Transformations

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Summary

When Aizawa moves into a new apartment a few months before the start of his teaching career at U.A., he finds he's now neighbour to All Might's private secretary. Though he has little love lost for his boisterous boss, Aizawa is quite drawn to the meek man he lives next to. Of course, there are a few things he doesn't know about Toshinori Yagi.

Notes

For this fic I'm working with the idea from the spin-off manga Illegals that Toshinori used to pose as All Might's secretary in his Small Might form.
Chapter 1

Shouta pushed the window open, allowing a sharp, wet wind to blow into the room. Leaning his arms on the sill, he let his gaze wander over the rooftops that crowded together before him. One slanted up to right under his window, the tightly-packed, old houses standing haphazardly thrown together, built before a time when city planners had their watchful eyes on the streets. This block was no doubt a nightmare for anyone trying to plan an escape route during a villain attack, but it still made a good spot for Shouta to set up camp. From here, he’d only have to drive two stations to U.A. when he began teaching there at the beginning of the next term in four months’ time.

In retrospect, he was still not entirely sure how he had let himself be talked into giving teaching a try. Midnight had handed in his résumé, but that wasn’t an obligation. Still, at some point, while he was listening to her and Hizashi’s tell stories from school, a seed of something like interest had taken root in his mind. He had had a couple of sidekicks, after all, and Hizashi especially had had to listen to his complaints of all the failures of their education that he had been forced to readjust once the would-be heroes had fallen into his hands. If he did want a competent batch of pros to follow his own generation then the most direct way to go about it was to help straighten them out himself at the earliest opportunity.

Of course, aside from some hand-picked exceptions, Shouta was not overly fond of the company of people in general or children in particular, but that was a bridge he would cross when he came to it. If he was lucky, some modicum of reason could be appealed to or at least enforced with the classes, making them bearable. After all, he wouldn’t be teaching kindergarten.

Shouta took another breath of cold air before he stepped away, glancing at the half dozen boxes and disassembled pieces of furniture he had carried up the stairs. Now only the mattress was waiting for him in the tiny lobby where the people driving the moving van had left it. He grabbed his keys and pushed open his door, descending a narrow staircase with the edges of the steps made round and slippery by years of use.

The mattress leaned next to a slim row of dented steel mailboxes that had been nailed to the wall. Shouta was just considering how best to take a hold of it when he heard a voice from behind him.

“Can I help you with that?”

Shouta looked up towards the staircase and hoped that he had instinctively suppressed his first reaction, which was to flinch. The man who had spoken looked like a ghost that would haunt an old house like this in a half-baked horror movie. His cheeks were sunken and his eyes laid in hollows so dark that Shouta could only see the light overhead catch in his blue irises. His wild blond hair made him think the stranger might have recently put his finger in a power outlet. The suit he wore hung off his tall body like clothes off a hanger. Wouldn’t this skeletal creature be toppled by the weight of the mattress?

He had asked, though, which meant he should be sure he could handle it. Besides, Shouta could use a hand. The mattress was, though not too heavy, quite unwieldy.

“Yes,” he said, tilting the mattress a bit. “Can you grab on to the other end?”

The man did, wrapping his long, twig-like fingers around the bottom of the mattress. Carefully, he shifted it so that he could glance over his shoulder at the steps he was now walking up backwards.

Slowly, they navigated the mattress upwards around the narrow corners of the landings. Shouta held
on tighter when they were on the second floor to halt the gaunt man’s movements.

“This is my place,” he said, nodding towards the door.

“Oh,” the man said, keeping the mattress steady as Shouta pulled the key out of his pocket and opened the door, “you’re right next to me.”

Shouta had no intention of making nice with the neighbours because he did not want them on his doorstep all the time, but he figured it would be impolite to ignore the attempts at conversation someone was making while he was helping him.

“I see. I’m Shouta Aizawa,” Shouta answered as he grabbed on to his end of the mattress again and they finished the last few steps of the journey, leaning the mattress against his living room wall.

“Toshinori Yagi,” Yagi said, looking around. “Do you need any more help?”

“No, the mattress was the last piece.”

“Oh,” Yagi halted, surprised. “That’s not a lot.”

Yagi wasn’t wrong, but Shouta had left nothing behind that he needed. There were six boxes with clothes and paperwork, a desk, a bed frame and a shelf in pieces, as well as a small fridge and a TV. His old sofa from two homes ago was still in Hizashi’s basement, where it’d be collected from during the weekend. A kitchen with cupboards came with the rental.

“I never liked clutter,” he said. “Most of it is from my office.”

“Right. You’re a pro hero, aren’t you?”

Now Shouta was the one who could not keep the look of surprise from his face. Though neither his real name nor occupation were a secret, the way he conducted his business meant even the frighteningly obsessive hero fans only ever knew his alias, if that.

Noticing Shouta’s expression, Yagi raised both his hands.

“Ah, sorry, I know you try to keep under the radar. Don’t worry, I won’t spread it around the house. It’s just that I’m in the business – not as a hero, of course. I’m All Might’s private secretary.” He ran a hand through his mop of hair. “I don’t usually tell people outside of work, but since you’re also a hero, I figured it makes sense. We might meet, after all. I didn’t want it to seem like I was keeping secrets.”

Slowly, Shouta nodded his head. So far he had been spared working close enough with All Might that they had to compare notes on the paperwork they were going to hand in. All Might’s missions included things like rampaging giant quirk users or collapsing buildings. Though Shouta had met him briefly during a few large-scale rescues in the city, the kind of villains and incidents they were involved with did not overlap very much. Shouta, for his part, was grateful for that. All Might’s missions often ended up spectacles whether he wanted it or not (and it certainly didn’t seem to bother him). That was not Shouta’s style.

“I imagined All Might’s secretary would be flashier,” he said, looking the man up and down in his drab grey suit and white shirt. He’d seen All Might’s office in Roppongi before – the gaudy monument to the legend that was All Might was hard to miss if you were anywhere in a few mile radius. Even the receptionists in there were dressed up in bright primary colours which Shouta would have considered a special form of workplace violence, but of course these people lapped it up.
“Well, I don’t really have any representative functions,” Yagi said, rubbing the back of his neck with an awkward smile. “Anyway, it’s nice to make your acquaintance. Since you brought all your things, are you going to run your office from here?”

