious injuries, when she was apprehended by another student, but she has since been healed. But unfortunately the student who captured her was seriously injured when his quirk apparently failed to function properly. 632 other student applicants escaped both quirk affects and harm.”

“Is he going to survive? Recover? The seriously injured student?” Shouta asked. The thought of someone his age dying merely for trying to take the Entrance Exam sickened him. But also, if he died, there was a chance Shouta could be found partially culpable for his death, dependent upon his injuries, and how he sustained them.

“Yes and yes, fortunately. Now I need you to tell me everything that happened, everything you remember, before I take you to where the police are questioning everyone. In the police interview itself, I’ll answer for you, just like I did the last time,” Hashira-san instructed.

Shouta felt a shiver run from his shoulders to his toes, as his eyes quickly darted to the door, half expecting to see his father looming there. His eyes widened in belated realization. “That’s why I’m in here. You had them put me here. It’s windowless, there’s no security camera, and something as massive as you described, there must be press crawling all over the campus. There’s wood but no exposed metal in case…” Shouta felt the blood drain from his face. “Was I seen? On the news? Have you checked the prison? Is he still there?”

“Calm yourself, Shouta,” Hashira-san soothed. “I checked, and he’s still in his plastic polymer cell. From what I’ve seen, no one took any photos or footage of you, not even cell phone footage from the students. Actually being put to sleep almost immediately kept you out of the images that have been released. The face of the girl with the sleep quirk has been plastered all over the news.

“Also, remember, your appearance has significantly changed from when your father last saw you, with the bangs and your hair grown out so long now, without the gel spiking it, and dyed black over the red dye, plus you no longer wear the same clothing extremes. I also made it painfully clear what would happen to the school were any images or your name or a description of your quirk to be released. It helps, of course, that your official paperwork no longer lists your quirk as “frightening appearance: glowing eyes”, as it did before you changed your name, but now reads “telekinesis: minor”. The effect of your power upon your hair wasn’t previously noticeable, with it shorter and gelled in place. No one will connect you with who you used to be, with your power, your father. You’re still as safe as we can make you.”

“Alright. Good. What about the Exam? I assume it’s been postponed? For how long?” Shouta asked, forcing his thoughts away from his fear, his father, for now accepted Hashira-san’s words at face value.

“A month or more, from what I’ve heard. The school is going to be reassessing all its security policies and procedures, and of course, even once the police investigation is concluded, the school board may run its own investigation into potential negligence by the principal and staff. I suspect
there will be a shake-up in the hierarchy in the school, that officials and teachers, possibly even school board members, might lose their positions over this. Quite frankly, from what I’ve learned so far, they should. Were circumstances different, this could have rivaled the Shibuya Station Tragedy for child fatalities,” Hashira-san stated grimly.

“That’s what I thought was happening, when I saw the gas,” Shouta admitted, again feeling a shiver wrack him. Those images, of scores of dead students, would haunt him for the rest of his life.

“You need to tell me everything that happened, from the moment you arrived on campus. I’ll determine what’s relevant. And after you’re questioned, once the police are done with you, and I’m officially off the clock, I’m taking you to the market, my treat, and I won’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Normally in these circumstances, for special clients, I’d take them to a restaurant for lunch, but clearly the money would be far better spent and stretch further this way. Then I’m taking you home, where you will eat lunch and then go to sleep, after you call in sick from whichever of the two jobs you’re supposed to be at tonight. As for my bill, you can pay it in installments as before, but I refuse to accept more than 5000 yen a month. You need to eat and sleep, Aizawa-san. I’m proud of you, all you’ve accomplished, how far you’ve already come, but you can’t be a Pro Hero or even a student studying to become one if you’re weak from hunger and lack of sleep, and I’m confident you’re destined to be one of the best and brightest Heroes this country has ever seen,” Hashira-san stated impassionedly.

All Shouta’s protests died on his tongue at the clear honesty and respect he’d fought for so long and hard being so freely given from the one man whose opinion he truly valued, who had stood by his side as he escaped the nightmare of his former life, a man who had literally put his own life on the line to help save him. He bowed deeply and sincerely, the gesture from the heart, to the man who had helped change his life. “Thank you, Hashira-san. I promise to prove your faith in me.”

To Shouta’s honor, Hashira-san returned his bow, just as deeply. “It continues to be an honor assisting you in reaching your goal, Aizawa-san.” Then he straightened. “Now tell me everything.”

Rookie Police Officer Naomasa Tsukauchi rubbed his forehead, knowing the motion wouldn’t truly alleviate the quirk-induced headache, from overuse of his power, but the motion tended to provide at least a temporary placebo effect.

“Forgive me for asking so much of you, but there is only one more student I need your assistance with,” his father apologized.

Naomasa immediately stiffened to attention. “Captain Tsukauchi. I’m fine, sir. It’s an honor to assist in this investigation.” Outsiders might see this as nepotism, but his father had confessed that, because of the delicate nature of this investigation, with so many children involved, the public already enraged, and the extensive and potentially damaging press coverage for the Department, he needed to know the suspects he was questioning told the truth, and that all bases were covered now, because it was not likely they’d be able to question them again, once the students’ and parents’ shock wore off, once more lawyers were called in, and the reporters further inflamed the situation. They needed the witness accounts now, before the media coverage unintentionally or otherwise influenced what the students reported had occurred. As a rule child witnesses were the most unbiased, the most honest with their testimony, but these were teenagers and young adults. Their perceptions were already colored. Having a quirk that could literally tell truth from lies was as invaluable in such an investigation as his father’s psychometry, both adding vital pieces to the puzzle.

“Recovery Girl insists that we wait until tomorrow to question Tensei Iida, so the last of the four students most heavily involved that we can question today is Shouta Aizawa. You’ve already
reviewed the paperwork he submitted to the school and seen the security footage. He’s a somewhat special case, as an emancipated minor, with an attorney instead of a guardian. There might be more to that than we’ve been able to discover in a short time. His attorney, Yasuo Hashira, has a history of working with civil and criminal cases involving collateral damages to lives and property caused by villain attacks and Hero battles. And frankly Aizawa’s minor telekinetic quirk seems weak for someone hoping to matriculate at this school in the Hero Program, to become a Pro Hero.”

Naomasa was as intrigued as his father sounded.

There was a knock on the Principal’s door, the office they were using for their questioning. “Enter,” the elder Tsukauchi commanded.

“Captain Tsukauchi, this is Yasuo Hashira, the attorney for Shouta Aizawa. He’s refusing to allow his client to enter until he speaks with you,” Officer Takihara stated, the usually composed man sounding unaccountably flustered.

“Please enter, Hashira-san. You are dismissed, Takihara,” Captain Tsukauchi ordered.

Takihara looked visibly relieved. “Thank you, sir.”

The door closed behind the attorney, who bowed in greeting. “Yasuo Hashira,” he introduced himself.

Naomasa and his father both bowed. “Captain Tsukauchi and Officer Tsukauchi. You have some concerns regarding your client speaking with us?”

The lawyer looked from one to the other and then around the office, frowning at a point over Naomasa’s shoulder. “My client will cooperate fully with your investigation, answering any questions related to this specific case that do not incriminate him, as long as our conditions are met. The press is not to have access to him at any time. Both the blinds and the curtains will need to be drawn in this room to ensure that. Also, no visual or audio recording devices are to be used, or artist’s sketches to be made. The number of people in contact with my client needs to be kept at a bare minimum, as must the people who have access to the transcript from this interview. His quirk and appearance will not be discussed outside the boundaries of this case.”

Naomasa felt his heart rate increase. They had missed something. On the surface, he had appeared to simply be another aspiring student, they had found no link to sealed juvenile records, but clearly Shouta Aizawa had a history of some kind, though of what, it wasn’t yet clear.

“It sounds as if his background might have a bearing on this case,” his father fished delicately.

“It does not. My client has detailed to me what occurred. He was merely at the right place and time to intervene to protect a student he perceived was in danger, who he then perceived was a danger to others. The injuries sustained by others which followed were not the fault of my client, who was asleep at that time. If you are prepared to meet our requirements, you may hear the information directly from my client. If not, I will submit his signed testimony to you, which I transcribed during my interview with him. Though my interview with him was quite thorough, I assume you would prefer the former, as we are not aware of incidents that took place once my client was put to sleep or of actions of individuals before that time that he might have witnessed that you might wish to question him regarding,” Hashira-san outlined.

“We will accede to your demands, none of which sound unreasonable,” his father stated. “But I would appreciate receiving a signed copy of his statement in any case.”
“Then I will retrieve my client,” Hashira-san replied.

The lawyer departed, and they watched him head down the hall. Naomasa’s father turned to him. “I’m sorry, son, but I need you to use your quirk the entire time we are questioning him, if you can. We missed something, we didn’t check their backgrounds carefully enough, we didn’t realize there would be reason to dig deeper, after the evidence on the tape, it looked relatively cut and dried, save for the motivations of some of the students, Aizawa primary among them.”

“Of course.” It would be a strain, but he’d deal with the migraine later, in private, he’d try to mask the pain before his father.

“You’ll see Chiyo after we’re done. I don’t want you suffering in silence stoically. Neither she nor your mother would ever forgive me,” he added.

Naomasa smiled. He should have realized his father was fully aware of the limitations and side effects of his quirk.

His father dialed someone on his cell phone. “Fujimoto, Shouta Aizawa has a history, possibly a record. I want you to research deeper, check under his name in juvenile records. If there’s a hit, we’ll get authorization to open those files. Keep it discrete.”

Naomasa began closing the blinds and curtains as instructed, as his father ordered the hall leading to the Principal’s Office cleared, to minimize contact with Aizawa and waited.

A few minutes later the lawyer and suspect arrived, closing the door behind them.

Naomasa’s first impression upon seeing Aizawa was “drug addict in need of a fix”. The boy was rail thin, his bloodshot eyes darting about the room, the long-sleeved tracksuit likely covering numerous track-marks on his arms. But he revised his assessment almost immediately as their eyes locked. Aizawa wasn’t avoiding his gaze, the way an addict would, he’d been methodically scanning the room, and now that Naomasa saw Aizawa’s eyes clearly, he realized they were lucid and bright with intelligence, and instead of tremors or shaking, his body held the coiled stillness of a hunting cat ready to pounce.

Aizawa glanced away from him and focused on his father, freezing, the tension in the room ramping up a hundredfold, as his father froze as well, a look of shocked recognition on his face. Naomasa was already moving, darting in front of his father protectively, silently cursing the lack of back-up, as he reached for his weapon, but his father’s hand clamped down tightly on his arm. “It’s all right, Masa. He’s not a threat. Far from it. He saved my life, once.”

It was the use of his nickname before a suspect and the shocking claim more than the hand that stopped him.

“I won’t say a word unrelated to this case, other than to ask a single question. To your knowledge, does he have anything to do with what happened?” he asked looking Aizawa in the eye.

“No,” Aizawa replied tersely.

His father’s eyes flitted to Naomasa’s for confirmation, and he blinked once, the sign for a truthful answer.

Aizawa’s head snapped around and he glared at him, his eyes suddenly glowing red, his hair lifting from his face, as if a breeze were blowing. “You’re a telepath,” he accused.

Naomasa started in surprise, his heart trip-hammering when he realized he couldn’t tell whether
Aizawa truly thought so, or whether he was intentionally misleading them. His quirk had never failed him before, but now it was as if he was suddenly quirkless, even as his father stepped in front of him. “No. His quirk merely enables him to know whether someone is telling the truth. He’s been using it on all the suspects and witnesses we’ve interviewed, though none of the others were able to detect him using it,” his father admitted to Naomasa’s consternation. They never let suspects know about his power.

“Given the nature of what’s happened, we cannot risk half truths and mistruths impeding our investigation. But he cannot read your mind, your thoughts, your history, none of it, and I’ve never told him any of it, or his mother. Your privacy is safe, Aizawa-san; you have my word as a police detective. Recovery Girl can verify that independently, as well. She and I are old friends, she knows my family. Your attorney can remain here, to ensure I don’t call her and coach her in what to say, while you go ask her, if you need to.”

“Recovery Girl?” Aizawa asked with a frown.

“Oh. I guess you haven’t met her? At least, not when you were conscious. I know she was tending to you. She’s the head of UA’s Infirmary. She has a healing quirk. She’s been treating the wounded.”

“You’d let me just walk out of here, unescorted?” Aizawa asked skeptically, suspiciously.

“You’re not under arrest. You’re being questioned as a material witness. You aren’t charged with a crime. Knowing who you are now, knowing your integrity, I am confident you did what you thought was necessary, at the time.”

“Whether or not paranoia played a role?” Aizawa challenged.

“I believe the saying goes, ‘You’re not paranoid, if they really are out to get you.’ Given your history, I would forgive what I might see as overreaction in others,” Naomasa’s father confessed.

“So you are confident in my integrity, but you’re still having your son use a quirk to tell if I’m lying. That negates your previous statement. You’re being hypocritical. There are no shades of gray when it comes to trust; either you trust me or you don’t,” Aizawa demanded.

“My opinion won’t hold up in a court of law, without hard evidence to back it up, if this incident leads to the necessity of that. The testimony of my son, however, considering his quirk, would. I’m doing this for your benefit, as much as ours. May we continue?”

“Ask your questions. But I won’t guarantee I’ll answer them,” Aizawa stated tersely.

“Thank you, Aizawa-san. I truly appreciate your cooperation. But before we begin, I need to make an important call, in your best interest. Forgive me, but I was somewhat suspicious of you, until I recognized you,” his father stated.

“Go ahead,” Aizawa replied, but he was watching Naomasa’s father warily, as he called.

“Fujimoto, belay that last order. I’ve already learned what I needed to. Don’t waste your time looking into Aizawa-san’s background. Instead, I want you and some of the others to get those damned reporters further back from the entrance. I’ve received several complaints from parents about them having to run the gamut to get to their children.”

“Good man,” he added, then he ended the call. Then he looked Aizawa in the eye. “Now, if you would please tell us everything that happened, from the moment you entered UA’s campus.”
Aizawa hadn’t expected Lieutenant – no, he was apparently a Captain now – Captain Tsukauchi to be the one leading the investigation. Such a remarkable stroke of luck had him waiting to see what new disaster would strike, because the universe had never been that kind to him. There had always been a towering dark thundercloud counterbalancing even the thinnest thread of silver lining in his life.

The original plan had been for Hashira-san to give his testimony and answer the question, but Captain Tsukauchi insisted he couldn’t allow that. “You may believe what Aizawa-san told you is the truth, so that is what my son would detect, but that doesn’t mean it actually is the truth. We need to hear it from Aizawa-san.”

Hashira-san took a deep breath, clearly ready to argue the point.

“I’ll do it. If it was anyone other than Tsukauchi-san I wouldn’t. But I trust him,” Shouta admitted to both of them. Both because of what happened, and the fact that he called him “Aizawa-san” without hesitation, when he’d known him by a far different name, an infamous one.

It was disconcerting, allowing a quirk to work on him unchecked. He had kept the true nature of his quirk hidden from his parents ever since he realized what his ability was. Had his father known, he would have either killed him as a threat, or exploited his power, forcing him to aid him in committing any number of heinous, unconscionable acts. His mother would likely have simply beaten him to death.

Since his father was jailed and thanks to Hashira-san, he was freed from his mother’s abusive influence, it had become both second nature and self preservation to nullify anyone’s quirk, when they tried to use it against him. Thankfully, the goggles he wore and the speed and viciousness of his attacks concealed his power effectively. None of those who had attacked him had ever discovered the nature of his ability. Legally, of course, he wasn’t allowed to use his quirk yet, since he wasn’t a licensed Hero, but law was a luxury for wealthier neighborhoods than the one he currently lived in.