“That’s the plan,” Shouta said with a shrug. “I’m going to start teaching at U.A. this spring, so there’s no reason to keep up an actual office, even if I’m still going to participate in solving incidents sometimes.”

In truth, he’d never had both, his own home and his own office, because it had seemed like a waste of time and money to him to travel between two places when he spent most of his time at work, anyway. Instead, he had designated a storeroom in his office as his own, pushed mattress and fridge in there and thus lived in a chamber that wasn’t much smaller than what most people rented in Tokyo. All that had changed now was that he’d shifted gears in his living space in favour of his private life again, since the bulk of his work would be done in a place where he couldn’t also live.

“You’ll be a teacher? That’s great!” Yagi said like he actually believed it.

“We’ll see,” Shouta answered laconically. He could still cancel if the brats were too annoying to handle.

Faced with his lack of enthusiasm, Yagi seemed to be at a loss for how to continue the conversation for a moment.

“I’m sure it will be fine,” he settled, still smiling brightly, perhaps under the impression that Shouta needed an ego-boosting encouragement.

When Shouta didn’t deign to answer the platitude and the moment of silence had stretched to an uncomfortable length, Yagi took a step towards the door.

“Uh, I have to go to the supermarket. Do you know the closest one yet?” he asked Shouta.

“No, actually.”

Shouta had often lived food cart to food cart to begin with; he hadn’t even had a kitchen to cook in his last ‘apartment’ and he hadn’t truly missed it, either. His mini-fridge had stored all the items that he needed on a day-to-day basis, but of course he had emptied it for the move.

“If you have time, I can show you,” Yagi offered.

Once more he smiled and Shouta found that it was relatively easy to get used to his face, after all. Though at first the dark eyes were unsettling, they did add to the starved look which made him resemble a mangy stray, vaguely pitiable and not especially dangerous. Plus, he did have an honest smile you could appreciate once you got over the fact that it seemed to stretch over nothing but bone.

Shouta checked for his wallet and keys and then nodded at Yagi, allowing him to lead the way out of the apartment. Together, they walked back down the stairs. Shouta looked at the smudges on the wall, about the height of children’s hands, and hoped that family didn’t live above him or at least that the dirt was old enough that the kids had grown up by now.

Outside, the narrow street already laid in shadow now at five in the evening, the pale winter sun hiding behind the houses. Bicycles lined the road and plastic lanterns with electric lights dangled in the wind before the entrances of small bars and convenience stores.

“What made you decide to become a teacher?” Yagi asked after they had walked down the street and taken a turn into an alley just broad enough to stand abreast. Being so close to him, Shouta had to tilt
his head up to look him in the eyes.

“I had grievances with the way my sidekicks were taught, so I figured the best place to start was where they are educated. We have too many so-called pros on the streets who think that weaselling their way into the last places in a hero licence exam actually qualifies them as full-fledged heroes. It’s dangerous to them and others.”

Halfway through his explanation, an unhealthy, deep-seated cough had taken hold of Yagi. He held a tissue in front of his mouth and crumpled it up after.

“Oh, you’re right. Preparing people for what they face in the real world is complicated work,” Yagi agreed, still a little choked.

“It’s also about keeping out those who don’t belong in this world altogether.”

Yagi hesitated.

“Everyone deserves a chance.”

“One, not twenty. By that time they might have already gotten in serious trouble.”

His guide gave a brief huff of a laugh.

“I have a feeling you’ll be a teacher students fear before tests.”

“Tests aren’t there to make anybody feel good.”

“But it’s important to build confidence, too,” Yagi argued.

The small, winding alley had led them straight onto the parking lot behind a Super Yuki chain store stuffed into a drab, flat-roofed building. The wind the walls had shielded them from blew into their faces, carrying drizzle so fine Shouta only saw a pervasive mist.

“If they have no abilities to be confident in, that would be lying to them,” he gave back.

“They could learn… It’s a school, after all.”

The logic did not seem to escape Yagi fully, judging by the wavering in his voice, which was good to know. Shouta didn’t think he could have continued talking to someone who had been robbed of his last shred of reason by the unending, unrealistic positivity that All Might’s brand stood for; but it seemed Yagi hadn’t swallowing that kool-aid whole.

Once they were inside the store under bright white LED lights shining down on shrink wrap and neon-coloured packages, each of them broke off onto their own trips down the lanes. Shouta grabbed some ready-made onigiri, a couple of water bottles, a beer, eye drops and a few apples that would have to serve as his vitamin source for the week. When he found Yagi again, he was contemplating an avocado with a few dodge marks. Clamped under his arm he was carrying protein bars and cat food.

“Do you have a cat?” Shouta asked, interest suddenly piqued.

Yagi placed the avocado down before he led the way to the counter.

“Sort of, I guess.” He smiled. “He didn’t start out as my cat. I don’t think he belongs to anyone. He comes by most nights, though. I took him to the vet once, which I don’t think he has forgiven me for yet, but since it’s cold now he will still hang out at my place.” Yagi turned to look at him. “Do you
“Sure,” Shouta said, perhaps making an attempt to sound more indifferent than he was.

Yagi placed his groceries down on the conveyor belt. Peeking out from under a leek and a few cans of wet food was some over-the-counter pain medication. Shouta didn’t comment. The man looked like more than a few things were wrong with him, so this made sense.

“You can have some of my treats. I’m sure he won’t mind having someone else to feed him around the neighbourhood.”

After they had paid, they stepped back out into the cool afternoon. The biting wind that had picked up now howled about them in the alley and blew sheets of fine raindrops into Shouta’s face. Next to him, Yagi ducked his head, the wind swiping back his shaggy blond hair.

“Hopefully there won’t be too many villain attacks tonight. This is not great weather to do hero work in,” Yagi said as he unlocked the front door for them.

“Rain makes for good protection with the right quirks. Of course, obfuscation is not your employer’s style,” Shouta noted.

Yagi smiled lopsidedly.

“That’s true,” he admitted as they trudged up the stairs, leaving wet bootprints.

Yagi stopped in front of his own door. Reaching into his bag, he took a small plastic bag of cat treats and handed it to Shouta before he put his key in the lock.

“It was nice to meet you,” Yagi said.