Reluctantly, his every instinct for self-preservation screaming at him to fight, to run, he steeled himself and allowed the quirk of the younger Tsukauchi to wash over him unchecked, as he was questioned by the Captain. He hated the feeling, like goose bumps breaking out across his skin, warning him of what his body perceived of as an attack, but unable to stop it this time because of the circumstances.

Clearly, from the questioning, the issue of greatest concern was why he had physically and quirk-attacked the blond-haired boy.

Shouta took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, subsuming the crawling chill along his skin and the memory of impending doom and terror that had smothered him in those frantic moments. “I thought
he was another Ren Kotara, that I was in the position to stop a Shibuya Station level attack,” he answered truthfully.

The eyes of both Tsukauhics widened.

“What made you think that?” the Captain asked, sounding not skeptical, but intrigued.

“The blond-haired kid was being bullied, almost threatened by some of the other kids for his quirk use. From his reaction – guilt, dismay, growing panic – I realized it was an accident, that he hadn’t meant to. But those others were either too stupid to figure that out, too callous to care, or just enjoyed bullying him too much to stop.

“I was about to turn on them, instead, to intimidate them into knocking it off. You know I could have, easily, without lifting a finger. But it was too late. The blond-haired kid snapped, his hand plunged into his jacket, and all I thought was, ‘Kotara, Shibuya, gas/bomb/gun, we’re all going to die’. So I grabbed his wrist and forced him to drop it, I was going to break his wrist to be safe, knock him out, but then I saw it wasn’t a weapon at all, it was a beat up sign, one he must’ve used a hundred times, saying, ‘I’m sorry! It was an accident!’

“Then, just when I thought, ‘He’s harmless,’ there was a gas attack anyway, purple gas, and I thought, ‘You blew it, you failed, they’re all dead, it’s your fault’. I thought he had an accomplice, or there was a villain, then just as I was dying, I thought maybe it was a Pro Hero teacher intervening, but I’m never that lucky. So I died. But then I woke up, in that book room, with Hashira-san standing there, because it was only sleep gas,” Shouta admitted, not pulling any punches, or trying to make himself sound heroic instead of a screw up.

Shouta tried to force those older images and memories that still haunted him away, but they were too strong, given renewed life by the terror he’d survived today and saying Shibuya Station and Kotara’s name aloud. It was like trying to fight blinded, bound, and quirkless.

Shibuya Station, those kids, dozens and dozens of dying kids, useless quirks flaring everywhere trying to save them, the station’s leaked security camera footage and cell phone footage the news wouldn’t show but went viral across the internet: choking, gasping, hacking their bleeding lungs out, some crying, begging, screaming, but most only whispering and whimpering for help, from their fathers and mothers and brothers and sisters as they died, in endless seconds of agony.

There were adults too. Business men in 100,000 yen suits with Rolexes and Guichi shoes and men in dingy T-shirts, faded jeans and worn trainers. Fashionable mothers in designer dresses with expensive strollers and ones in sundresses and sandals, both trying to cover their toddlers and babies with their own bodies, to save them. He was glued to the computer in horror. He remembered every brutal word his father said as if it were yesterday, instead of nearly a year ago.

“Serves the little shits right. Stupid fuckers should have known how to use their quirks better than that, or learned who not to fuck with. Too late for them now. It’s a shame that kid only took out a couple of hundred of those weak, pathetic sheep. Me, at his age, I’d have done it at school, quirked the steel doors shut first, to make sure no one got out but me, then brought the fucking building down on top of them. No more assholes,” he bragged with a manic grin.

“Shit. Just thinking about it is making me want to pay a little visit to them in a week or two, just when everyone’s starting to feel safe again, and they convince themselves it can’t happen again, that it would never happen to them. See if any of those bastard and bitch teachers who tried to put me in my place are still there. Watch the looks on their faces, just before they’re crushed, when the building starts to come down.”
“Shouta!”

He jumped at the sound, crouched, spun, gasping, heart pounding, assessing targets, then straightened and started leveling out his breathing as he realized where he was, cursing himself for getting sucked in to his past like that, but thankful it hadn’t been somewhere, sometime, that could have gotten him killed.

Hashira looked at him with a wordless question.

“I’m fine,” he lied, and then winced, and glared at the younger Tsukauchi, feeling the pull of his quirk bringing the lie to his words into the light, even as he caught a double blink.

So one blink for truth, two for a lie. A simple system, but too easy to spot. Except no one else he questions knows about his quirk.

Before the Shibuya Station incident, Shouta had tried to convince himself that his father hadn’t intentionally killed anyone before, though there had been more than one story on the news about crimes and attacks that sounded like they were likely caused by his father’s quirk, with civilian and even police and Hero victims.

He’d been such a coward. He should have stopped his father years earlier, but he’d been too afraid to even call in an anonymous tip, because he knew if his father ever found out, he’d kill him. So instead, other people had died, because he was too pathetic to save them. That night though, hearing his father considering destroying an entire school full of innocent kids, was the motivation he’d needed to finally have the balls to risk his life ratting out his father to the police.

“Alright, I’m not fine. I’ll never be fine. I don’t deserve to be. But I’m still alive, sane, free, functional, and on the Hero track, and those five things are all that will ever matter,” he insisted, though after everything he’d lived through, sane and functional were questionable at best, some days. But at least he’d finally had the guts to put the lives of others before his own.

That pathetic, weak, worthless kid he used to be, the one who had cowered and kept himself alive while other people died, was gone. He refused to even think his dead name again. Shouta Aizawa would never let innocent people be harmed. He’d give his life, if necessary, to protect theirs. Because he was a decent human being and a Hero, even if the universe had tried so desperately to cast him in the role of a villain.

He could literally feel Hashira-san’s disapproval grow, as if he could hear every disparaging word in his head. He couldn’t. Hashira-san’s quirk was a photographic memory. He remembered every court case, every witness statement he ever read, everything he ever saw or heard. He was peerless, as an attorney, because of it. But he’d chosen to use his gift not to make millions helping get the guilty acquitted or corporations make billions, but to help the victims and families of villain attacks, people who had lost everything, regain some small measure of a life, health, comfort, closure. And sometimes he used that rare gift to help the children of the villains who committed those heinous acts, whether or not they deserved to be saved.

Yasuo was relieved to see some semblance of color return to Shouta’s pale face. Whatever nightmarish memory had momentarily trapped him in his hellish past was gone, for now, at least. He was furious at himself for not checking in more carefully with Shouta than monitoring his grades through the school and the periodic brief phone calls, which clearly hadn’t been sufficient. He never should have assumed Shouta was doing well merely because he was maintaining consistently high marks in all his classes and keeping a roof over his head. He belatedly suspected both the building
and location he resided in were likely questionable. But Shouta was so mature for his age, so responsible, so overwhelmingly competent that Yasuo hadn’t maintained his normal healthy dose of skepticism.

At least he’d managed to make the groceries he was offering in lieu of dinner something that would be hopefully impossible for Shouta to refuse. He needed to contact that Hero Recovery Girl and find out exactly how bad Shouta’s physical state was. Chronic exhaustion and malnourishment, clearly, but he looked like he might be ill, on top of that. And he’d ask her opinion on his mental state as well. He should have done more, insisted he be put in the therapy he’d firmly refused.

Fortunately Captain Tsukauchi only had a few more questions, and then he sent the two of them on their way, assuring them no charges would be file, that Shouta didn’t appear to be culpable in any wrongdoing, as far as the police were concerned.

Shouta was quiet as he exited, perfectly silent, even his footsteps inaudible, still living up to his given name, his birth name, Kiyoshi, his dead name. The one Yasuo knew he shouldn’t be thinking of, now, but it was harder to do for some protected clients than for others. Kiyoshi had such incredible unquenchable presence, for someone so young, a charisma that he attempted to keep carefully hidden now, apparently, but that still leaked out with every step, as an air of competence, or perhaps ‘badassery’, as Yasuo’s brother Kenjiro used to call it. And of course, Kiyoshi’s last name, Ikari, his father’s name, was legendary. Or rather, infamous.

“What about reporters outside?” Kiyoshi asked. He sounded exhausted rather than tense or anxious, but he was likely both.

*Stop thinking of him as Kiyoshi. He’s Shouta Aizawa now. You’re the one who processed his name change, the Victims and Family Protection Program paperwork.*

“I’m parked in the lot behind the school, where they can’t see. You can get in the car, hunker down in the back seat with my suit jacket over your head and torso to hide you, then emerge once we’re safely out of the mess around the school, though it might take 20 to 30 minutes just to get out of the area. But you could maybe catch a nap that way, and I’ll wake you at the grocery store,” Yasuo suggested.

Shouta merely nodded, instead of arguing the point about the groceries again, which made Yasuo both thankful and worried. But then he heard Shouta’s stomach growl and realized he must have been desperate enough to accept the offer, which made him worry all the more.

They were both wary of reporters, heading to the car, but thankfully there were none in sight. Yasuo stripped off his jacket, as soon as they were in the car, and handed it to Shouta, who thanked him for it, and promptly buried himself under it. It was easy to escape the school like that, the bright lights and cameras that made Shouta so rightfully cautious not affecting Yasuo adversely at all. Anyone who saw him would likely assume one of the families had retained him. He was used to the cameras, considering how high profile many of his cases were, as he fought for victims’ and family’s rights, against villains, but sometimes also against the city and the police.

He’d have to see what he could find on the two Tsukauchis. The older one had seemed supportive of Shouta, but the younger looked too intrigued for his liking, and of course he wouldn’t even begin to trust either of them until he knew more about them. The fact that Shouta seemed to trust the Captain was telling, though. Before today, he thought he was the only person Shouta trusted. But Shouta had apparently saved the elder Tsukauchi’s life. He knew it wasn’t when they arrested his father, or at his father’s trial. They’d been careful to keep Shouta away from both. There were plenty of other witnesses and evidence from the man’s crimes, without endangering Shouta.
“You aren’t wearing your whip. I thought they might have confiscated it, but I know you wouldn’t leave without it,” Yasuo began conversationally, hopefully a safe topic.

“They don’t allow weapons at the exam,” Shouta’s muffled voice came from beneath his jacket.

“Ah. So it’s still your preferred ranged weapon?” he prodded.

“I don’t own a gun, if that’s what you’re worried about,” Shouta replied wryly.

“No, actually, I wasn’t,” Yasuo admitted. He wasn’t concerned that Shouta had a dangerous weapon. He was actually concerned that he might not own one that was dangerous enough. But clearly he couldn’t afford a customized weapon, something more efficient than a whip at snaring his opponents and pulling them into the range of his hands and feet, when he couldn’t even afford to feed himself properly.

Yasuo punched in Shouta’s address to his car’s GPS and then checked for nearby grocery stores and frowned. Apparently part of the problem was where he lived. There was only a single tiny grocery store in his neighborhood and one fast food place. He located a larger store some distance away and typed in the destination.

“So, tell me about your two jobs,” Yasuo risked asking. He’d only known about the stock clerk position at Yashida Warehouse, the one he’d investigated to ensure they wouldn’t overwork a child, that they’d obey the labor laws.

“Stock clerk, both,” Shouta replied.

“Yashida Warehouse and…?” he prompted.

The silence was telling.

“Shouta?” Yasuo prodded.

There was a heavy sigh from the back seat. “I don’t work at Yashida anymore. They were taking too much out for taxes and wouldn’t let me work enough hours,” Shouta explained, his voice carefully flat and emotionless, which revealed far more than he realized.

Damn it.

So, they’re both off the books, they’re overworking and underpaying him, likely in hazardous conditions, with improper training, equipment, and safety measures.

“It pays the rent,” Shouta justified, filling the silent void left by his lack of comment, even though he knew it was a tactic he and every other lawyer used to subtly encourage a witness to say more than was wise. The police used the same tactic, when interrogating a suspect.

“Barely, if you don’t have enough left over to eat.” But of course, he couldn’t say so aloud, without damaging Shouta’s hard won pride, and he’d cut out his own tongue before he’d ever hurt Shouta.

“I’m not criticizing your work ethic. We’re both aware that, with your skills and intelligence, you could make far more illegally, much more easily, until you were caught, and that it would likely be years until you were, if ever. But you’re not a criminal or a villain. You’re a student. There’s a reason they limited your hours, Shouta. You need time to study. To sleep. To have a social life.”

There was a snort of derision from the back. “I study. I can sleep once I get my scholarship to UA.”

Yasuo wasn’t surprised that a social life wasn’t even on Shouta’s list.

“I thought you told me I could sleep on the way to the store,” Shouta grumbled, innocuously sounding enough, but Yasuo knew it meant the conversation was over, for now, at least.

Yasuo wasn’t about to jeopardize the chance to buy Shouta the food he clearly needed, so he merely said. “Of course. Forgive me. I’ll wake you when we arrive.”

0 0 0

It felt strange to Suzu to be back in costume, and using her quirk in public, but when they’d guiltily left a still hysterically crying Tenya with Mari at IDATEN, she and Tomi had both donned their costumes, knowing they’d be using their powers to travel to the school, once the car was impeded by the traffic snarl, and to deal more effectively with the reporters, the ones who swarmed them, now that they had arrived at UA.

“Rocketeer! Slipstream! You’re supposed to be on leave and retired. Then it’s true your son is one of the applicants! Can you give us a statement?”

“Ingenium, Eruca and Missilis are still inside and your sidekicks are still outside. Was your son the one who was seriously injured?”

“Is he one of the students who caused this incident?”

“Are you here to protect him from the other students and their parents?”

“Is he being arrested?”

Suzu had been determined to ignore the reporters, but the accusation in those last three questions had her fuming. She was glad she wore a full face mask because of her quirk, because she couldn’t have kept her anger from showing on her face, as she confronted the vultures circling them.

“Our son was one of the applicants. He did nothing wrong, but in fact acted as a true Hero, and was injured protecting his fellow applicants. He has not been accused of a crime or arrested, nor will he be. Our older sons, Ingenium, Eruca and Missilis, are at his side. Some of our sidekicks are here, assisting with crowd control and traffic direction, but the majority of them are now on patrol elsewhere in the city, as are a number of other Heroes, to ensure that villains don’t take advantage of the concentration of Heroes and attention in this part of the city to create havoc elsewhere. Now if you’ll excuse us, we need to see our son,” she stated sharply and succinctly, curbing the wild speculation about Tensei and also warning any villains who might be watching that this was not the opportunity for chaos and carnage they might have hoped.

They headed for the open door to UA, which was well guarded on both sides by Heroes, to keep both the press and any lurking villains safely outside. They were escorted to the Infirmary, though Suzu could have walked there in her sleep. Speed quirks were notorious for injuries – sprained ankles and knees, torn ligaments, and broken bones – and she and Tomi had been frequent patients of Recovery Girl, who had become a surrogate older sister, as well, one who had helped iron out the thankfully infrequent relationship snafus she and Tomi had experienced while still in school, and had also helped her through the occasional challenges of her internship at IDATEN, when she was proving her worthiness to Tomi’s loving and protective family.

She pulled off her mask as soon as she was inside the Infirmary, and Tomi doffed his helmet, both of them adhering to Recovery Girl’s rules.
“Chiyo! How is he?” she asked, as soon as she saw her surrogate sister. The boys had told her, but she needed to hear Tensei’s condition from Chiyo herself, to look her in the eyes as she told her.

“Suzu! Tomi!” Chiyo gave her a hug, around her waist, and looked up at her. “Better, and he’ll make a full recovery. I’m sure your boys have told you the details. He’s sleeping now, but you can still see him, of course. Follow me, though I know you both know the way.”

Just hearing Chiyo’s warm, reassuring voice relieved some of the bands of steel that had been wrapped around her heart ever since she heard the news.