“You too,” Shouta replied and found that he didn’t have to lie. His stance on neighbourly involvement in his life hadn’t changed in an hour, but he could imagine greeting this guy in the hallway. He was quiet and agreeable, someone he might allow to intrude at the fringes of his life.
Chapter 2

It was past midnight when Shouta pushed open the door to the old apartment house, the quiet squeak of its hinges the only sound in the night but for the distant hum of traffic. After locking up behind himself and flicking on the dim lights, Shouta trudged up the stairs while peeling off the wet, shredded right sleeve of his pullover. He grimaced as the wounds were torn open once more when he tugged at the cloth that had been baked into the congealing blood.

There was always a risk when he went up against people with mutant type quirks. Retractable claws he might have been able to keep in, but since this villain had simply been born with lion features, all Shouta had had to rely on were his martial skills. They had been enough to knock the man out against a brick wall eventually, but not to get out without a few scrapes himself.

Shouta took hold of the key with his unscathed left and ended up noisily dropping it as he fumbled with it at the lock. When he reached down, he moved his foot and knocked over an old, empty planting pot that someone had left in the hallway long before Shouta’s time, judging by the cloud of dust that exploded in the fall. Shouta muttered a curse under his breath at the loud clatter.

Predictably, the door next to his opened. Into the warm glow emitting from the apartment stepped Yagi, wearing a comically oversized shirt with a washed-out decal of some megacity’s skyline on it, hanging off his left shoulder so far it almost slipped down. His trousers seemed supported by no contact with his body but that provided by the belt. At least he didn’t look like he’d been asleep.

“Oh, it was just the pot. I thought someone may have fallen,” he said, his gaze on Shouta, focusing in on his arm after a quick once-over, scanning the blood covering it elbow to fingertip. “Are you alright?”

“Just a few dents,” Shouta muttered, fingerling for the right key on his key ring.

“Do you need help?”

Shouta was about to tell him that he was fine and Yagi could mind his own business when he remembered in a flash that he still hadn’t bought those medical supplies that he’d been telling himself to think of for a week now. The old stuff had gotten lost in the shuffle of the move.

He hesitated and glanced back at Yagi. Some people tended to be more instinctively kind than actually helpful and he didn’t want to babysit a panicking neighbour while he was trying to deal with his arm. However, Yagi didn’t seem bothered by the sight of blood and raw flesh.

“I don’t think I have disinfectant at home,” he admitted. Or bandages for that matter.

“I do. Come in.”

Yagi smiled and opened the door wider, light streaming out of his living room brightening the gloomy hallway. Shouta pocketed his key and followed him.

The floor plan of Yagi’s apartment was a copy of Shouta’s own, but evidently the place belonged to someone who had more fun making his living space homey. There was a couch covered in too many throw pillows and a TV over which hung a traditional rendering of cedar trees in broad ink strokes. An All Might figurine was keeping a row of novels upright on a shelf. A few framed posters of old American movies decorated the far wall with the doors leading to bed- and bathroom. They looked to be from the early 20th century and Shouta had never heard of any of them. The watercolour drawings rendered anything from gangsters with guns and cat-eyed femme fatales to historical
costumes to a dancing couple under a street lamp, a wild mix of genres.

“Please take a seat.”

The couch table standing before the sofa housed a plate with a half-eaten apple and yesterday’s newspaper opened on the International Heroes section. As Shouta sunk back against the excessive amount of pillows, Yagi walked into the kitchen corner. Looking over his shoulder, Shouta noted the first-aid kit was right at the front when he opened a cupboard. Could be he was orderly; could be he needed it a lot.

After a moment of deliberation, Yagi picked a salad bowl and filled it with water. He vanished briefly out of Shouta’s sight through a door and returned with a wet washcloth.

“Are those all the wounds you have?” he asked as he perched next to him, his long legs folded between the table and the couch.

“The rest is just bruises and scratches.”

Leaning forward, Shouta reached for the bowl, but Yagi kept his grip on it.

“Maybe I should do that. Unless you’re left-handed?”

Shouta shook his head and held out his arm. Yagi acted like he’d done this before and would probably do a better job than Shouta with his left.

Carefully, Yagi grasped his wrist, turning his arm so he had access to the wounds. His long fingers were so thin Shouta thought he could see the tendons stretching between the protruding joints, but his hand was also broad and warm and held his arm in place quite gently, making the position as comfortable as getting patched up could be.

“I hope your other scratches aren’t like these,” Yagi murmured. “Sorry, this is going to hurt.”

Slowly, deliberately, Yagi the dragged the cold cloth around his wounds, trying not to brush the naked flesh if he could help it, but not too squeamish to dig in if he had to get out dirt and lint. Definitely used to fixing up people, Shouta thought, biting his tongue so he wouldn’t make a noise as pain crackled through his nervous system. Maybe even All Might sometimes hit his big head hard enough to need help. Someone who was that invested in his own ego could make good use of a private secretary with medical training to help him protect his image of invulnerability.

“Perhaps you should go to a clinic to get stitches,” Yagi said thoughtfully, looking down at his arm.

“I’m too tired to spend five hours in a waiting room.”

“That’s not a reason not to go to the doctor,” Yagi chided. “I guess we can try bandaging it for now, though.”

From his first aid kit, Yagi grabbed some disinfectant and a cotton square on which he poured the sharp-smelling liquid before cleaning the skin around the wound. If he had gone to an emergency room, Shouta considered, he probably wouldn’t have gotten much better care and he’d have spent the night among a variety of loud, whiny, and often infectious people. This was the better alternative.

“You seem to know a lot about this,” he noted.

“Oh – well, I worked around heroes all my life,” Yagi said, glancing up briefly. “Unfortunately, most of them get hurt at some point and there’s not always a doctor available.”
He leaned forward over his arm and Shouta looked at the pretty arch of his slender neck as he bent down, his soft blond hair only inches from Shouta’s face. Then Shouta glanced at the ceiling instead, pushing the image away before it had the chance to turn into a slight but unnecessary, distracting complication for his mind to dwell on.

“Did you win?” Yagi asked.

“Yes. It was just a badly-planned heist,” Shouta said and suppressed a shrug that would surely have sent the carefully applied cotton square slithering straight into an open wound.

“So many people don’t seem to know what to do with their quirks.”

With a sigh, Yagi placed the disinfectant on the table and was just reaching for the gauze bandages when a scraping sound came from the direction of the window. They both looked up to see a cat sitting on the sill outside, its shape outlined by the light of a street lamp reaching up over the sloped roof.

“In a moment,” Yagi told the cat behind the window.