They entered the Critical Care area. “Mom, Dad!” Taro said softly, so as not to wake Tensei, his voice thick with relief, sounding more like the little boy they’d raised than the man their eldest had become, who was doing an exemplary job running IDATEN while Tomi was on leave. He and the others were also still in costume, but not wearing their helmets.

She hugged her eldest. “He’ll be fine, Taro,” she assured him, her son’s need for reassurance immediately overriding her own.

“I know, it’s just… he sounded so different, at first. I recorded what he said, so you could both hear, in case there were things he didn’t remember, but he did, it was just… seeing him hurt, and not sounding like our baby brother—”

“Tenya? What happened? Is he alright?” Tensei asked anxiously from the bed, struggling to sit, and hissing in pain as he put pressure on his injured arms.

“Not again! Tensei, you have to stop doing that!” Taro scolded, as he and the others rushed to gently restrain him.

“Tenya’s fine, honey. You’re the one who was hurt, remember?” Suzu soothed, going to his bedside and stroking a lock of hair from his face.

“Mom? Why are you in your Hero costume? What happened? Where’s Tenya? Is he and Dad alright?” he asked, sounding more panicked.

“Well at least I received an honorable mention, this time,” Tomi joked, stepping up to the bed so Tensei could see him past the others, Taizo and Tani moving back to give him room. “Tenya’s fine, son. He’s with Mari. Do you remember what happened? And being awake before?”

Tensei frowned, and then his eyes widened. “The applicant orientation, for the Hero exam! The fight, the gas attack! I was trying to stop the fight, but then that girl attacked everyone with the purple gas. I caught her, but my engine misfired, it flooded and stalled out. That’s never happened before. We were going to hit the wall, and if I dropped her, she could have broken her back or her neck on the seat backs, and firing the one engine would have just sent us into a wild spin, so I timed it just right to pull a 180, so I could take the hit on my back, to protect her as much as I could when we crashed, even if she was a villain. I couldn’t let her die, even if she was a murderer. But she wasn’t, Recovery Girl told me it was only sleep gas, and she wasn’t a villain after all. So I’m really glad I saved her. If she died, I would have been the murderer: it was my quirk that malfunctioned, my fault.

“I’m sorry, Mom, for worrying everyone, for messing up and getting hurt when I promised you I wouldn’t. I told you I’d be careful, and I tried to be: I used the mask and hood, so the gas didn’t affect me, but I had to subdue her, to protect everyone. If she really had been a villain, if it was poison gas, so many people would have died. I never should have said nothing bad would happen to me. That’s not really a promise any of us can make, and still be Heroes.”
“You’re right, son. We’re so proud of you,” Tomi said.

“You’re going to make a great Hero, Baby Bro,” Taizo said.

Tensei looked uncertain. “But I don’t know if I can be, now. At least, not training at UA. I broke the rules. I used my quirk, and the test hadn’t started yet. They warned us that meant we’d fail.”

“I don’t think you need to worry,” Recovery Girl assured him. “Considering the number of applicants who used their quirks, and the reasons for it, and the outcome, it would be foolish to penalize any of you for it. Now you need some more sleep, young man, so I can use my quirk on you again, once you’ve rested. And yes, one or more of you can stay here with him, we’ll figure out who and how many in a bit. Tell your family goodnight, Tensei.”

“Good night, everyone,” Tensei said dutifully. It was a sign of how much the healing had already taken out of him that he didn’t argue, but instead closed his eyes.

“Good night, honey,” Suzu replied, Tomi and her sons echoing her. After a few lingering looks, they filed out of the room.

“I’ll stay,” Tani and Taizo said simultaneously.

“I want to, but I need to head back to IDATEN to help Mari coordinate everyone, and to provide back-up, if one of our patrols runs into trouble, so you and Mom can get back to taking care of Tenya,” Taro stated.

“Taizo and I can take shifts, so there’s always someone in the room with him, so if he wakes up and is confused again, we’re there for him,” Tani suggested.

“Exactly,” Taizo agreed, though the moment before he looked like he was about to argue with Tani.

“As much as I want to stay, you’re right, Tenya needs us,” Suzu agreed. Then impulsively, she hugged each of her three older sons, starting with Taro. “Be careful.”

“We will, Mom,” Taro assured her.

Suzu knew they would be as careful as they could, but like Tensei, they wouldn’t hesitate to risk their lives to protect others, if it came to that. Because all her grown sons were Heroes, and that’s what being a Hero was all about.
Shouta hated that Hashira-san had seen him like this again, hungry and in need of help. Hashira-san was the one person he respected, that he most wanted to impress, or at least prove that he was worthy of the efforts the attorney had made on his behalf. Well, one of two, now, counting Tsukauchi-san. That wasn’t a face he’d expected to see, at least not until he became a Hero. He’d been careful to keep his interactions with the police nonexistent.

Now here he was, at the market, the excuse of lunch a thinly veiled attempt to make Hashira-san’s charity something he could accept. He would have argued with him about it, but it was a foregone conclusion it was an argument he couldn’t win. As an attorney, Hashira-san made his livelihood convincing juries and judges of innocence and guilt. In a battle of wits they might be relatively evenly matched, in spite of the differences in age and experience, but in a battle of words, Shouta didn’t stand a chance.

At least Hashira-san wasn’t an intrusive and invasive presence. He let Shouta select what he wanted: loose leaf tea, a bottle of sesame oil, a bottle of soy sauce, a 10 kg bag of jasmine rice, a package of dried seaweed, a carton of 10 eggs, beans, an assortment of mostly dried fruit and vegetables instead of fresh or frozen, plus frozen fish, exactly the quantity that would fit in the tiny freezer of his micro fridge – nutrition, variety and economy over ease of preparation and convenience, the opposite of what most teenagers living alone would purchase. As always, Shouta kept a careful tally in his head, though this time he wasn’t spending against his own budget, but against what he was willing to accept from Hashira-san, while taking into account he’d be cooking lunch for them both. Reluctantly he added a single fresh pepper, leeks and broccoli, because Hashira-san deserved his best effort.

“Would you prefer sake or beer with lunch?”

“Water and tea, actually,” Hashira-san stated.

Shouta looked challengingly at him, but he met his gaze levelly.

“I don’t drink, for the same reason you likely never will,” Hashira-san replied, unexpectedly sharing something highly personal.

Shouta acknowledged the revelation that one or both of Hashira-san’s parents at one time drank in excess and abused him with a wordless nod. It helped explain the level of compassion and understanding he held for his clients, and for his case in particular.

“Chicken or fish?” Shouta prodded, before he thought any more about his mother, and to prevent the silence from becoming awkward or introspective for Hashira-san.
“Chicken. I noticed the larger packages of boneless thighs are on sale. You can freeze the remainder, for some variety from the beans and fish,” he suggested.

He’d noticed too, of course, but the fresh chicken was also still far more expensive that the dried beans, or frozen fish, and his tiny freezer would never fit the remainder even if he put back the fish. So he’d just have to cook it, before it could spoil, and then refrigerate it. He reluctantly added a package of the chicken to his basket.

“Dessert?” Shouta asked, resignation in his voice.

“Matcha tea cookies would be perfect.” Hashira-san suggested.

Yasuo was surprised to see that Shouta picked up a family sized package of strawberry Pocky as well as the cookies. From what he knew, Shouta didn’t like sweets. But he was careful not to comment on it. Suggesting the chicken had been a calculated risk. It was a miracle Shouta had accepted as much as he had, and a credit to his relationship with the young man, because he knew Shouta would literally rather starve than to feel he was not self-sufficient.

Finally done, they headed to the register. Yasuo did his best to keep Shouta distracted during checkout, though he saw him look at the growing total more than once. From his lack of reaction, he suspected he already knew perfectly well what it would cost.

After finishing at the store, the drive to Shouta’s was discouraging. The neighborhood deteriorated rapidly.

“Will my car be safe?” Yasuo asked dubiously, but still not regretting the shopping trip.

“If we pay the parking fee,” Shouta replied wryly.

“There’s a parking garage?” Yasuo asked in surprise.

“Not exactly,” Shouta evaded, without elaborating. “I’ll tell you where to pull up. Just keep heading to my address. Let me do the talking. You just put on your court face, park it and lock it up. Bring your briefcase. I’ll carry the groceries. You want to look like someone they shouldn’t mess with, but not like you’re trying to goad them. The neighborhood toughs will peg you as either my sugar daddy or Yakuza, dressed as you are, in this car. It’s better if they think Yakuza.”

Yasuo snorted. “You overestimate the cost of my suit by a zero.”

Shouta shrugged. “No, I know the difference. But they won’t.”

Yasuo knew Shouta would never have let him come if being seen with him was going to cause too much trouble, so he followed the instructions to a location about three blocks from Shouta’s apartment.

“Park there, at the pink curb,” Shouta instructed.

“Why is it pink?” Yasuo asked, perplexed.

“To mark it as Ichigo’s turf,” Shouta replied.

Yasuo was intrigued – “Strawberry” was an unusual name for a gang.

They parked at the curb and Yasuo retrieved his briefcase from the back seat. It had both his laptop
and some papers from his latest court case, neither of which he could afford to lose. He exited the car and locked it, activating the alarm.

“Where do we pay?” he asked, curiously. All he saw was two rows of dilapidated apartments on either side of the street, bordered by an oddly starred and cracked sidewalk.

Shouta was scanning either side of the street surreptitiously, and then he looked up, towards the roofs.

“Give it a minute. Ichigo will-“ he broke off abruptly as a meteor fell from the sky and impacted in front of them, starring the sidewalk with an array of new cracks.

Yasuo instinctively jumped back, heart hammering, but a steel vise latched around his wrist, and he realized before panicking further that Shouta was the one holding him. Belatedly, he remembered he was supposed to look tough.

“Heh-heh-heh! I made you jump!” a childlike voice laughed and then boomed gleefully.

Yasuo stared at the bizarre person in front of him. He looked like he was a full 200 centimeters tall, and half again as wide, he was built like a sumo wrestler, but his skin was a deep reddish pink, pitted with pores or pock marks, and his hair was bright green and in complete disarray. He looked like a giant human strawberry.

Shouta sighed. “I thought you promised not to jump off any more roofs, Ichigo. The sidewalk is broken enough as it is.”

“But I wouldn’t have surprised you otherwise, Kanzō,” Ichigo accused, sounding both defiant and guilty, like a little kid being scolded by his father. He’d also called Shouta “licorice”, instead of by name. Although his hair actually did look a bit like licorice now: black and in sort of wavy strings.

To Yasuo’s surprise, Shouta actually smiled. “You’re right. I didn’t see you coming, this time. You’re getting really good at surprising me.”

Now Ichigo looked like a happy puppy praised by his master.

“I’m glad you’re home. My friend, Tafi, would like to park his car here, while he visits with me at my house. Can you watch it for us, to make sure no one paints on it, breaks it, or takes it?” Shouta asked.

He wondered why Shouta had called him “toffee”. Did Ichigo like thinking of everyone by candy names, or was it Shouta’s way of keeping their identities secret?

“Did you bring the parking fee?” Ichigo asked.

“Of course. I even brought extra, because he’s going to be staying for a few hours,” Shouta said, reaching into his bag and pulling out the large package of strawberry Pocky from the top.

Ichigo’s face burst into a gleeful grin, and then faster than even Shouta could move, he wrapped his arms around him in a hug.

Yasuo tensed, afraid of how Ichigo would react when Shouta slipped out of his hold, or attacked, but though he visibly stiffened, he didn’t try to escape, or get violent.

Ichigo abruptly pulled back, looking dismayed. “Oops. Sorry, Kanzō. I forgot you don’t like hugs. I didn’t squish you too hard, did I?”
“No, I’m fine, and I know you were just being friendly,” Shouta assured him, not trying to force a smile, but clearly forcibly trying to relax, to reassure Ichigo, when Yasuo could see how tense he was. “We’ll see you later, OK?”

“OK. I’ll watch the car and make sure no one breaks or takes it,” Ichigo assured them, looking reassured.

“Thanks, Ichigo.”

“This way,” Shouta said, turning in the direction Yasuo knew his apartment was.

When they were a block away, and definitely out of earshot, Yasuo risked asking softly. “Are you alright?”

He was surprised to hear Shouta simultaneously ask him the same, word for word.

“I should have warned you about Ichigo, but I honestly didn’t expect him to jump again, and I figured he wouldn’t really be intimidating otherwise, considering your client base,” Shouta explained.

“I’m fine. Just startled,” Yasuo dissembled. He’d actually been terrified. He’d thought they were going to be attacked, or worse, that the buildings were going to come down on top of them. It was the neighborhood, the way it looked, smelled. It reminded him painfully of his shattered childhood home.

“What about you? He hugged you,” Yasuo bluntly asked.

“I’m fine. It just… He triggered my fight of flight reflex, and he could have accidentally killed me if I did either. He was just being friendly, and he’s not a villain, but his brain doesn’t work like ours. He forgets how strong he is, and he’s very emotional, he gets angry easily and throws tantrums, like a child, only he can knock down walls and throw cars with his strength, so I need to be cautious when I’m around him. I should have warned you about him,” Shouta admitted.

“Did you pick the alias, or did he?” Yasuo asked, intrigued, happy the conversation was staying turned in a safer direction, away from thoughts of his past.

“He did. I didn’t correct him, because the fewer people who know my name, the better, and he doesn’t really have a filter of any kind. I figured it was probably best he not know your name, either, and your eyes are sort of toffee colored; they’re your most distinguishing feature,” Shouta replied unexpectedly.

Shouta was being far more talkative and open than usual. He must have still been rattled by the hug. From what Yasuo had heard, the only time either of his parents had ever touched him was in anger, and they were both terrifying individuals, in their own ways.

“Thank you,” Yasuo replied neutrally, so Shouta wouldn’t feel pressed to continue the conversation. And it was definitely better that no one hear his name and associate him with Shouta. He was thankful that Kenjiro had taken Hiro’s family name, Hasagawa, when they’d married. He never wanted his work to endanger his younger brother.

They continued the walk in silence. They passed few people, and Yasuo kept his court face on the entire time, looking stern, knowledgeable, and like he wouldn’t stand for any bullshit, and none of them bothered them, though they definitely drew some attention. They turned the corner and walked under the elevated tracks towards Shouta’s building, which looked as dismal as the others.
It was a three flight walk-up to his apartment, which was in the front of the building, on the train track side.

“I need to enter first, to deactivate the alarm system,” Shouta claimed, at the door. He opened the door with three separate keys, for each of the three locks, and then he felt around the inside frame of the door, from down low to the top. Then he swung the door open and invited him in.

They left their shoes at the door, and proceeded inside in their socks, since Shouta didn’t have any guest slippers. Or much of anything else. The studio apartment was incredibly sparse, without so much as a frame for the futon. Shouta unfolded a small table and two chairs that were leaning against the wall, setting them up near a narrow freestanding cabinet against the left wall, which had a rice cooker, mini refrigerator and double burner hotplate on top and clearly served as his kitchen. It didn’t look like he even had a microwave, let alone an oven.

Yasuo had already been determined to see that Shouta landed a scholarship, so he could quit his jobs and concentrate on school, but now he wouldn’t rest until Shouta was out of this place, and in the limited dorms at UA. If Shouta didn’t qualify for an existing scholarship, he’d create an anonymous one. Even if for some reason Shouta didn’t get into the Hero program, with his test scores he’d have no trouble getting into the General Studies program. He’d speak with the school’s principal in the morning and find out what were the necessary steps for setting up a scholarship.

“What can I do to help you make lunch?” he offered.

“Can you cook?” Shouta asked dubiously.

“I cook most of my meals,” he confessed. But in a gleaming professional kitchen, in the model home his brother had designed and built and given him as a gift, once he’d sold all the other homes in the artfully designed housing complex, the keystone project of his now thriving business. Normally Yasuo was justifiably proud of his home, which was next door to his brother’s specially custom made home designed for wheelchair bound individuals, but now it made him feel guilty.