“It’s cold, let him in,” Shouta said immediately. “I’m not running away.”

Yagi gave him a slightly confused look, but he got up, anyway, allowing the cat in. In the light, it looked little different than it had when it had just been a shadow, black as night, with only a lively pair of green eyes as a new addition.

“This is the cat I talked about. I don’t know his name, so I’ve been calling him Momo,” Yagi said, pushing the window shut. “It seemed like a good guess.”

So far, Shouta had only seen Momo in passing, a black bolt racing across the rooftops outside his window. He’d spent most of his time at home asleep and the rest of the day away working.

The cat noticed the new addition immediately, carefully padding towards Shouta and sniffing his boots. He held out his good hand and let Momo inspect it before he scratched him behind the ears.

“He seems tame.”

“Yeah. I don’t know if he ever belonged to anyone,” Yagi said, sitting down next to Shouta. “Maybe he still does and they don’t know what he gets up to at night.”

“Possible,” Shouta said, but he hoped the owner would not feel like chasing their cat. A friendly stray dramatically improved the property value of his new apartment in his eyes. He gave Momo a last pet before he sat up and let Yagi continue his work.

“Do you have a quirk?” Shouta asked, watching him loop the gauze around his arm. The cat’s interruption notwithstanding, the thoughtful tone of Yagi’s assessment of peoples’ quirk use had stuck with him.

Yagi looked at him with a lopsided smile.

“I’m quirkless. Feels a bit odd now that most people are born with one, but I guess that also makes it special in its own way. Besides, I can still be a little useful without one.”

The hint of defiance in his tone betrayed that perhaps he was not always at peace with that lack in his nature, but Shouta thought it wasn’t his business to point that out.
Yagi finished, tucking the end of the bandage under its tight coils. It was firm around Shouta’s arm, but didn’t cut off the blood. Shouta flexed his fingers, feeling dull pain as his muscles stretched and contracted, but the bindings stayed put even with movement.

“Thank you,” he said.

“No problem.” Yagi smiled. “You should probably change that tomorrow – yes, I’m getting your food, give me a second!”

Momo had been bumping his head against their legs repeatedly while Yagi had finished wrapping the bandages. He trotted into the kitchen and was digging through the cupboard as a short, loud cough shook him head to toe. He dropped his hand to his mouth just in time to stop blood from splattering all over the kitchen counter. Instead, it painted his palm and fingers, dripping from there into the sink.

Shouta was on his feet at once. He might not have been a philanthropist, but he was a certified hero. While he hadn’t been ready to deal with the hospital tonight for his own sake, he would not hesitate to drag someone else there if he had to. However, as Yagi saw him move in the corner of his eyes, he quickly lifted his clean hand to stop him.

“Ah, don’t worry, that’s normal,” he spluttered, blood still on his lips, running down his chin.

“It’s really not,” Shouta answered, furrowing his brows.

“Well – y-yes. You’re right.” Yagi opened the faucet and rinsed the blood off his hand and face, drying his hands on a towel after. “I’ve been sick for a while, so this happens sometimes. It’s not worse than usual, I should say.”

While he explained, he grabbed a can of cat food from the cupboard and filled a flat bowl. Slowly, Shouta sat back down. Yagi would know better than him whether he needed help and he didn’t look particularly worried. Still, Shouta couldn’t help but scrutinise Yagi every movement as he made his way over again, waiting for another outburst, more blood.

By placing the bowl next to him on the couch, Yagi at least managed to draw some of Shouta’s attention away from himself to the cat. Shouta ran his hand over Momo’s back, which didn’t seem to distract him at all from his sauce-covered chunks of meat. Yagi sat in the corner of the sofa leaning against the armrest, looking tired. Shouta only just remembered how late it was.

“I’ve kept you up,” he said, slowly tearing himself from Momo, but pausing briefly before he walked to the door. “If you ever need to go to a doctor, knock on my door or whatever. If I’m around, I’ll help you.”

It was the least he could do; hell, he’d have done it for a neighbour he didn’t find as surprisingly tolerable as Yagi. Without that impulse, he wouldn’t have been out there on the streets getting the wounds he’d brought home today to begin with.

Yagi looked honestly grateful for the offer as he forced himself to his feet and shook Shouta’s good hand.

“H’ll be fine, I’m sure, but thank you. Have a good night... oh, and if you want Momo over sometime, just keep your window open for a bit and put some treats on the sill in the evening. I bet he’ll find them in no time.”

Shouta nodded his head, already moving around tomorrow’s appointments in his head to make room for that.
Chapter 3

As he walked along the small alley that Yagi had shown him on his first day, Shouta checked the plastic bag from the supermarket once more to see if he needed to turn in at a corner shop before he returned home. He had water, two packs of coffee, rice and sweet-and-sour sauce in a glass. At the top were a generous helping of treats for Momo because he had used up the ones Yagi had gifted him and since Momo did now usually pass by his window and had even jumped inside twice in the hopes of food and attention, Shouta did not want to disappoint him.

He was contemplating going to a convenience store for some salty liquorice that he hadn’t found at the supermarket when he heard a dull thump followed by a grunt of pain and a low voice rumbling: “Don’t even think about it.”

Lowering the bag, Shouta edged forward to the corner of the alley, all instinct, muscles suddenly tense, breathing flat. It was long past sunset, so details were lost on him, but the dim red glow of a restaurant’s tacky plastic lanterns down the road showed him a burly figure that had cornered someone against the concrete wall of a building. The tall, scrawny silhouette topped with shaggy hair was easy enough to recognise.

Slowly, Shouta put down the bag, careful not to make a noise, and approached the man from behind. Coming closer, he saw that he had a knife in one hand and the other on Yagi’s throat.

Yagi’s gaze, only blue pinpricks in the dark of the street, fell on Shouta for just a moment, but he dropped it immediately. Smart, Shouta thought. Yagi didn’t want the guy to discover Shouta because he was staring at him when his attention should logically have been on his attacker. Curiously enough, Yagi looked more worried than scared up close, but Shouta let the thought go. It was hard to read a face in this light and shock did odd things to people.

He tightened the coils of his weapon around his hands and, in a snap motion, shot forward and wrapped the band around the man’s neck, pulling him against his own chest as he kicked the back of his knee. The attacker stumbled into him and Shouta saw teeth sharpen in an open maw. A quick, focused glance stopped whatever transformation he had tried to kick off.