This apartment was actually somewhat similar to the one he’d grown up in, but they’d at least had a dinghy kitchen and a bedroom for his parents, though he and his younger brother Kenjiro had shared the futon in the living room as their room. They’d been happy, poor as they were, until he was in high school, when a villain had brought the building down on top of them, killing his mother and crippling his brother. They’d lived in the hospital after that, until moving to a “displaced persons” shelter for victims of villain attacks, where they’d lived for years, while his father slowly drank himself to death.

The settlement they’d fought long and hard for came too late for their father, but he and Kenjiro had both been able to go to college. Kenjiro had majored in architecture, so he could design buildings that were strong enough to protect people from most villain attacks, built so that even if they did collapse, like the crash cage in a car, the building could come down but the people would survive in a reinforced void space safety box. Kenjiro had met his future husband Hiro at the University, and the two men had gotten married and founded their own business after graduating.

Much like Shouta, Yasuo would have worked himself to death putting himself through law school after he finished his undergraduate studies, and the settlement ran out, if he hadn’t earned three separate scholarships that paid his way. Once he graduated and obtained his license to practice law, he was finally able to fight for the victims of villains, so others didn’t have to wait years to get on with their lives after similar tragedies. It was a while afterwards that he realized that many times the families of the villains, like Shouta, were as much victims as the strangers who’s lives their family members had destroyed.
He forced the painful memories of his past down, because he’d already revealed enough to Shouta tonight, in his honest response to the innocuous “beer or sake” question. “I use the time I’m cooking to mentally review my cases and plot my defense. Washing dishes and folding laundry work as well for that. I’ve been told I’d make the perfect husband, if I wasn’t married to my work,” he admitted ruefully. Not that he’d gotten close enough to many men to hear that, but his three serious relationships had all ended with that same complaint.

“Then after you wash your hands, and I put away the groceries, you can cut the vegetables while I start the rice. I’m stir frying the chicken,” Shouta instructed, accepting the help without undue fuss.

Shouta’s bathroom was just as dismal as the rest of the apartment, the tile cracked and stained with mineral deposits that looked like they’d been accumulating for decades, the grout withered, cracked and dark grey, and the mirror permanently foggy, the glass riddled with scratches from something abrasive. The room was clearly as clean as Shouta could make it, but depressing. He washed up quickly, and then headed back to the painful excuse of a kitchen to help Shouta prepare lunch.

Yasuo talked as he chopped, trying to learn as much as he could about Shouta’s current life without sounding like he was cross-examining a witness on the stand. The tension that had enshrouded Shouta since UA gradually eased, so he congratulated himself on doing that much right, at least, for all he’d clearly failed Shouta for a while, now. Shouta even shared details of his self-regimented hero training, which thankfully didn’t sound overly abusive. Shouta was incredibly driven to achieve his dream, but it was reassuring to see that he was proceeding with caution in spite of it.

The chronic lack of sleep and malnutrition were clearly due to economics, not some misguided attempt at self-flagellation for what he considered to be his past sins, but were truly the sins of his parents. No child should ever be forced to choose between sacrificing themself to protect a random stranger they’d never even seen, knowing that the punishment when they were caught would be death, either being crushed by a building intentionally collapsed on top of them, or something far more lingering, imaginative and gruesome.

“Tell me about any cases you’re allowed to share,” Shouta commanded, during the small lull brought about by Yasuo’s introspection, having clearly reached the limit of what he was willing to share, but fortunately not pulling back from social interaction entirely. Yasuo had carefully learned his remarkable young client’s limits.

“I actually just successfully completed a case I think you’d be interested in,” he smoothly agreed, and willingly began discussing it with him, as they finished preparing their meal and began eating.

Lunch was simple, but tasty. It was honestly nice to prepare a meal with someone for a change, though he enjoyed cooking alone. He’d been working too long and hard on the case he’d finally just concluded to have time to visit his brother for lunch or dinner, though Kenjiro and Hiro both had been encouraging him to for a while now.

They chatted sporadically over tea and cookies, after doing the dishes together, but it became clear after a while that Shouta was finally reaching his limit for socializing, and the last thing Yasuo wanted to do was overstay his welcome.

“I’d better get going,” he apologized, standing, empty tea cup and cookie plate in his hands.

“I’ll wash those, just put them in the sink,” Shouta instructed impassively, not betraying any eagerness for him to be gone, but not suggesting he stay longer, either. “I’ll walk you back to your car.”

Yasuo didn’t argue with the offer. He had his taser in the outer pocket of his briefcase, but though he
had a special permit for the police grade device, it wouldn’t do much against someone with one of
the more powerful body enhancement quirks. To someone like Ichigo, it would likely register like a
mosquito bite.

He noted that Shouta fastened his coiled whip to his belt, as he headed for the door. He must have
felt naked, leaving his house unarmed for the test.

After Shouta reset his homemade alarm and triple locked his door, they headed back to his car,
which he saw to his relief appeared undisturbed, Ichigo standing dutifully beside it, happily
munching on a Pocky.

Yasuo thanked Ichigo, and then bade goodbye to Shouta, encouraging him to call if he needed
anything, though he knew Shouta wouldn’t. He headed for home, reluctantly watching Shouta’s
form shrink in the rearview mirror, until he turned and was lost from view, promising to do
everything in his power to get that incredible young man safely into the UA dorms, even as he began
assembling the outline of the new scholarship he was planning in his head. He’d call his brother,
onece he was home, and take him up on the freestanding offer for dinner. Kenjiro would only be
mildly exasperated that he had an ulterior motive for the visit, and he was sure he and Hiro would be
happy to arrange the scholarship, even if he hadn’t planned to secretly finance it.

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“He’s too young to be an informant. You’d never risk a child,” Naomasa fished, as soon as Aizawa
and his attorney were safely gone, ignoring the knife of pain lancing through his eyes, from
overusing his quirk.

His father sighed and looked pained, and surprisingly guilty. “You need to let this one go, Masa. I
know you’re a natural born detective, down to your bones, it’s in your DNA, I know you hate not
knowing the story, but it’s not one I can share, not even with you.”

“Alright. Sorry,” he added, because his father would never intentionally risk a child, unless there was
a far greater risk that endangered them worse. “Although it’s more than a little terrifying, knowing
you almost died and didn’t even tell us.”

“I know. But any mention at the time would have risked too much leaking out. And it’s not as if you
and your mother don’t already know police work is inherently dangerous. It’s always been, long
before villains with quirks were involved. You just have to trust that I was as careful as humanly
possible, and my silence now isn’t only protecting that incredibly heroic young man, or you and your
mother, but a number of others as well.”

Which didn’t just mean “villain”, it meant “super-villain”, a level of carnage and chaos Naomasa had
thankfully yet to experience in his yet brief career.

“Now come on. Let Chiyo help you, if she’s not too worn out from helping young Iida.”

Naomasa was thankful she was close by, because it was becoming increasingly hard to function at
all, let alone think. And he had a lot to think about.
A/N: Thanks so much for your comments and kudos! I really appreciate them! I’d love to hear from more of you, if you have a moment. Also, just a heads up that I posted Chapter 2 of my present day BNHA story, When Hell Freezes Over, this morning. Enjoy!

Suzu was glad Taro had agreed to ride with them in their car back to IDATEN. It helped, having their oldest son as the spearhead of their three person wedge, as they cut a swath through the endless sea of reporters circling UA like sharks scenting blood and eager for the kill.

As soon as they were free of the crowds of civilians thronging the outer police barricades, they wordlessly activated their Quirks and raced for the car they’d parked in a garage dozens of blocks away, Taro following their lead. Running at her top speed was incredibly freeing, helping to burn away some of the tension that had been smothering Suzu. She was glad for the weekly workouts she followed religiously, keeping her quirk honed in spite of the pregnancy and her retirement, so she’d be ready in an emergency, if she was ever needed in the field again. After all, villains could strike anytime, anyplace, in grocery stores and playgrounds, restaurants and theatres, and besides, retired or not, she was still a Pro Hero.

Taro helped keep her and Tomi grounded during the drive to IDATEN, talking about both the Agency and his other brothers, so they wouldn’t obsess over Tensei. Because he’s going to be fine. Chiyo told you he will be.

But her tension spiked a hundredfold when they opened the soundproofed doors to IDATEN and were greeted by high pitched screaming and crying. Tenya! Mommy’s coming, sweetie. Suzu immediately rushed forward, darting past the plush and functional reception area and into the office operations center.

The relief on the faces of their employees was palpable, as they parted from around Mari, who was bouncing and cooing at the inconsolable purple-faced baby in her arms, desperately encouraging him to drink from a bottle he knocked violently away, as his tantrum reached an earsplitting crescendo. When Mari looked up and saw her, the forced smile on her face shattered, and she began sobbing.

“He won’t stop crying,” she wailed helplessly, her voice wracked with guilt, as she held Tenya out to her.

Suzu immediately pulled off her mask and wrapped her arms around her infant son. “Oh honey, I’m so sorry we had to leave you when you were so upset, but it’s alright now, everything’s alright, Mommy and Daddy are here,” she soothed.

Tenya quieted for a moment, as he sucked in a lungful of air, only to start sobbing again, still completely hysterical. At least the screaming had stopped, but that might only be because he’d exhausted himself, which made her heart ache even worse.

Taro had taken off his helmet and wrapped his arms around Mari and was comforting her, too.

“I tried everything I could, but he wouldn’t eat or play, and his diaper’s fine, I tried to calm him
down, to tell him his mommy and daddy would be back soon, but he just… I’m going to be a terrible mother,” she choked out, pressing her face into the hard shell of Taro’s armor.

“Of course you won’t be. It’s not your fault, honey. Look, even Mom can’t get him to calm down. Poor little guy, seeing everyone so upset, and then being abandoned in a strange place, even if it is with people he knows and loves. Besides, that’s not something you need to worry about for a good long while yet, at least until after the wedding next year,” he gently teased.

But instead of cheering up, Mari crumpled. “I’m s…s….so s… sorry! I don’t know how it happened! I mean, obviously one of the condoms must have been defective because… and now I’ve ruined everything, this isn’t how I wanted… but I wanted Tensei to have his big day first, I was going to tell you tomorrow, because we need to talk, because you promised once we… but that was supposed to be years from now… but you know after what happened to Y…y…uri…” And then she broke down completely.

“We’re going to…? Come here,” he urged, scooping his arms under her and lifting her, looking for a moment as if he was going to fly her into his office, but then he rethought it, and walked carrying her instead, closing the door.

Startled exclamations and eager whispers broke out across the room, because Mari was apparently pregnant, and had been hiding it from everyone.

“Tara-san, please use my desk, it’s in the back corner, and we’ll give you privacy,” the youngest member of their operations center staff offered as an alternative, pointing.

“Suzara-san, isn’t it? Thank you so much,” Suzu stated, heartfelt, as she headed to the back with Tenya, while half the staff began manning their desks again, while the rest were still talking about Mari’s unexpected news.

“I’m so sorry, sweetie,” she soothed, as she tried to get Tenya to nurse. “We’re back now, we’re going to be going back home as soon as you feed, so you sleep in the car on the way home. And your big brother is going to be fine, we’ll bring you to see him tomorrow, because he’s going to be at UA for a couple of days still. Come on honey, you’ll feel better if you eat, I promise.”

It was hard to tell, but she thought Tenya’s frantic cries were beginning to be just a tiny bit softer, though he refused to latch on, when she tried to entice him to feed by running her nipple across his lips. She kept encouraging him gently, breathing slowly and deeply, pressing his head against her chest, so he could hear her rhythmic breathing and heartbeat. And finally, he closed his mouth on her, chomping down hard, the way he usually did, not softly and gently, as if asking permission to suckle her, the way Tensei used to. She remembered it clearly as if it was yesterday, and he could have died.

Stop it, you’ll upset Tenya. You need to be strong for him and Tomi. You can fall apart tonight, once they’re both asleep.

“Suzu? Now that we know T… his big brother is going to be alright, would it be alright if I stayed here tonight, to run the agency? It sounds like Taro and Mari need to talk at length, it would be better if they could just go home, and spend the rest of the day together,” Tomi asked softly, so the others wouldn’t overhear.
“Of course! I just need someone to drive me home, so I can be in the backseat with Tenya, next to his car seat, but that can be anyone from the Agency,” she agreed. Because she had no idea who Yuri was, or what had happened, but it sounded like Taro had promised to give up being a Pro Hero when they were ready to have children, and Mari was clearly pregnant. She felt incredibly guilty, for having an unintentional hand in turning what should have been a private, intimate, joyful announcement to Taro into a very public traumatic incident.

“Almost thirty years, and I still love you more every day,” Tomi stated reverently.

“As long as I get you back late tonight or tomorrow,” she belatedly qualified, because it hadn’t been easy for Tomi to step away from IDATEN, and she wasn’t about to have him end his paternity leave prematurely.

“I promise,” he swore.

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“Tani, do you know who Yuri is, in relation to Mari? Dad texted us,” Taizo asked softly, so as not to wake Tensei.

“Why?” Tani asked warily. Because he’d found out pretty much by accident, because he’d been in the right place at the right time when Taro was on patrol and Mari had needed a shoulder to literally cry on, which was completely unlike the strong, stable, competent woman his brother had fallen head over heels for.

“It’s Dad, Tani,” Taizo argued.

Tani sighed and bit his lip, then looked at his phone and texted back: If it’s important you know right away for some reason, I can tell you, but Mari should, or Taro.

The response was immediate. It’s important, and they can’t right now. They’re occupied.

Holy shit! Is she pregnant?

He heard a gasp and grimaced. He’d forgotten it was a group text.

Apparently yes. Now I really need to know about Yuri, if that was your immediate response. Did Mari have a child in a previous relationship?

Calling you. Because this wasn’t something he couldn’t put in a text.

“Dad? No, it was nothing like that. Yuri was Mari’s best friend; they grew up together, they knew each other since preschool. Yuri’s mother died soon after she was born, so it was just her and her dad, and they were inseparable, but then in middleschool… Yuri was only 13 when… Yuri’s father was Vanguard. You know what happened to him, everyone knows.

“She was devastated when he was killed, she would have been even if those villains hadn’t… anyway, it was gruesome and horrible and plastered all over the news, everyone was talking about it, and she was just a kid, and she’d lost her only parent and she, um… she couldn’t… They held a joint funeral, for the two of them, they were buried side by side, next to her mother. Mari was really messed up, for a long time. She’s had years of therapy to cope with what happened. Taro knows all about it.

“It’s amazing Mari was even able to think about working at IDATEN, or dating Taro, but that’s just how strong she is, now, that she was able to put it behind her. But Taro told me, the day after they
got engaged, that she accepted his proposal conditionally, that he had to promise he’d give up Hero work, that he’d work inside the Agency, or find some other line of work once they got pregnant, because she couldn’t risk something like that happening again, to their child. So, um, I guess Tensei won’t have to worry about picking a Hero name to go with ours. Because it looks like Ingenium is going to become available, in 6-8 months or so, huh?

“I’m going to be Ingenium?” Tensei whispered hoarsely, in disbelief, from his bed.

“Shit. You’re awake. I mean I’m glad but… Although I guess you need to know that… how do you feel?” he asked, putting the call on speaker.

Tensei bit his lip. “Everything hurts.”

“I’ll get Recovery Girl, you just stay calm, OK?” Tani soothed.

“Don’t worry Ba- Tensei, they’ll be quick,” Taizo assured him, as Tani left the room to find her. Thankfully, she was just down the hall, in the general Infirmary. “Tensei’s awake, and he says everything hurts,” he told her worriedly.