The man gaped and with another swift kick, Shouta toppled him and threw him to the ground, keeping the long steel wire alloy band tight around his neck. He was used to that moment of slack bewilderment that his targets often displayed and had learned to make the best use of it. From where he had him now, his foot between the villain’s shoulderblades, Shouta pulled his hands back and tied them together at the wrists before unravelling the bandage further and securing his legs as well.

Ignoring his curses – it meant he still had enough air, so the restraints weren’t too tight around his throat –, Shouta turned to Yagi, who was standing with his back still against the wall, rubbing his throat. His long, skinny neck, looking barely strong enough to hold his head up, showed angry red marks where the fingers had tightened on his skin.

“Are you alright?” Shouta asked.

“Uh, yes. Th-thank you very much.”

Since he was eye-level with Yagi’s throat to begin with, it was easy for Shouta to do a quick visual check. The bruises looked gruesome, but not dangerous. He’d been around the block enough to know that the throat could be damaged within even without leaving impressive marks on the skin, though.
“What did he want?” he asked as he pulled out his phone and thumbed through a series of menus without more than a few glances, ending at the Hero Network’s police emergency pick-up button, the movement habit by now.

“Just my wallet.”

“Give it to him next time. It’ll be easier to recover than your life,” Shouta said.

“Yes, of course. I was just...”

He trailed off and Shouta nodded his head. Despite his connection to All Might, Yagi was still a civilian, after all, and it wasn’t unusual for a non-combatant’s mind to go blank in a situation like this. Shouta waved at him to follow as he picked up his shopping from where he had left it on the ground in the alley. From afar, they both looked at the captured man.

“If you feel dizzy tonight, you need to go to the hospital,” Shouta said.

“Okay,” Yagi answered meekly. “I think it’s fine, though. He didn’t have me for long.”

In the distance, Shouta heard police sirens separating themselves from the buzz of the four-lane streets encircling the block of old apartment houses. Sighing, Yagi glanced at the thug on the ground again. He looked exhausted now, most of all.

“Has this happened to you before?” Shouta asked.

Yagi’s hands didn’t even shake. Despite his lapse in judgement when he had failed to hand over his wallet, he was definitely one of the more fearless victims Shouta had met.

“What?” Yagi, lost in thoughts, winced and turned to look at him. “Ah, a couple of times. I used to live in a much worse area than this when I was a kid. But thanks to you, I was lucky tonight.”

Before Shouta could probe further, the police car turned into the street.

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“It’s a nice place,” Hizashi said, stretching out his legs, his arms folded behind his head. “And now you got your couch, too! You haven’t had one since we were roommates!”

“I didn’t need a couch in my office.”

“You could have had an apartment aside from your office,” Hizashi said, jumping to his feet from where he sat on the sofa to look out the window.

Hizashi’s boundless stamina shouldn’t have surprised Shouta anymore, but he was getting tired just watching him move around right now. They’d been out patrolling all day before taking the couch out of Hizashi’s basement and bringing it over and Shouta wanted only to take a nap on it now. Hizashi, for his part, had already announced he was going to an EDM club after having a drink with Shouta and he was tapping his foot, humming, looking by all accounts like he could barely contain the energy within him even as he stood there inspecting the street. You’d think at twenty-seven a man would slow down a little, but age had neither combated Hizashi’s drive nor his proclivity for leather clothing and certainly not his volume.

“I didn’t need an apartment, either.”

Hizashi ignored his objection.
“Seems like an okay neighbourhood, all things considered. You ran into a villain here?”

“The streets are small and mostly dark at night. Draws them in.”

“I guess, although with this many windows only an idiot would think they wouldn’t…”

Hizashi interrupted himself at the sound of the doorbell. With an audible sigh, Shouta picked himself up off the couch. One person was more than enough social interaction for an evening and unannounced visitors never meant anything good. Who was even going to drop by here at this hour?

As he opened the door, he found himself faced with Yagi, wearing an oversized grey suit that somehow made the tallest man without a growth quirk that Shouta had ever met look like a child playing dress-up. The smile he gave Shouta faltered into a frown when he spotted Hizashi standing at the other end of the room.

“Sorry, I didn’t know you had company.”

“Hey, don’t I know you?” Hizashi asked before Shouta had a chance to answer.

Looking over his shoulder, he saw his friend pushing himself off the windowsill and march over to inspect Yagi close-up.

“Present Mic, yes? We may have bumped into each other at my workplace. I’m one of All Might’s secretaries,” Yagi said, holding out his hand.

Hizashi shook it hard enough to waggle Yagi’s arm.

“That’s probably it! Are you doing business with All Might?” he asked, turning to Shouta again.

Shouta snorted with derision at the idea.

“Mr. Yagi is my neighbour.”

He stepped aside to let him in. Though he wouldn’t usually invite anyone who had the audacity to come unannounced into his home, he didn’t mind Yagi much. He was not an obtrusive factor with his diffident nature and friendly demeanour; an easy type to get used to.

“I didn’t want to bother you. I just wanted to give you this.”

In his hand was a box with a see-through cover presenting chocolate in the form of cartoon cat heads which he now pushed towards Shouta. He raised a brow at Yagi as Hizashi whistled.

“Do you have a suitor, Shouta?!” he crowed.

“What?”

Yagi’s blood shot into his cheeks and Shouta was briefly grateful it didn’t continue its way out of his mouth.

“It’s just because Mr. Aizawa saved me from a villain,” he was quick to say. “I thought because of Momo, cats would be appropriate.” He grinned and rubbed the back of his neck. “Anyway, that’s all. I simply wanted to thank you.”

“Who is Momo?” Hizashi asked.

“A stray cat. Mr. Yagi told me about him.”
“We kind of share him now,” Yagi said, smiling.

Shouta placed the chocolates on the kitchen counter. They were kind of cute.

“You didn’t have to thank me. I was just doing my job,” Shouta pointed out.

“I know, but it’s a dangerous job,” Yagi answered.

Glancing back at him, he saw Yagi looking around his barely furnished apartment. There was the couch now and a flat-screen TV on the wall and he had managed to stuff his paperwork into one bookshelf. His computer sat on the desk with his phone charger.

“Your home is, uh, quite functional. It’s nice,” Yagi said charitably.

“If you like empty hotel rooms!” Hizashi called out as he sat back down.