“Oh dear. I was hoping he’d be able to sleep through the night,” recovery Girl said with a sigh. “I’ve already healed him all I can for today. I’ll just have to give him some painkillers, now that his concussion isn’t an issue. I should be able to heal the breaks and possibly even the worst of the bruising tomorrow, though he’ll still need at least one more day after that, in my care in any case.”

“We’re so grateful, for everything you’ve already done,” Tani told her sincerely.

“I’m happy to help. I’m only thankful it wasn’t worse for the poor boy. It won’t be easy keeping him from training, especially with the postponed Exam coming up, but you need to make sure he doesn’t risk another concussion. I know I’ve said so before, but I can’t stress that strongly enough,” she insisted.

“We’ll make sure he doesn’t risk himself. Tani and I have already talked about it. We’re going to temporarily move back in with mom and dad, so we can help keep an eye on Tensei, keep him out of trouble and distracted, as well as help with Tenya. You mentioned he could continue to be confused or disoriented, and have attention issues and mood changes, plus problems sleeping. Mom and Dad wouldn’t feel safe leaving the two of them alone together, but they need some time together, too,” Tani said, as they headed back to the Intensive Care area.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. I’m so proud of you. You’ve both grown into such fine young men, Taro too, from what I’ve seen,” she told him sincerely as she entered the room.

She examined Tensei again, and then gave him an injection of a combined painkiller and sedative, to help him sleep, instead of pills, explaining it would take effect more quickly. She also insisted they each take a dinner break, telling them the school provided a limited meal selection for the faculty when classes weren’t in session, that one of them could come with her and pick up some of the prepared refrigerated meals, and that she’d take turns sitting with them. Tani hadn’t even thought about food, until she mentioned it, he’d been so anxious over Tensei, but suddenly his stomach was rumbling, and he was happy to take her up on her offer. She insisted they take turns sleeping, as well, as all the other beds were thankfully empty. She did everything in her power to make the entire ordeal that much more bearable.

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Shouta had felt guilty, faking calling in sick to his employer, in front of Hashira-san, but he needed
the money from the double evening and night shifts to help pay his next rent, and he couldn’t risk annoying his boss. Working through dinner wasn’t an issue, since he’d eaten more at lunch than in the previous three days combined, but sleep was. As usual, that night he only got three hours. But at least the following morning he was able to have an actual, filling breakfast, thanks to the groceries Hashira had pressured him into accepting. Considering the apartment still faintly smelled of the stir-fry from lunch the day before, he wasn’t about to complain. Especially since that also meant he’d have the energy to double down on his training.

Robots. The entire Exam was going to be destroying giant robots. Unless they changed it. But he doubted they would, considering how excited so many of the students had been to use their Quirks on that particular challenge. The school would have even more potential for lawsuits from upset parents, if they changed it. Which meant, he was going to have to train even harder, and think up ways to defeat them, especially as he most likely still wouldn’t be allowed his whip, or any other weapon. At least not what other people would think of as weapons. But shattered concrete and brick and broken pipes were also effective weapons, and a training ground where students periodically fought robots would no doubt have rubble, if not at the start of the Exam, then within moments after it began. Even the appendages of the robots the other potential students demolished could become impromptu weapons.

He needed to think, plan, strategize, and hone his body into an even keener living weapon within the next month. He had his work cut out for him.

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Hizashi spent hours with his parents the night of the disastrous aborted Exam silently arguing for them to still allow him to take the postponed Exam to attend UA. After what happened, they were even more convinced that he wasn’t ready to train to become a Hero, they urged him to look into other schools, to study something else, anything else, that wasn’t so dangerous, but he managed to stay calm and firm, refusing to be pressured into giving up on his dream. In the end, they finally grudgingly agreed to let him take the Exam when it was offered again.

Hizashi headed to his room, and closed and locked his door, for some much needed privacy, to listen to his music, trying to decompress from the exhausting and stressful battle with his parents which he still couldn’t believe he’d somehow won, when his cell phone buzzed, the unexpected vibration against his leg making him jump.

Guiltily he turned off his music, realizing his parents must have been knocking and ringing the bell, trying to get his attention, and called him in exasperation, but when he looked down, the caller ID was listed as Nemuri Kayama. Completely flustered, he accidentally refused the call, instead of accepting it. And then he somehow managed to hang up on her in the middle of her unapologetically salacious greeting, when she determinedly called back. He called her then, screeching his apology into his phone so loudly and unintelligibly that even he didn’t know what he was trying to say.

Thankfully, Nemuri had simply laughed, clearly amused by his suffering, but in a friendly and mischievous way, rather than sadistically. And somehow she was able to steer past his complete social ineptitude and invite him to spend the following day with her, one that was sure to be one of the most terrifying and exhilarating days of his life. He was certain that, for all she would undoubtedly make a daunting enemy, she also had the potential to be an amazing friend. Assuming he lived through the day. And, he belatedly realized, if his parents let him go.

He resolutely headed back out to the living room, and explained he was invited to go out the next day with one of the applicants he had met at the test, begging them to let him go. His parents were so surprised he’d actually managed to make a social connection that they gave their permission without
even asking who it was, and both of them gave him extra hugs, before he headed back to his room, eager to get to sleep, so the night could be over. But once he was there, he lay awake in his bed for hours, unable to calm down enough to sleep.

The next morning, he was up with his first alarm, diving for his closet, to find the perfect outfit. He spent a ridiculous amount of time choosing his clothes for the day and dressing, even for him. He’d emptied nearly his entire closet and bureau onto his bed and across his floor, in a vain attempt to look like someone she might want to be friends with. He’d lost count of the number of shirts he’d tried on and was staring in dismay at his bare chest when the doorbell notification light flashed from both his wall and the hallway, as the chime only he could hear sounded through the house. He was still half naked and he hadn’t even had breakfast yet!

In desperation he yanked on the closest shirt, hoping whatever band it was from was one Nemuri liked, or at least, didn’t abjectly hate, and then stumbled from the room, tripping over his own feet in both his eagerness and terror, because he’d never had a friend come to his house before, because he’d never had a friend before, and the urge to run and hide was becoming overwhelming.

Nemuri beamed at Hizashi’s mom when she opened the door of the Yamada residence, immediately recognizing her from the day before. Unlike in the Infirmary, the attractive blond-haired, green-eyed middle-aged woman was smiling warmly, instead of looking frantic and frazzled.

“Hi! I’m Nemuri Kayama. We didn’t have the opportunity to be formally introduced yesterday. I’m here to see Hizashi.”

The woman’s welcoming smile froze on her face, but managed not to fall altogether, which was a point in her favor, as her eyes darted up and down, taking in her clinging white sweater, the bullwhip she wore looped around her waist as a belt, and her skintight red leather miniskirt with matching high-heeled thigh-high boots. Yamada-san strengthened her smile with a clear effort of will and silently waved her to come inside, and then picked up a silver bell and lifted it, as if she was about to ring it, but set it back down again, even as Nemuri heard the sound of stumbling footsteps coming down the hall.

“HI, YOU’RE HERE!” Hizashi cried, then slapped his hand over his mouth, a look of horror on his face.

Nemuri had been prepared, she’d slammed her hands over her ears at the first sound of his Quirk-laced voice, but still couldn’t help wincing, even as she quickly reassured both him and his alarmed looking mother. “No worries. It’s good to see you again. Ready to head out?”

Hizashi nodded, apparently afraid to verbally reply.

His mother snapped her fingers, getting both their attention, smiled apologetically, and held up a finger to her – her index finger, indicating she should wait a moment – and then she waved her son towards the kitchen.

Nemuri internalized a sigh as she subtly positioned herself so she could watch from a distance through the doorway, pretty sure she knew what was coming next. But instead of the usual round of parental whispering, she spotted a quick flash of hands, no doubt warning her son of the type of girl he’d innocently brought home. But to her surprise, she saw Hizashi blush, shaking his head, as he took his wallet out of his pocket, ruefully accepting a handful of bills his mother gave him. Then he put his wallet away and the two exchanged what appeared to be a heartfelt hug.
Nemuri smiled and quickly stepped out of the line of sight, pleased she’d passed both the Front Door Test and the Meeting the Mother Test, in spite of how she was dressed, even if it had, clearly, been an initial shock. But she refused to “tone down” who she was merely because of social stereotypes and misguided prudery.

“SOR… sorry,” Hizashi whispered, after starting to yell again, though it didn’t sound like he’d been using his Quirk this time. “I’m ready now. Mom said it was nice meeting you and she hopes we have fun,” he added, and it sounded sincere, not like a platitude for her sake.

“It was a pleasure meeting her, too. So, where would you like to head, on our wild adventure?” she asked, after waving goodbye to his mother, as they left his house.

“Wherever you want to go,” Hizashi replied deferentially.

“What do you like to do? Movies, the arcade, shopping?” she fished, not asking what he did with his other friends, because she was pretty sure he didn’t have any, from what he’d said in the Infirmary, and she didn’t want to hurt his feelings.

“Anything you want,” he replied eagerly and noncommittally.

“Don’t blame me if you don’t pick and I take you clothes shopping,” she threatened, but then grinned, at the way his eyes lit up. “Aha! So you do have a preference. Clothes shopping it is,” she agreed happily.

The next three hours were spent in every leather and punk shop they could find. Hizashi let her lead the way the entire time, though she kept trying to get him to express his preferences. By lunch time, Nemuri couldn’t remember a day where she’d smiled and laughed so much with a single person. Hizashi had all the warmth and eager exuberance of puppy, he was completely adorable.

She was pleased to see that, as the day had progressed, he seemed more and more relaxed in her presence, too, that he was clearly having just as good a time as she was, even though so far he’d only window shopped, while she had two shopping bags full of new clothes. He’d offered to carry them for her, but not insisted, as if she couldn’t do it herself, which she heartily approved of.

“How about I buy you lunch?” she urged, to reward him for knowing the difference between being a gentleman and being a chauvinistic jerk.

“Oh! No, I can pay. But yes, I’d love to eat. If you’re hungry, I mean. If you’re not, I’m fine,” Hizashi stammered.


“Whatever you like is fine,” Hizashi said, but she’d seen the way his eyes lit up again at the mention of burgers.

“Burgers it is,” she announced, with a grin.

They headed for the Happy Meal fast food place on the next corner and stood in line.

“What can I get for you?” the gangly boy behind the counter asked, his voice squeaking, as he fought to keep his eyes on Nemuri’s face and to keep from swallowing his tongue.

She smiled and leaned over the counter, subtly pushing her chest out, the fabric of her sweater straining against her breasts. “I’ll have a double cheeseburger with extra cheese, be sure to make it hot and gooey. A large fries, and a big, thick, vanilla shake. I think I must have been a cat in a past
life, because I just I love to lick the cream from my lips,” she said, seductively licking her top lip for emphasis.

The poor boy could barely type in her order and then stutter out the price.

“WAIT!” Hizashi cried, much too loudly, startling both her and the cashier but not quite using his Quirk. “We’re together, I’m paying. I’ll have what she’s having, except make my shake strawberry, please.”

The cashier looked at him uncomprehendingly for a moment, but then his words seemed to process, and he typed in his order, which doubled the price.

Hizashi hadn’t sounded jealous or possessive, but he’d interjected, and insisted on paying, instead of allowing her to. Nemuri was proud of him. “Aw, Hizashi, thank you. You’re such a good friend,” Nemuri purred, her voice dripping with innuendo as she smiled sweetly at him and gave him a bro hug, from the side, which made him jump and turned his face beet red, but to her surprise, he hugged her back, and not nearly as stiffly as she would have thought he might. He was more tactile than she’d expected, which was good: it meant his parents hugged him often enough that he wasn’t touch-starved, because from what she’d learned in the Infirmary and confirmed on their little sojourn today so far, he didn’t actually have any friends, other than her. She was going to change that, but baby steps.

The caressing hand on her ass was completely unexpected. She was so startled by it, it took her a few seconds to realize it wasn’t Hizashi’s, that apparently some pervert behind her had thought it was acceptable behavior to grope her. She spun around, furious, her right hand raised in a slap, expecting to see some middle-aged businessman, but instead there was a towering younger man dressed in denim and leather, with the dual horns and features of a rhinoceros, his skin a leathery gray, who caught her wrist mid-swing and yanked her forwards, pressing her up against his torso.

“Hey there, sweet-cheeks. Aren’t you a feisty little girl? Me, with my Quirk, I’m always horny, and it sounds like you’re just aching for a real man. I’ve got something thick and creamy for you, too. How about you ditch the stringbean, we get takeout, and you come back to my place?” he propositioned coarsely and shamelessly, in the middle of the restaurant, in front of Hizashi and dozens of customers and employees.

The sick bastard didn’t even flinch from the sharp knuckle strike of her left hand to his throat, her knee slamming into his groin, or the heel she jammed into his booted foot, for manhandling her as he spoke, but his head drew back, and his free hand brushed furiously at his eyes, when a cascade of chocolate milkshake suddenly drenched his face.

“LET HER GO!” Hizashi demanded loudly and fiercely, but not using his Quirk, as she hadn’t, knowing he’d be arrested for it, and that he could hurt innocent bystanders, as the line of customers melted from around them and people began scrambling up from tables and running for the door, not one of them, or any of the employees, intervening to help them.

“You’re dead, you little fucker,” her attacker roared at Hizashi, yanking Nemuri off her feet and tossing her over the counter as if she weighed nothing, slamming her into the person who’d just taken their order, who somewhat cushioned the impact, the way Rocket Man had only yesterday, she thought groggily, as she fought to stay conscious, regretting not using her Quirk when she’d had the chance, but she hadn’t expected his crude behavior to escalate into a fullblown attack.

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Hizashi knew villain attacks could happen anytime, anyplace, but this wasn’t like that, they’d just
been buying lunch when he’d suddenly seen a look of disbelief and indignation in Nemuri’s eyes, and then she’d spun around and tried to slap the customer behind them. He still didn’t know why, but he knew the man had done something to her, from what she did, and the vile things he was saying to her now, and the way he’d grabbed and held onto her, as she unleashed a flurry of blows, which harmlessly glanced off his leathery hide and clothes.

In inspiration born of desperation Hizashi snatched another customer’s chocolate milkshake off the tray that had just been placed on the counter, ripped the lid off, and flung it into the hulking brute’s face. “LET HER GO!” Hizashi ordered, not using his Quirk, not because he’d be arrested for it – because it would be worth it, to save Nemuri – but because upset as he was, and still an untrained novice, he’d blow out the windows and hurt or deafen innocent bystanders.

“You’re dead, you little fucker,” the man roared, to Hizashi’s horror yanking Nemuri off her feet and flinging her over the counter, he could hear the crash of her landing as he ran for the nearest table, snatching up one of the chairs, because if Nemuri’s hand to hand blows hadn’t worked, his certainly wouldn’t, and even if he couldn’t stop him, he needed to keep him distracted and away from her.

He swung the chair with all his might into the rampaging man, but the metal legs bent and strong plastic seat and back shattered like eggshell as it was ripped from his hands and bashed into the floor, as he more fell that dove under and away from him, then scrambled along the floor hopelessly, knowing he’d be dead with his next blow. He opened his mouth to scream, to use his Quirk anyway, to save himself, now that most of everyone was hopefully outside, when a yellow and white blur slammed into the villain’s side, knocking him sprawling into half a dozen tables with the force of the impact.

Hizashi shook his head and blinked, afraid he was concussed, as the villain jerked and twisted, first right, then left, then up and down, as if a marionette controlled by an amateur being jerked by invisible strings, amidst a foggy haze of white and yellow, until he crumpled to the ground in a heap, as if those strings had been cut.

Then suddenly a grey haired middle-aged man in a yellow and white caped costume was standing in front of Hizashi, he just materialized out of thin air. “You OK, kid?” he asked.

Hizashi blinked. “Who…? How…?”