“You realise you don’t have to be here, Hizashi?” Shouta murmured without bite as he walked over to the fridge. “Mr. Yagi, do you want a beer?”

“Thank you, but I’m not supposed to drink.”

That did not surprise Shouta, given that he’d seen him spit blood. He frowned at his mostly empty fridge as he searched for a substitute and found a bottle of green tea, holding it to Yagi with a questioning look. If he’d rather go to his own apartment now that he had done what he seemed to think of as his duty, Shouta would understand, too.

“Thank you,” Yagi said, again, taking the bottle from him.

With two beer bottles in hand, Shouta sat down on the couch and switched on the TV to the news for background noise. He liked keeping an eye on recent events. It made it easier to identify trends when it came to villains, know what other heroes had been up to or who of those he didn’t know through some connection had ended up in the hospital or dead. It wasn’t always fun to watch, but it was important to know the successes as well as the failures that influenced their environment.

Yagi perched awkwardly on the armrest as if he couldn’t decide whether he was allowed to really take a seat.

“What do you do around All Might’s place?” Hizashi asked, snatching his beer from Shouta’s hand.

“I’m responsible for personal requests for and from All Might. I also take messages for him and relay them.”

“You work into the night a lot,” Shouta noted. The house wasn’t sound-proofed very well, so he heard him come home at all hours when his own latent insomnia kept him awake irresponsibly late.

Yagi nodded his head.

“He gets a lot of messages. I have to decide which of them he really needs to hear and when.”

“Do you also have to sift through the fan mail?” Hizashi asked, bemused. “That must be funny! Love declarations, marriage proposals, I bet he gets it all. Even I have crazy people call in on my radio show, but people go absolutely insane for All Might!”

For some reason, Yagi’s ears turned red again. Shouta wondered if he had been forced to sort through the more graphic fan letters.
“It’s – it’s very good of them, of course, to show such interest! Some fans are a little overenthusiastic, though.”

“All Might never sets proper boundaries, so it’s no wonder,” Shouta said, shrugging his shoulders. “It wouldn’t kill him to pick a harsher tone with the press sometimes, either. Fighting them is no use, but coddling them makes them think everyone wants a spotlight shone in their face. It’s not helpful to all of us.”

Sipping from his drink, Yagi looked conscience-stricken on behalf of his employer. Good – Shouta hoped that was a message that made it back to All Might loud and clear.

“Shouta is not a fan of the media, if you can’t tell,” Hizashi commented after taking a gulp of beer. “They can be annoying, but hey, there’s Put Your Hands Up Radio, too! It’s not all bad!”

His volume rose at the mention of his own show and Shouta leaned his head away, quietly suffering it. He found Yagi looking between them.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing. I just...” His brow knit. “I’ve listened to your show a few times, Present Mic, and you two seem quite... different.”

Since they’d started hanging out sometime in their first year of high school, Shouta had heard similar sentiments. From the outside, they made an odd pair; hell, even from the inside he often wondered how he had ended up befriending someone this goddamn loud. In the end, Hizashi was more than his voice, though, quirk or not; more than his big mouth, too. The only people Shouta really got along with were those whose core he was sure to have understood, the good and the bad, and if he liked what he saw what dressed it up didn’t matter so much after that.

“Hizashi’s enthusiasm makes people think he’s nicer than he is,” he said dryly, instead of going into all that. It wasn’t a lie, either.

“Hey!” Hizashi snapped. “That’s how it’s gonna be? Alright, Shouta only acts like he doesn’t care so he’ll look cool. Never grew out of that phase!”

Yagi laughed at the two of them. It was a pretty laugh, clear and unaffected, and it lifted the shadows from his eyes a bit when he leaned his head back like that.

“Maybe I get it a little now,” he said.

Hizashi opened his mouth to add something, but the TV drew their attention with a sudden jingle, the screen growing red at the borders, signalling an emergency broadcast. Automatically, Shouta grabbed the remote and turned up the sound.

“… an unknown mechanical construction, about thirty feet tall, terrorising the suburbs outside Kamino ward. Local heroes and police have already arrived on the scene to secure civilians, but so far no one has been able to contain the threat itself.”

Yagi put his bottle of tea down.

“That sounds like a job for All Might,” he said. “He’ll be there for sure. I better get going – there are always a lot of calls to field in these situation. The regular staff isn’t around this time of night.” Hastily, he gave a little bow. “Thanks for having me over. Have a good evening!”

“You too,” Shouta said, looking over his shoulder. Yagi had vanished so fast that he’d not even had
time to bring him to the door. If he went to the office on a case-by-case basis, it made sense that he seemed to have no sleep or work schedule to speak of, judging by the odd hours that he heard him traipsing around his apartment.

“We can’t get there fast enough,” Hizashi said, cocking his head. “All Might just jumps, wherever he is, but it’ll be an hour travelling there for us.”

“Yeah. I guess I’ll tell the police that we’re available if they plan to ferry in more heroes for rescue work,” Shouta muttered, reaching for his phone.

Hizashi nodded his head before he took another swig of his beer. While Shouta was still fumbling through the Hero Network App, Hizashi turned back to him, letting the bottle dangle between his fingers.

“So... Mr. Yagi, huh?”

“What about him?” Shouta asked, immediately wary of the humorously conspiratorial tone and the way Hizashi drew out the man’s name like bubblegum.

Hizashi grinned.

“You tell me!”

Pocketing his phone again, Shouta crossed his arms over his chest.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said. “He’s my neighbour. I saved him from a villain. That’s the only reason he came over.”

“Sure. You just invited him to stay over for a drink and adopted a stray with him.” Hizashi snorted. “Don’t try to pull that with me! We lived together for four years and I don’t think you ever learned the names of the people who were in the apartments to the right and left of us.” Hizashi rolled his eyes. “Besides, don’t act like I haven’t been around to watch you date for the last, what, ten, fifteen years?”

Shouta had never regretted that Hizashi had been the first person whom he’d come out to, even if it had been in a moment of desperate irritation. After an evening of listening to his friend’s adolescent bragging about half-baked ideas of meeting a few girls behind the camp that night on the class trip, the words “I’m gay” had come out more or less accidentally. However, Hizashi had simply switched, without so much as a second’s pause, from “we can pick up chicks” to “well, we gotta find you a guy, then.” Despite the fact that his remark hadn’t stopped Hizashi’s eager planning, fifteen-year-old Shouta had found himself immediately grateful for the reaction, once his heart had stopped thumping.