“Name’s Gran Torino. You’re lucky I stopped in here to take a leak on my way home, there’s no way I’d actually eat this crap. I didn’t even get an alert yet, some guy just came barreling into the restroom hollering a rhino was attacking two kids. You look kind of out of it. You injured? Where’s the other one?” he asked.

Now that he had a moment to process, his hands hurt like hell, from the chair being ripped out of his grasp, and his right shoulder throbbed, from slamming into the floor, but “Nemuri!” he cried, scrambling to his feet, heading for the counter at a stumbling run, all but tripping over his own feet.

Gran Torino beat him there, he was somehow already behind the counter, kneeling down. “Crap. Looks like we’re going to need more than one ambulance,” he grumbled, but then he added gently. “Easy there, miss, kid. It’s OK. Don’t try to move, you could be hurt worse than you think.”

Heart hammering, Hizashi made it to the counter and leaned over, and saw Gran Tornino gently taking Nemuri’s pulse and checking her eyes. He was relieved to see she was conscious, that she didn’t seem to be bleeding, but she looked dazed, and the employee lying underneath her looked to be in similar shape.

The hero pulled out his phone and touched the screen a single time, lifting it to his ear. “This is Gran
Torino. I need officers and three ambulances, one of them police, for two civilian victims with possible concussions, broken bones and internal injuries, no goring, but pummeling and impact damage, and an unconscious villain, at my location, the Happy Meal burger joint on Yuri between Fifth and Sixth. Clock me back in for at least two hours of overtime, too. There’s minors involved, and possibly illegal Quirk usage, the paperwork on this one’s going to be a bitch.”

“WE DIDN’T!” Hizashi protested, barely keeping his voice at a normally loud volume, forcing it softer with his next words. “We didn’t do anything wrong, he did something, Nemuri was just defending herself, and then he grabbed her and was saying disgusting things and she didn’t use her Quirk, and neither did I.”

“Save it for the police, kid. They’ll examine the security tape, question whatever witnesses are still around, talk to you both at the hospital or station, call your parents, and straighten this mess out,” Gran Torino told him.

“Our parents?” Hizashi whispered, horrified, he could feel the blood drain from his face, because it had taken him hours to convince his parents to let him still take the Exam, and now they were never going to let him leave the house again, let alone try to become a Hero.

Gran Torino frowned, looking him intently in the eye. “If you’ve got some kind of problems at home, kid, you need to tell me. I’m a Hero. I’ll keep you safe, no matter who it’s from.”

Hizashi’s eyes widened at the misunderstanding. “NO! Sorry, I mean no, it’s not that at all, it’s that they’re really protective, and after yesterday they didn’t want me to take the Exam, they wanted me to go to a different school, instead of UA, but I want to become a Hero, to help people, to make up for… to save people, and help them,” Hizashi babbled in a rush.

“You were at yesterday’s UA Exam? They should be glad you made it out safe, then, that you weren’t injured, after the way those idiots screwed it up. Back in my day, something like that never would have happened,” Gran Torino criticized.

Hizashi felt his eyes water. “IT WAS MY FAULT! I used my Quirk, by accident, and everything went crazy, because of me,” he confessed.

Gran Torino sighed. “Look kid, I don’t know what you did yesterday, but from what I saw of what you did today, all you were doing was defending yourself, and maybe your friend. So I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt, until we question you, OK?”

Hizashi nodded, wiping the tears streaming from his eyes with both hands, knowing if he tried to say another word, he’d start sobbing.

“I don’t care what anyone else says, Hizashi,” Nemuri unexpectedly piped up from the floor, and Hizashi was so relieved to hear she was coherent, that he almost missed what she said next. “I was there and here, I saw what you did both times. The first time was an accident, and you tried to fix it, with your sign, and this time, you tried to protect me, when I couldn’t protect myself without making things worse again, you ran for me, you fought to save me, when everyone else ran away. You’re going to be an amazing Hero, if you give yourself the chance.”

It was the relief from both hearing her speak and her words that made him lose the battle and start crying his eyes out, just as the sound of sirens began approaching. By the time tires screeched to a halt, he could barely see the flashing lights through his tear-filled eyes.
A/N: Shouta’s father’s name is Akemi “Akuma” Ikari. Akemi means “Beautiful Dawn”, but his nickname in school and on the street as a youth was “Akuma” or “Demon” and Ikari means “Anger” (or “Anchor”, depending on the Kanji). His adult villain name is Demolition Demon, a play on both his name and Quirk. His Quirk is to create metal fatigue in iron by touch, drawing the strength of the iron into his body, so the structures around him weaken and collapse, even as he becomes physically nearly invulnerable. His power’s limitation is that it only works on iron, steel or other alloys containing iron, but the danger he poses in an urban setting is almost limitless.

Shouta’s mother’s given name is a complete misnomer: Kohana, “Little Flower”. His mother has a Strength Quirk, making her both physically strong and impervious to injury, to a limited extent, which is a deadly combination, in conjunction with her volatile temper, and only worsened by her alcohol abuse. His mother is fiercely loyal to his father and would literally kill at his command, or to protect him.

Shouta’s birth name was Kiyoshi, which means “Silent”, and was extremely appropriate – even as a child he was known for his stealth and quiet strategizing, predominantly in an effort to keep from being noticed by his parents, as much as possible, for his own safety. He has privately theorized that his Erasure Quirk was nature’s attempt at keeping him safe from his parents long enough to live to adulthood.

“Oh. Hello again, Detective,” Kayama said in surprise from her hospital bed, because she’d clearly known the police would be questioning her, but had apparently not expected to see the same detective, in a city their size.

“Kayama-san. I was assigned to this case because you and Yamada-kun are involved. I’ve already examined the scene of the attack and taken his statement.” His psychometry Quirk had revealed a silent series of images of what had occurred, but he needed the crucial vocal piece filled as well. A crying Yamada had been all too eager to provide it. Getting him to talk wasn’t the problem: it was keeping the volume down to a dull roar that had proved to be a challenge. They’d finally had to resort to a written response to his questions, because Yamada couldn’t keep his Quirk from activating. Saburo rubbed his temple, because the aspirin hadn’t kicked in yet and he had one hell of a headache, thanks to Yamada’s Quirk. He empathized with Masa. At least his own Quirk didn’t harm him, the way his son’s did.

“Is Hizashi alright? I mean, I don’t think he was hurt physically, but he told me his parents really gave him a hard time last night, about still being allowed to take the Exam, and he hasn’t been answering my texts. I’m afraid his parents might have confiscated his phone or grounded him or something,” Nemuri stated in what sounded to be genuine concern.

Detective Tsukauchi fought not to close his eyes and shake his head at her statement, because as parental punishments went, the ones he usually dealt with were fists, Quirks, guns, knives, and worse, parents who beat their kids bloody at the slightest provocation, real or imagined. These two kids and the Iida boy had no idea how lucky they were, to have been born into the families they
were, with loving, caring parents.

Aizawa’s father would have dropped a building on him, if he’d made the mistake of angering him, if he was lucky, if he hadn’t used his power more creatively than that upon his only child. They had an entire six cartons of case files filled with photographs, witness and survivor statements, and forensic reports, that demonstrated all too clearly what that monster was capable of.

He’d almost had a heart attack the day before, when he’d overheard Kayama referred to Aizawa as “Demon Eyes” in front of Chiyo, after he’d finished questioning him. He was only thankful Aizawa hadn’t been present to hear her. He’d questioned her sharply about it, while Masa was there to tell if she was lying, because he needed to know if she’d somehow found out he was Akemi “Akuma” Ikari’s son, the infamous Demolition Demon, who was currently serving concurrent life sentences in Tartarus, for his many crimes.

“Detective? Are you alright? Do you need a doctor?” Kayama asked in concern from her bed, her hand hovering over the “Call Nurse” button, suddenly sounding far more mature.

“No, I’m fine. Just a headache, but I’ve already taken aspirin, it just hasn’t kicked in yet, and last night ran rather late,” he admitted, because sounding human in front of a suspect could also be an efficient interrogation technique, dependent up the individual, and from what he’d seen, Kayama was definitely truly empathic, not just faking it, to manipulate Yamada, as she might have been. “In answer to your question, Yamada is fine. His hands and shoulder were mildly injured in the altercation, but he sustained no serious injuries, and his parents weren’t too severe with him, merely concerned for his safety.” They’d been frantic and all but hysterical, but she didn’t need to know that.

“How are you feeling?” he asked solicitously, although he knew the answer to that, physically, at least – he’d already spoken to her doctor.

“I have a minor concussion – not as if minor traumatic brain injury isn’t bad, especially since it’s my second one in two days, but it’s still considered minor. Fortunately Recovery Girl fully healed my first one. There’s a lot of bruising and a few sprains. No broken bones, but my skin is going to be pretty colorful, for awhile. The cashier broke my fall pretty effectively, and fortunately, from what I overheard when we were being transported to our respective ambulances, I don’t think he was seriously injured either.”

“He wasn’t,” Saburo assured her. “I’ve taken his statement as well, along with the few witnesses who didn’t run when the trouble began.”

“Then you should already know what happened wasn’t our fault,” she challenged.

“I still need your statement,” he replied calmly. “Start with when you entered the restaurant.”

He listened as she told the same story as Yamada, except this time he found out what triggered her spinning around to slap a stranger’s face, the hand on her buttocks, something none of the other witnesses had seen, or the security cameras, which were focused on the cash registers, in case of robbery, not the customers. The additional combat moves she’d used were impressive, and he asked a question he’d been curious about when he first heard Yamada’s description of her attack. “Where did you learn to fight like that?”

“Self-defense classes, since I was little. A lot of my mother’s patients wish they’d known how to fight, to fend off villains, muggers, rapists, people with more powerful Quirks, siblings, parents. Mom thought I should know how to protect myself.”
“Though apparently not from police detectives who insist upon questioning them without their mother present,” a voice said from the doorway accused, making Saburo turn guiltily.

“I believe I made it clear yesterday that you are not to question my daughter without my presence. At the time, you seemed to welcome it,” Kayama-san accused.

“That was a different incident. And I suspected this might have involved something she might not have spoken about quite so freely, in front of a protective mother,” he explained.

She turned from him, focused solely on her daughter. “I know it’s not the Yamada boy, from your phone call. Who do I need to kill?”

“No one, mom. A Pro Hero already pummeled him into the ground, an older one I’d never heard of before. Gran Torino,” the younger Kayama assured her.

“Gran Torino? I’m not familiar with him either. Detective?”

“He keeps something of a low profile; he tends to get involved in the more complicated cases. He’s a strategist, more than muscle and a flashy Quirk, though he has both. He’s one of the few Heroes I know who could care less where he falls in the rankings. He doesn’t play to the cameras or steal other Hero’s captures out from under them. He has a good reputation with the police, though he’s been known to be a little abrupt and rough around the edges with civilians.”

“I see. Thank you. Are you finished questioning my daughter?”

“Yes, I am,” Saburo admitted.

“Is Nemuri in any trouble? Being charged with assault, or any other crime?” the elder Kayama challenged.

“No. Her initial slap can be considered self defense, because our suspect laid his hand on her first. She’s also legally still a minor. The manhandling afterwards justifies her more aggressive defensive attacks, and she didn’t use her Quirk, so we won’t be filing any charges against her. Or Yamada, who also acted purely in defense of your daughter and himself, and also wisely chose not to use his Quirk illegally,” he assured them.

“Good. Then I believe you have no further business in my under-aged daughter’s room, do you, Detective?” Kayama-san stated, striking as swiftly and sharply as a viper.

“Wait! Did you speak to Tensei Iida today? I don’t want to know what he said, I just want to know if he’s alright, if he’s recovering,” the younger Kayama interrupted.

“I’m afraid I can’t discuss the case with a civilian. But if you’re worried about him, you can always call or visit his family’s agency, once you’re released from the hospital,” Saburo told her helpfully.

“Thank you, Detective. As soon as I’m out of here, I will.”

Tensei wanted to go home. He hated lying in bed in the school Infirmary, his family hovering over him, all their energy focused on him, instead of their Hero work, or Tenya. He missed Tenya too, almost as a physical ache. He’d gotten so used to holding him, playing with him, doting over him daily. He was so proud to be the big brother, so tired of being the little brother.

In the next moment he felt guilty for it. He hated worrying his brothers, his mom and dad. He hated
feeling helpless, being a burden, being dependent, being stuck in bed, being still. Especially being still. Even when he was sick – which wasn’t often – he was never still, never confined to his room. He’d snuggle up on the couch and watch movies, or play video games, and head into the kitchen for food when he got hungry.

He wasn’t hungry now. He was too nauseous to eat, too anxious. Because his Quirk had malfunctioned. It had flooded somehow, stalled out, when he needed it most. That had never happened before. Not only to his own Quirk engines, but to his brothers’ or his father’s. He’d checked, he’d asked. What if there was something permanently wrong? He wasn’t allowed to test it to see. He was too scared to test it. Because what if it still didn’t work? What if it never worked again? What if it worked, he thought it was fine, and then when he needed it most, it failed again? Heroes relied on their Quirks, depended upon them to save people, to survive against villains. What if he couldn’t be a Hero?

It had only been a day, and already he was a wreck, mentally. He didn’t even know if it was from the concussion, the mood swings and personality changes Recovery Girl had warned might happen, or just the emotional trauma from the fight, the fear, catching up to him. What if he couldn’t handle the pressure of being a Hero? What if this happened every time he tried to fight a villain?

His brothers’ whispering was the worst, the way they talk about him, when they thought he was asleep. He loved them, but he just wanted them to shut up, to go away, to let him sleep. No, he didn’t want them to leave him alone, because if he was trapped in bed, alone, it would be worse, only it was worse because they saw him like this, and he was being weak, and… and he was so wired he couldn’t sleep, not tired at all, except he was exhausted, too, and that made no sense, and he hated that his thoughts were like tied in knots like that now, that his head felt so fuzzy, only sharp and clear sometimes, but those times were the worst, because he was trapped and-

“How are you fee-“ Recovery Girl started to ask, as she approached his bed.

“Shut up and leave me alone!” he snapped immediately. He shouldn’t have interrupted Recovery Girl, or yelled at her, but she was so annoying, treating him like a child, feeding him gummy bears like he was a kid, so why should he feel guilty?

“Oh my. Well then. I know this is difficult, Tensei, but you need to try to stay calm. It’s time for another treatment.”

Her voice was firm and warm and motherly, but she wasn’t his mother. He wanted his mother, only Tenya needed her more. Tani and Taizo had been whispering about Tenya too, about how he didn’t sleep through the night last night, the way he always had before, how he kept waking up, crying, like he was having nightmares. Was he dreaming about me disappearing and never coming back? What if I never come back? If I’m stuck here, in this bed, forever? It felt like forever.

The touch of lips on his left cheek was so unexpected he yelped and jerked away, his left engine flaring on without him meaning it too, sending him rocketing out of the bed, flipping over the guardrail and crashing down face first towards the floor, his elbows angling down and Quirks firing instinctively to protect him, only it was just like before, in the auditorium, except the right one didn’t flood out, it just didn’t fire at all, this time, but the left flared to life again, which sent him shooting up towards the ceiling, diagonally across the room, he was going to crack his skull and die, but then he was tackled midair, and Taizo was yelling, Taizo never yelled, he was always the goofball, the jokester, the prankster, but he was yelling now, as Tensei belatedly shut down his left Quirk Engine.

“What the hell were you thinking? Are you crazy, using your Quirk in here, when you’re still injured? What if you’d hit your head again? You could die! Recovery Girl, are you alright?”
Tensei didn’t know if it was the difference in tone that did it, when he spoke to her, or the terror from what just happened, not only losing control, activating his Quirk without meaning too, but the fact that the right one still wasn’t working, but he broke down and started to cry, he started sobbing like a little kid, wildly and hysterically.

“Oh shit! No, Tensei, stop! I’m sorry. I just… you scared me, little brother. I only left the room for a couple of minutes, I just needed some coffee, and you could have died, and it would have been my fault, and please don’t cry,” Taizo begged, and he sounded like he was about to start crying himself, any second, and that only made Tensei sob harder.

“Taizo, you need to keep him still for a moment, while I use my Quirk to examine him, to make sure he didn’t hurt himself. And I don’t think any of that was intentional, I apparently startled him, though I told him I was going to treat him. You see how he’s looked this morning, it’s just like what I warned you might happen. And I think you might need a Quirk specialist to look at his right arm. Both times he only used his left. Once we’re done, why don’t you contact your father? Since he’s still a minor, Tomi or Suzu will need to set up the appointment,” Recovery Girl urged.

Tensei hated that she was talking about him like he couldn’t hear her, or speak, but he couldn’t say a word, because he was still crying like a toddler who broke his favorite toy. He couldn’t stop, no matter how hard he tried, just like when he was flying for the wall in the auditorium, he couldn’t stop, and everything was coming crashing down.

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Shouta stared, riveted, at the crappy little TV in the break room of the warehouse, that had been left on, though no one else was in there; the other workers were always leaving it on. It was usually playing some annoying sports game or even more annoying sitcom or soap opera, but this time, it was showing the local news, and a flash of blond hair had caught his eye, along with the flash of police sirens, so of course he’d looked, though he knew it couldn’t possibly be the same blond hair, not the loud kid from the Quirk test. Only it was.

And not only him, but the girl with the purple gas, too, she was being loaded into an ambulance. And it looked like they might both be under arrest, though he’d missed that part, it was just the tail end of the story, the last image, before the camera switched to a view of a homeless shelter, cordoned off with yellow police tape, the next sensationalized story. He made note of the network, and headed back to work, because he was only on a bathroom break. He’d look it up on his phone later, when he was done.

Seven hours later, Shouta watched the same video clip on his tiny phone screen. The story was titled “Unhappy Meal”, and it would likely have never even made the news, since there was no blood or death, but the girl was attractive, he supposed, for a girl, and dressed provocatively, and the boy was annoyingly pretty too, and they had been involved in the UA incident the day before, and they hadn’t been able to show footage of them then, but they could now, though their faces had been blocked out on the later clip, because the news station’s legal team had either belatedly realized they were minors, or purposefully waited until someone complained.

Scandals and attacks meant ratings, and the UA incident was both, though not technically an attack. Which just proved that reporters were as slimy and useless as ever. And maybe meant there would be two less competitors for the limited slots at UA a month from now. Which was fine by him. He hoped he never had to see that loud blond haired kid or black haired gas user again.

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Yasuo stood before Principal Masayama and began his pitch, with the same gravity as if he was
speaking before a judge and jury.

“I’d like to propose a new three-year fully funded scholarship and internship program, sponsored by Phoenix Design and Construction, for your school. The scholarship will cover tuition, room, board, uniforms, lab fees, and all ancillary expenses for a single student. The internship will be limited to six hours per week, one hour each day after classes, enough to teach the student marketable skills and provide a career and future in the design-build industry, if the student desires – in Phoenix, if there is an opening – but not enough to interfere with school class work, homework, or trips. The internship will provide a stipend, so the student has spending money for clothes other than uniforms, entertainment, and other personal expenses not covered by the scholarship.

“When you check their business license and rating, you’ll see that they are an award winning design-build firm that specializes in villain attack salvage and reclamation projects and special needs homes. They’re both an LGBTQ+ and special needs firm.

“My brother, Kenjiro Hasagawa, is the head architect and co-owner, he’s extremely talented and visionary, and also paraplegic, the survivor of a villain attack and building collapse. His husband, Hiro Hasagawa, is the youngest son of the Hasagawa Construction Company, and co-owner of Phoenix. Their mottos are “We can rebuild your home from the ashes and rubble” and “We specialize in special needs homes” – loss of mobility, limbs, sight, any permanent injury, due to villain attack, accidents, or other causes, and also homes for individuals with unique body types and sizes due to Quirks. All their buildings incorporate a unique crash cage design in every room, reinforced concrete and Plexiglas, to increase survivability in case of villain attack, or natural disasters, such as earthquakes, landslides and even tsunami and flooding, the crash cages are air tight, are built to float, and have their own oxygen supply.

“Please review the written proposal with your legal team and your Board. I will be more than happy to attend any meetings and answer any questions you might have. We are offering the scholarship for a minimum of fifteen years, five three-year terms, open to all courses, Hero, Support, General Studies, and Business. We will select the recipient from any of your student body who choose to apply, for the second through fifth awards. We already have a candidate in mind for the first three-year term.”

Principal Masayama looked at him steadily. “Yes, I thought you might. Your client, Shouta Aizawa, I suspect. Though I honestly expected this proposal to be for a single year, or three-year term, for your specified candidate. I wasn’t expecting this.”

“You mean something legitimate? You’ll find this offer is completely above board. Yes, we are trying to aid a specific student achieve his dream,” he admitted, neither confirming nor denying it was Shouta. “But Phoenix is not affiliated with the Yakuza, or any other illegal organization, and neither am I, though I would hope you would have researched me and discovered that for yourself, before agreeing to meet with me.” Yasuo smiled tightly, the smile his brother-in-law had called more intimidating than his distant cousin’s, who actually was Yakuza.

“I researched you thoroughly, and received nothing but positive reports, even from lawyers you won against in court. Your reputation is impeccable. I would hope your brother’s will be as well.”

“It is. When do you think you will have your decision by?” Yasuo asked.

“Within the month, certainly. It will likely be my last act as Principal. Don’t worry, my involvement won’t taint their decision against your proposal. For now, I am still the Principal here. I’m stepping down voluntarily. Taking an early retirement.” It was a statement of fact, no bitterness or other obvious emotion attached to it.
“I look forward to receiving your approval before you depart,” Yasuo stated sincerely.
The Things I Hold So Dear

Chapter Summary

Tensei rolled his eyes. “We left an hour early, because you knew you were going to drive 20 kilometers below the speed limit the entire way here, because you were so concerned about getting into an accident and hurting me. We’re still 20 minutes early, and they already have all my paperwork. If you’re so concerned, go check me in.”

“Or we could walk with you and keep talking that way,” Kayama suggested conciliatorily. “My mom’s doing the paperwork to check me out, Hizashi and I were just going to get a soda for the ride to my house, so I can get changed, because my clothes got trashed, and the ones my mom brought for me to wear home aren’t cool enough for the karaoke bar. Hey, after you’re done with your appointment, how about you meet us there? Karaoke’s always more fun the more people there are.”

Yamada had a deer-in-the-headlights look on his face, and Tensei was just about to politely decline, when unexpectedly Yamada chimed in. “Yes, come with us! I need to make up for messing everything up at the Exam!”

Chapter Notes

Thanks for your kudos and comments. I’d love to hear from more of you! Also, you might be interested in reading my present day BNHA story, too, When Hell Freezes Over, which usually updates weekly, every Friday night, but I posted three chapters this past week, Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. Things are about to get REALLY interesting in that story, too!

Hizashi had been terrified when that man grabbed Nemuri, even more than he was in the UA auditorium, because at least there he knew there had been teachers, Pro Heroes in the immediate vicinity, that they would eventually protect him from those angry kids, if he’d needed, but that man was a huge, hulking adult, and no one else had helped, they’d all run, until Gran Torino had come and saved them. But he was even more terrified now, and not only because he and Nemuri could have died.

His parents didn’t want him to see Nemuri again. They thought she was dangerous, that she caused or attracted trouble. He’d tried to tell them it wasn’t her fault, that an adult had groped her, because Nemuri had texted him from the hospital and told him what happened, but his mom said her mother shouldn’t have let her leave the house, dressed like she was, that she’d been inviting trouble. Which exasperated him, because why shouldn’t she be able to dress how she liked, without having to worry about men attacking her? She clearly knew how to defend herself, too, in case of trouble – it wasn’t like she had needed him to fight for her. He was a useless wimp, compared to her: she was amazing.

She was his first real friend, she genuinely liked him, she cared, she joked with him and asked him about himself, what music he liked. She’d even said she wanted to hear him sing, she’d promised to
take him to a karaoke bar, the next time they hung out. No one had ever heard him sing before, or
cared that he could. He’d never had hearing friends, and his parents couldn’t, thanks to him. He’d
asked his mom once, what her favorite song had been, before he was born, and the look of joy,
instantly replaced by pain, made him realize she’d once loved music as fiercely as he did, though she
never talked about it. Because he’d taken that from her, from both of them, stolen it, like a thief. Like
a villain.

Maybe he didn’t deserve a friend. But he wanted one. But what if he hurt her, too? Except he
wouldn’t, because he’d been an infant then, and he could control his Quirk now, he could. He’d
used it only once by mistake all day, when he greeted her at the door, but not at all the hours they’d
been out shopping and talking, he’d talked so much, too, and she’d listened, happily, eagerly, she
never interrupted him, or told him he was too loud, and he’d been so happy. When he’d gone on and
on, and apologized for it, getting so flustered he somehow tripped over his own feet, she’d laughed
and kept him from falling, and told him he was adorable, that he was like a cocker spaniel puppy,
just a bundle of gregarious energy and exuberance, and no one had ever seen him with eyes like that
before, with fond affection instead of exasperation, sometimes not even his parents, as much as they
loved him.

He thought speaking up to his parents about wanting to attend UA had been his proudest moment,
his biggest triumph, until he’d realized it would take days, weeks of convincing, until they’d let him
take the Exam. When he’d finally done it, he thought his next achievement would be passing the
Exam, he kept picturing how good it would feel. But instead, his next battle had been that night,
when he convinced his parents to let him take the rescheduled test. That time it had been harder,
because he could have been seriously hurt, and they were more afraid, but it had only taken a single
night, he’d been more firm, more insistent than ever. This was going to be the hardest fight yet,
convincing his parents to let him keep Nemuri as a friend, but he went into it with more confidence,
because he wasn’t alone, it wasn’t only him it was fighting for, it was Nemuri, too.

His fingers had never flown so fast and furiously before, as he pled his case in sign language. His
parents were so insistent, he waited impatiently for them to finish each sentence, at first, but they kept
diving in one after the other, not letting him get a word in edgewise, and he finally started signing
right over them, he even spoke verbally when he did it, and he never spoke verbally to his parents,
because they hated the focus reading lips took, doing it in the hearing world exhausted and still
frustrated and upset them, after all these years – his mom had once told him it made her feel broken,
but she’d regretted it immediately, because he’d cried – and they needed to be able to understand him
more clearly and easily, because he was their son, and they loved him, and didn’t ever want to make
a mistake. But they were making one now. And he had to make them see that.

“LISTEN TO ME!” He didn’t use his Quirk, but he yelled. “I don’t just want to be a Hero, I haven’t
just always wanted to, I need to be. I need to help people, to save them. And I know I didn’t do
much, but I would have used my Quirk on that man, if I had to, I would have gone to jail to save her,
but I don’t want to be a vigilante, I don’t want to break the law, I want to protect it. I want to be a
Hero. If I hadn’t been with Nemuri today, she could have died, or been kidnapped, and… and raped,
and I’m sorry, I love you both, I do, but she’s my friend, and I’m not willing to give her up.”

He waited, breathless and shaking, his parents were staring at him, stunned motionless, their hands
stopped mid-sign. Then they looked at one another, and did that wordless, motionless thing that
made him think they had a secondary Telepathy Quirk, and he felt left out, and ganged up on, like he
always did, when they did that.

“Alright. We’re sorry, honey,” his mother said, she actually spoke, instead of signing, and she never
did that, she hated how she couldn’t hear her own voice anymore. It was oddly inflected, and
strange, and the most beautiful sound he ever heard. He swallowed and fought not to cry, because he
didn’t want her to stop talking. He wished he could record it, but he just wanted to listen.

“We’re just trying to protect you, but we don’t want to smother you, to keep you from going to UA, and I can see she must be good for you too, because you didn’t text us once, the whole time you were gone, and you were out for hours, which means you must have been having a good time, and you’re fighting so hard to keep her as a friend, we’ve never seen you be so strong. We are so very proud of you. We love you.”

“I love you both too, so much! Thank you, for everything, for being the best mom and dad ever!” he spoke and signed, and then he dove onto both of them, hugging them fiercely, and began crying his eyes out, because he was so lucky to have them as parents, and so happy.

Hours later, when he was finally alone in his room, after spending the rest of the day with his parents, he almost had a heart attack, when he opened the first in a string of voicemails from Nemuri and heard her first words, because he’d left his phone in his room and hadn’t realized she’d called.

“So, my mom didn’t want me to see you anymore, because you’re trouble. I laughed in her face and told her about our day, and that changed her mind pretty quickly, like I knew it would. So how are your parents taking it? Am I persona non grata? Have they impounded your phone? Call me.”

Then the next one, sent twenty minutes later.

“Hizashi, seriously, how are you doing? Are you okay? Are you grounded? Just shoot me a quick text or something, just a single word like ‘okay’ or ‘fine’, to let me know. I’m stuck in the hospital until tomorrow, for observation, because this is my second concussion in two days and all, but I feel fine. Text me. Later!”

The next message was sent nearly three hours later.

“OK, now I’m officially worried, because I’ve been asleep forever and you still haven’t texted or called. I’m going to start texting and keep doing it until you do. Oh! And I was asleep because Recovery Girl came to the hospital! She was worried about me, because of the second concussion, that detective called her, I guess, and she came down to diagnose and treat me. So no more concussion! You should have heard the doctors and nurses talking, I mean, I didn’t know any Hero was worshipped like that except for All Might. But apparently she normally limits her Quirk use to students, other than when hospitals call her for extreme cases only she can help, mostly little kids or pregnant women, but she came for me because I was already a patient. Anyway, sorry this is so long. Call me? Please?”

Then there were at least twenty texts. He jumped when the phone rang in his hands, while he was still reading them, and just like the first time Nemuri had called him, he managed to disconnect the call instead of answering it, and then drop his phone. He was frantically fumbling for the contacts button when it rang again.

“NEMURI! Sorry, too loud, I know, but I’m fine, I’m so glad you’re alright and that your mom is letting us still be friends and I actually yelled at mine, I never do that, I mean, I used my voice, too, and my mom even spoke back to me, I don’t mean in a bad way, like snapping at me, I mean she used her voice, and I wish I’d recorded it because I never heard her before and… and… *sniff*… sorry, it’s making me cry again, and I was hanging out with them and I just got back to my room and my phone and your messages and I’m so glad you called!”

There was laughter on the other end of the phone, not mean sounding, just relieved, happy. “You’re adorable. I’m so glad you’re OK. So you listened to and read them all?”
“Most of them. All the voicemails and I was just reading the texts and then I was going to call but you called first and I’m so glad you’re my friend!”

“I’m glad you’re mine, too. So, how about karaoke tomorrow, to celebrate my release? Because they’re still making me stay the night, just to be safe.”

“Yes! I’d love that! I can’t wait to see you again!” he gushed.

“Me you too.”

0 0 0

After nearly two-and-half days trapped at UA, away from the familiar comfort of his own bed, his own room, Tensei would have been relieved to finally be leaving the Infirmary, except he wasn’t going home, he’d come straight to the hospital, for an appointment with a Quirk specialist, to examine his Quirk Engine and determine what was wrong. Three days ago he was flying boldly into his future, expecting to ace the Exam and enter the UA Hero Program, like his older brothers, his parents, his grandparents. How had this become his life? It seemed surreal.

“Rocket Man! Tensei Iida, that’s you, right?” a girl called out eagerly from the corridor on his right. He turned and started in surprise. The last thing he expected was a familiar face. Two faces, he realized, as he recognized both the blond haired boy with the Voice Quirk, and the black haired girl with the Gas Quirk from the auditorium at UA.