There were massive downsides to having a person with a front-row seat to your love life, though. Hizashi had lived through all the awkward stages of adolescence with him, when Shouta hadn’t been smart and subtle enough to hide who had caught his fancy, which gave him a pretty good idea of Shouta’s preferences. And no, it had indeed not escaped Shouta’s notice that Yagi ticked too many boxes on his checklist. He wasn’t an idiot. He wasn’t an asshole. He had legs that went on for miles and a slim waist, a likeable smile and a head of sunflower-coloured hair that Shouta imagined it would be fun to run his fingers through.

“He coughs up blood and he looks like he’s starving,” he told himself and Hizashi. “I wouldn’t call that attractive.”

“Yeah, but you were still staring at him. Were you trying to suppress his quirk? Funny! I didn’t notice him using one,” Hizashi jeered.
In response, Shouta could only scowl.

He didn’t even know if Yagi liked men, much less whether his behaviour around Shouta wasn’t just his version of simple cordiality. Apart from that, Shouta was also about to start a new job in a field he had zero experience in and juggle being a pro hero on the side.

“I don’t have time for a relationship,” he muttered into his beer.

“I didn’t tell you to marry him,” Hizashi gave back. “Live a little!”

Shouta could certainly imagine in more vivid detail than was appropriate what it would be like to fuck Yagi. However, while Shouta couldn’t be sure after such a brief acquaintance, gentle Yagi did not seem the type who could keep sex and feelings separated; and deep within himself, he knew that problem might crop up on his side, too. It was not difficult if a man was handsome but insufferable. People who had already won his respect and interest, though, were not as easy to kick out of bed again and blurred lines were even more taxing than trying to handle a regular romance.

On the TV, the newscaster was handed what looked like a hastily written note just in time to announce All Might’s arrival, shaky overhead footage of the Number One Hero going head to head with the metal beast flickering onto the screen. Shouta watched it without taking in any of the words said.

The logical decision was to do nothing and keep Yagi as a friendly neighbour and nothing more.
“It’s still moving!” Hizashi called.

The robot’s featureless head rolled slowly over the meadow, sputtering sparks, leaving the smell of singed grass in the air. It had been wrenched clean off, but losing it had not slowed down the metal behemoth it used to belong to.

“Where did these even things come from?!”

Midnight danced out of the way of a metal foot, glancing up at the sky perhaps in the hopes of seeing a drop ship or some other spawn point for their mechanical enemies. It figured, Shouta thought, bandages flying freely about him as he clambered up the branches of a tree, that even when he just met up with Midnight and Hizashi to discuss the syllabus at U.A. in a park he would somehow end up in trouble. He didn’t think he’d had a day without a fight in weeks.

Three robots had descended on the Imperial Palace East Gardens minutes after they had set foot through the Otemon gate. One of them they had managed to involve in a fight, but the other two had walked past them unimpressed with their efforts and the third seemed intent on following them on their way further in, ignoring the pros as much as it could without losing more limbs – which, at the moment, was completely.

“At least these aren’t as big as the one in Kamino ward!” Hizashi shouted from where he was herding a panicking group of teenagers towards the main road to the park exit.

They weren’t, not even close, but they were still ten feet high and much more well-made than the ones that Shouta had inspected as Principal Nedzu had explained the U.A. entrance exam to him. Where those robots had been built to be taken apart with relative ease, someone with a lot more destructive intent and possibly a related quirk had put these constructs together.

Shouta watched the robot shuffle along the road with disquieting coordination.

“It must have a back-up brain,” he concluded, throwing his capture weapon in a loop around the branch of a tree and pulling himself up to get on eye-level with the neck stump that was frizzling with residue energy spitting from ripped cables.

“Of course it does,” Midnight commented with a heartfelt sigh.

With the help of a broken rod from a destroyed park fence and Hizashi acting as a distraction, Midnight and him had been able to wrench off the horned head of the robot, but Shouta could already tell they were out of luck trying to get at anything inside its heavily plated body without being electrocuted. Between scent, sound and quirk erasure, they were perfectly useless against brute metal beasts that had no noses, ears or quirks.

Shouta let himself down on the bindings and collected them in his hands.

“Let’s just get the people out of here!” he commanded.

“Way ahead of you!” Hizashi shouted, pushing his finger down on something on the speaker system on his neck. “I’m gonna call everyone over.”

“I’ll help collect the leftovers,” Midnight said.
Before Shouta could announce his plan of action, something hit the ground with a heavy thud behind him. Shouta tensed as he whipped around, half expecting another robot to have landed. Instead, he found himself looking at All Might, a colourful spot against the mellow background of the leafless trees and pale lawn in his garish costume. He was carrying two men in pinstripe suits in his arms.

“Hello my friends!” he boomed, grinning as if he hadn’t even noticed the terrifying mechanical constructions upending trees and leaving footprints like fridge-sized stamps in the grass. Gently he set the two men down by Midnight’s side; they looked like their legs were not going to support them for long. “Could you take care of these gentlemen for me? I think I have to go and produce a little material for the scrap metal yard!”

Shouta deliberated quickly. He had no great desire to team up with All Might instead of Hizashi and Midnight, whom he knew much better as partners in a fight. However, the man was clearly the prime choice to deal with enemies like this. Supporting him would give the greatest amount of people a chance to get out of here.

“I’m coming with you,” Shouta decided. His friends could handle the people fleeing and keep them away from new attackers if any more should land here; it meant Shouta had one exit he could send everyone to knowing they’d probably make it out. “You concentrate on the robots, All Might, I’ll get the civilians out the way.”

“That’s a great plan, Eraserhead!” All Might answered, giving him a thumbs-up.

Shouta bit down on a sarcastic response. He did not appreciate being treated like a child who needed to be given an attaboy during mission planning, but there was no point in starting a fight now when they could be helping people.

All Might sprinted after the robot that had ignored the heroes as far as it had been able to while they pulled off its head, never wavering from its trek deeper into the park unless it was to swat at them as if they were flies.

As Shouta followed All Might, he heard Hizashi’s voice calling out behind them, the sound vibrating through his body even a few dozen feet away. He was asking all park visitors to go to their nearest exit gate and turn to Otemon if they weren’t particularly close to any. Even All Might winced briefly as his scream washed over them, making the air quake.