Tani stepped protectively in front of him. “Who are you? What do you want with my brother?” he asked suspiciously.

Tensei belatedly realized he had every right to be wary, because these two had never actually seen his face, he’d had his protective suit liner on the entire time, masking his features, unless they’d seen him before then, in the auditorium, or on the way in? But they still shouldn’t know his name.

“I’m Nemuri Kayama and this is Hizashi Yamada. I just wanted to say ‘hi’, and to thank you, for saving my life, after you captured me,” she said, speaking to him, instead of Tani, which was a welcome change, after the past couple of days. “Recovery Girl is a big fan of your family; she said none of you would hold what happened against me.”

“We don’t blame you, personally, for what happened. The school is to blame for not keeping better rein on the student applicants and environs. If you’ll excuse us, we have someplace we need to be,” Tani stated, far more accusatory and bluntly than he normally would speak to anyone.

“Tani, stop. I want to talk to them. How did you recognize me? My face was masked,” Tensei questioned, more curious than concerned.

“I heard your name in the Infirmary, and Googled your family. There were some pictures of your oldest brother, Ingenium, accepting an award a few years ago, it was an article about multi-generational Hero families, and they showed your grandparents, parents, and you and your brothers.” Kayama explained. “So that costume you were wearing was gas proof, huh? Weren’t you breaking the rules, wearing it?”

“No, it was just the liner for the armor, not the armor itself, protective gear. Dad checked with the school to make sure it wasn’t breaking the rules, because they keep changing, over the years,” Tensei explained.

“Tensei, we’re going to be late,” Tani huffed in exasperation.
Tensei rolled his eyes. “We left an hour early, because you knew you were going to drive 20 kilometers below the speed limit the entire way here, because you were so concerned about getting into an accident and hurting me. We’re still 20 minutes early, and they already have all my paperwork. If you’re so concerned, go check me in.”

“Or we could walk with you and keep talking that way,” Kayama suggested conciliatorily. “My mom’s doing the paperwork to check me out, Hizashi and I were just going to get a soda for the ride to my house, so I can get changed, because my clothes got trashed, and the ones my mom brought for me to wear home aren’t cool enough for the karaoke bar. Hey, after you’re done with your appointment, how about you meet us there? Karaoke’s always more fun the more people there are.”

Yamada had a deer-in-the-headlights look on his face, and Tensei was just about to politely decline, when unexpectedly Yamada chimed in. “Yes, come with us! I need to make up for messing everything up at the Exam!”

“Are you sure?” Because he was dying to do something fun, but he hadn’t called any of his friends, yet, because he wasn’t sure what the Quirk doctor was going to say, and if it was catastrophic news, he didn’t want to see his friends or family, hear their pity. Yamada and Kayama were apparently not on a date, if they wanted him along, but they were on a first name basis, which meant they must have known each other for years, but they didn’t know him, so it would be easier to cope in front of them, but they’d provide a welcome distraction.

“We wouldn’t have invited you if we didn’t want you to come,” Kayama encouraged.

“T-e-n-s-e-i,” Tani voiced his name in drawn out disapproval.

“Sure. It sounds like fun,” Tensei agreed impulsively, because he was anxious and afraid, and Tani was really starting to drive him crazy. There was a difference between protective and overprotective, and his brother seemed to need a reminder of that distinction. And Tani’s pity, all of his brothers’, and worse, his parents’, would be even harder to bear than his friends’.

Tani threw up his hands in exasperation. “Alright. Fine. You win. But can we please get you signed in now?”

“Of course,” Tensei agreed with a smug smile, feeling more himself than he had in days.

He exchanged phone numbers with both Kayama and Yamada as they walked, and got the name and address of the karaoke bar from them, Siren’s Song on Yanagi. But the moment they left, to continue their vending machine mission, his tension and dread surfaced again, with a vengeance. What happened in the next few minutes could change his entire life. Even if he hadn’t gotten into UA for some reason, he could have gone to a different school to become a Hero. But without a Quirk, the future that had always seemed carved in stone would collapse like a sand castle beneath a wave.

Nearly three hours of questioning, waiting, Quirk tests, more waiting, blood tests, more waiting, and finally a CT scan, to compare the tissue, bone and metal in his functional left arm to his dysfunctional right, he was ready to scream. He wasn’t even able to text Kayama and Yamada, because of the “no cell phone” policy in his location, but he hoped they’d realize that.

By the time the Quirk specialist finally returned to the room he’d been waiting in, he almost didn’t care what the news was, he just wanted her to say something, anything.

“I have primarily positive news. We have discovered there is indeed a physiological problem with the exhaust pipes of your Quirk Engines. As we discussed, the Engine Quirk of your father’s side of
the family’s is a modified Speed Quirk, physically manifested over time by the iron within your blood combining with other trace minerals and accreting to form actual metal conduits, or exhaust pipes, if you will, which are fused to your bones and allow the energy of your Speed Quirk released by your cells to be directed as a form of thrust, enabling you to travel at accelerated velocities. Your grandfather’s, father’s and brothers’ Quirk Engines are located on their backs and legs, enabling them to anchor to the more broad surfaces of their shoulder blades, pelvises and leg bones.

“Yours, however, are decidedly more narrow, due to their location on your elbows, but the metals within your blood have been accreting at a similar rate, resulting in partial sealing and blockage of the exhaust pipes. The vents in your right arm show blockage ranging from 16% at best, to 78% in the most impacted. Your left arm is also affected, though at a lesser rate, with the blockage ranging from 4% to 36%. You likely haven’t noticed the decrease over time due to the natural counterbalancing increase in your speed as your body grows.”

Tensei felt sick. *My left arm too? I’m not going to be able to use either side?*

“How is that positive news?” Tani demanded.

“Because it’s correctable, with a relatively minor procedure. I won’t even call it a surgical procedure, because it’s noninvasive, we won’t need to cut into healthy tissue. We can use probes and files from the mouths of the vent to smooth away the secretions and clear the blockage. You’ll need to have the procedure repeated periodically, possibly every three months or more, at first, but eventually every six months, and then a yearly treatment, which may become unnecessary altogether, once you reach 21 or so, and your body stops growing, but possibly beyond then.

She turned to Tani. “But again, it’s a noninvasive procedure, and can be completed in under two hours. It will take somewhat longer the first time, because of the severity of the blockage, but the time will be much shorter his subsequent visits. This also means your brother’s vents haven’t been operating to their full power. He’ll enjoy an immediate increase of approximately 40% to both speed and maneuverability, once the procedure is completed. Which is definitely positive news to an aspiring Hero. I wish I could present news like this to all my patients,” the doctor said with a bittersweet smile.

“You can fix it? I’ll be able to fly again? When? When can you do it?” Tensei demanded.

“We’ll be able to schedule you as early as next Wednesday if-“

“Yes! I’ll be there!” Tensei cried eagerly.

“Sorry, you’ll have to forgive my brother, this has been very traumatic for him, and as I explained earlier, he was concussed during the UA Exam incident, and he’s still recovering from that trauma,” Tani apologized.

Tensei had the irrational urge to punch Tani in the jaw for saying that, which only validated his statement, much to his mortification. “Forgive me. Thank you, doctor. I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Not at all. Again, I wish all my patients had the energy and enthusiasm you’re exhibiting, and I’m quite familiar with the aftereffects of head trauma. I look forward to seeing you next Wednesday. Just check in at the desk to confirm the appointment and pick up the necessary forms and written description of the procedure, which one or both of your parents or your older brother’s will need to sign, as you are still a minor,” she stated, speaking directly to Tensei, which he appreciated.

“Thank you doctor,” he said again. He wanted to fly, he was so relieved, or to run and jump. He was thankful he had plans for karaoke, because the excitement of making new friends and mild anxiety of
potentially embarrassing himself in front of them would burn off some of the nervous energy he was currently drowning in.

“I’m so happy for you, Bro! I told you there was nothing to worry about,” Tani said, grabbing him up in an unexpected hug and back slap. “I can’t wait to text Mom and Dad and the others.”

“I’m sorry I’ve been difficult,” Tensei apologized, because Tani had clearly been almost as worried as he had been.

“Don’t sweat it, Baby Bro. That’s what big brothers are for,” he assured him.

Which had Tensei gritting his teeth again, relieved that he’d be getting away from his family for a few hours, so they could each burn off their own nervous energy. Seeing them jet around the house and in the yard, or worse, not doing so, when he knew they would have wanted to, would have just upset him.

0 0 0

“Tensei! Over here!” Kayama yelled enthusiastically from across the crowded karaoke bar, while Yamada waved his arms energetically but silently, likely afraid of accidentally using his Quirk again.

Tensei was surprised by the use of his first name. Perhaps Kayama had been raised elsewhere, in America, or somewhere equally informal, and was unaware of the proper use of surnames and honorifics? He made his way over to their table.

“Congratulations! We’re happy for you! This means by Exam time, you’ll be operating at 100%. Literally, right?” she asked with an almost manic grin. He’d given them both the good news via text, before coming. If he didn’t know better, he’d think she’d been drinking. He looked suspiciously at the small cluster of empty glasses in front of her.

“Don’t worry, it’s only soda. This is all just me. And half my body weight in sugar,” she added with a conspiratorial wink.

“I TRIED… sorry. I tried to get her to eat something, but she wanted to wait for you,” Yamada apologized, looking extremely flustered.

They were definitely an unlikely pair. “That was very thoughtful of you. I’m sorry I kept you both waiting so long.”

“No problem! It gave me a chance to learn more about the music Hizashi likes. We’ve been trying to find a good song all three of us can sing together, since he’s too shy to fly solo for his first time,” Kayama explained.

“You two haven’t ever been to a karaoke bar before?” Tensei asked in surprise. “Do you usually go to the movies or arcades, then, when you hang out together, or are you more sports fans?”

“I’ve been to karaoke plenty of times – I’m an exhibitionist, in case you hadn’t noticed – but Hizashi said he hasn’t ever been to one. We only met two days ago, at the Exam, so it’s just been shopping and burgers and the Infirmary or hospital. We intend to break that last trend, because both our parents are understandably freaked out about that part,” she said with another grin.

“You just met? I assumed… but you called me by my first name too,” Tensei realized.

“Yeah, I just don’t believe in the whole formality nonsense, when it comes to making new friends. I’ve found it just gets in the way and makes things too stiff and tedious. My views on friendship are
diving in head first, and only bobbing to the surface if it looks like there’s a need to bail, you know?”

No, he didn’t, but her attitude was definitely refreshing and appealing, if more than a little unconventional. No doubt scandalous, off-putting and even offensive, to most people. “So, what song were you thinking of?” he asked, intrigued.

“BREAK THESE CHAINS,” Yamada yelled, and then slapped his hand over his mouth and looked sheepish.

“You like hard rock too, Tensei? You look like you could definitely be an air guitar kind of guy,” Kayama agreed approvingly.

Tensei grinned back. “I’ve been known to do my share of air guitar and I love that song.” It definitely fit his mood. He felt like he’d been chained to his bed for days now, and then by his malfunctioning Quirk. If he wasn’t able to fly or allowed to run, the next best thing would be jumping around on stage and singing at the top of his lungs in a room full of strangers.

“It’s one of my favorites, too. Come on, let’s show these amateurs how it’s done,” Kayama challenged.

“You’re on,” Tensei agreed eagerly.

Nemuri led them to the stage and grabbed the mic, as Yamada cued their song on the teleprompter. “We’re Midnight’s Boys, and we’re going to sing a cover of Break These Chains by Uprising,” she announced.

Tensei hadn’t expected Kayama to give them a group name, but it actually sounded kind of cool. He wondered if Midnight was the name she planned to use once she became a Pro Hero.

He’d thought the biggest surprise of the day after learning his Quirk Engines could be fixed would be learning that Kayama and Yamada hadn’t been friends for years. But then he heard them sing. He’d expected a cacophonous train wreck of noise once the three of them took to the stage, but instead, they sang remarkably well, not only individually, but also in harmony, his own alto blending beautifully with Kayama’s tenor and Yamada’s soprano, and all three of them knew the lyrics by heart, as well as the guitar riffs and drum pieces, enough to convincingly mimic the band. They actually received a hearty round of applause from the rest of the patrons for their performance.

That’s when, to Tensei’s mortification, he received his biggest surprise, though he likely should have expected it: he heard a familiar whoop of approval from the back of the room. He peered over a sea of unfamiliar heads, and there, at a booth in the extreme right hand corner of the bar was not only Tani, whose voice he’d recognized, but his entire family.

Tani was being chastised by Taizo for giving them away, while Taro and Mari shook their heads in fond exasperation, and his mother and father laughed, but best of all, a squealing baby Tenya was bouncing and waving his arms in delight. He couldn’t even be annoyed with them for spying on him, because he knew how worried they’d been the past few days, and seeing them laughing and happy instead of stressed and anxious, sad and angry was almost better than learning his Quirk could be fixed.

“Wow, and I thought my parents were overprotective,” Yamada quipped, and then he looked horrified, until Kayama laughed and slapped him on the back, nearly knocking him off the stage.

“Mind if we go over and introduce ourselves? That little guy looks like he’s about to start flying, if he keeps flapping like that,” Kayama said with a grin.
“That’s Tenya. He’s definitely my favorite, especially after today,” Tensei informed them, but without any real rancor. He was too happy. He’d missed the little guy like crazy, and from what he heard, the feeling had been mutual. Wild horses couldn’t have kept him away from his baby brother, so he was glad his new friends understood.

They made their way to the back table, accepting a few additional compliments on their song on the way. “It’s just coincidence we picked the same karaoke bar to celebrate your news in,” Tani feebly tried to explain, as they reached the table.

“I’m not listening. I only want to talk to my favorite brother. Hey, Robo Bro, did you miss me?” he called, as he reached for Tenya, who terrifyingly flung himself from his mother’s outstretched arms. He felt his heart pound as he caught him. “And we thought Taro was the daredevil in the family. Careful, little wild man. You don’t have your Quirk Engines yet, you know,” he scolded, even as he snuggled and nuzzled his face against Tenya’s downy hair and soft cheek.

“Hi. It doesn’t look like Tensei’s going to introduce us, so I’m Nemuri Kayama and this is Hizashi Yamada. We’re not sorry we stole him from you for the day, though, because his voice is awesome and his air guitar is killer,” Kayama quipped.

His mother laughed. “We had no idea he’d been hiding that particular talent from us, and both you and Yamada were inspirational. I was just reminiscing about one of our first dates and trying to convince Tomi to come on stage with me. Now that the cat’s out of the bag, and you know we’re here, I think you’re all out of excuses, honey.”

“I wouldn’t want to embarrass Tensei in front of his new friends,” his dad demurred.

Tensei grinned. “Oh feel free. The more you embarrass yourself, the louder I’m going to laugh.”

His dad shook his head in mock dismay. “Honestly, what have you been teaching your son, Suzu?”

She just laughed. “Come on. It’ll be fun. For me, anyway.”

His mom and dad stood, heading for the stage, as Taizo and Taro pulled three more chairs over.

Tensei watched, entranced, as his parents put on a performance of “Be My Villain” that had Kayama catcalling and wolf whistling at his mom, along with a handful of other patrons, and his three older brothers bristling protectively and eyeing those other patrons suspiciously. Which was both hilarious and really sweet. His parents’ finale kiss on stage was smoldering, and Tensei saw more than a few cell phones had been raised and recording the entire performance, in addition to their family’s. He sighed. They wouldn’t be able to come back here for a while, once those were posted online. It was never a good idea to let the villains know places you and your friends and family frequented in your off hours.

He shook the thought off, as his parents came back laughing and breathless. Tonight was for celebration. They’d have the rest of their lives to worry about the villains.

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