A similarly loud but brief screech of metal announced the beginning of All Might’s first battle. Since the robot had not gotten far since All Might’s landing and they had mostly cleared the areas of civilians before he had come, there wasn’t much yet for Shouta to do but point those streaming out from between the trees away from the fight and hurrying along the especially intelligent specimens who stood to gawk with no regards to whether they would catch pieces of metal plating with their face as All Might dented reinforced steel with his bare fists.

While All Might wrenched an arm out of its metallic socket to the tune of metal bursting, Shouta pushed against the backs of a middle-aged couple to move on. This was one of the caveats of working with fan-favourite heroes. It even annoyed him when he was out with Hizashi and Midnight, but All Might was creating ten times the unreasonable behaviour. It seemed like half the people forgot they had been fleeing in terror when they saw him.

The robot toppled, taking with it an old plum tree. A gust of wind carried handfuls of dirt into Shouta’s face as the tree was uprooted, but he could not really complain, since All Might had at least managed to make both fall towards the empty meadow instead of the road that Shouta was still pushing people along. Those that had come last now cheered and All Might gave them a winning smile once he had clambered out of the chaos of branches and metal, picking leaves out of his
immaculate hair.

“No problem at all!” he reassured them and Shouta was in serious danger of straining something the way he rolled his eyes. Gods beware All Might would be seen to have struggled with something.

All Might vaulted over the fallen tree trunk and marched towards Shouta.

“You did work on that robot before I came,” he said.

“We didn’t have any useful quirks to take care of it and it was too big to restrain,” Shouta said with a shrug. They had done what they could, but they had clearly not been the dream team for this particular incident, so he didn’t need a participation award from All Might. “The robots seem to be heading deeper into the park. We saw two more.”

“Well – now I am here!” All Might said good-naturedly, extending his hand towards him. “Would you mind holding on to me, Eraserhead? We should get to the next point of action as fast as possible!”

Before Shouta really had a chance to react or ask what All Might planned to do, the man had looped his massive arm around Shouta’s waist and catapulted them into the air. Reflexively, Shouta clawed into the steel-hard muscle under his fingers, his heart falling into his stomach as he saw the park narrow down to a green lake in the grey chaos of the city, wind whistling in his ears and burning in his eyes; and just as soon as he had convinced himself to take a breath, they plummeted again, the cold air tearing at him as Shouta was still pinned against All Might’s side like a doll.

They came down in the high grass and he could feel All Might lifting him briefly just before they were at the end point of their journey, pulling him up towards his shoulder so that Shouta was in no danger of having his feet slammed against the ground and shattering his legs as they landed. Despite this act of consideration, Shouta was fuming as his shaking knees were finally allowed to carry his weight again.

“Can you warn me next time?!” he snapped at All Might.

All Might looked surprised.

“But I did…”

“Not sufficiently,” Shouta growled as he skulked past him. There was a family hiding in the bushes, watching in stunned shock as a robot uprooted a tree and flung it at a horde of fleeing people. All Might wisely chose to concern himself with that rather than Shouta’s comment, jumping like an oversized rabbit to intercept the trunk.

“I’ll try to keep the fight by the riverside!” All Might shouted as he dodged a fist ramming a foot deep into the ground next to him. He pushed the trunk he had caught off his shoulder. It landed in the river with a giant splashing fountain of water.

“Alright!” Shouta called back. He gestured at the family. “Do you know the Otemon gate?”

They nodded faintly and Shouta told them to run.

The situation here was much worse than at the entrance, since it seemed like whoever directed the robots had sent them to the centre to start causing damage. People were stumbling in all directions, running into each other, falling over the fresh holes in the ground, and there were wounded left behind.
All Might was keeping the robots busy, but these two were still at full capacity and made him a lot more trouble than the first one he’d fought. Between keeping them off the people and not catching a steel part to the head, he had his hands full without a counterattack. Shouta knew he had to give him space if he wanted this to go somewhere.

“You there!” Shouta called to two young women who looked unharmed and still mostly in possession of their senses. “I need your help!”

They were only the first of several pairs and trios that Shouta formed to carry those that couldn’t walk from the field. Between the clang of robotic limbs and the babble of those around, he had to scream to get his orders across. By the time he had created sufficient room for All Might to have a proper brawl, he was sadly too hoarse to give his real opinion to those idiots who were staying around for the show. Lassoing a few of them with his capture weapon and yanking them towards the road to the Otemon gate did make a point, though.

All Might was almost a security risk in himself, although Shouta had to admit it was not his fault this time but that of his more brainless fans. Truthfully, watching him fight was a spectacle up close, though not one to risk your life for. He’d seen All Might in action a thousand times on the TV, a few times from afar, but there was something fundamentally unbelievable about punching through four inches of solid steel, despite all the strange quirks that Shouta had witnessed in his lifetime. Maybe it was because All Might’s quirk, for all its impressive force, really did nothing unusual to his body. He did still look like a normal man, size aside, and life experience did not expect a human fist to have the same impact as a derailing train car.

As soon as he noticed that the bulk of people had been sent away, All Might jumped from the banks towards the lawn. Shouta saw him throw back his left shoulder, really putting his weight behind the swing. As he shot forward and his fist collided, it sank deep into one robot’s chest. All Might grimaced as electricity crackled and popped. The second robot turned to him, but All Might used the fact that he seemed to be stuck, bringing his feet up to the first robot’s chest plate and halting, waiting for the exact moment as the second machine raised its fist before he tore himself free and vaulted off.

With a huge clamour, the fist connected with the burst chest plate and the two constructs collapsed onto each other. All Might pushed himself up, jumping high into the air for momentum before he came crashing down heel first on the exposed neck joint of the robot on top. Where Midnight and Shouta together had only wrenched off the head with combined strength, All Might’s kick broke the joint itself.

Overhead, news helicopters had begun circling. The robots billowed smoke and sparks as they struggled to separate their mangled parts from one another. All Might looked around for a moment and then zipped over the river and grabbed a huge boulder, a picnic blanket that had rested on top fluttering off as he lifted it and dropped it on top of the heap.

“Was that all of them?!” All Might called to Shouta.

“They all landed in the same spot at the Otemon gate, but I don’t know if there were others coming from a different direction.” Shouta squinted up at the news helicopters. “Why don’t you join your friends and have a look?”

Following his gaze, All Might looked up. “Good idea!” he found, before he jumped.

From the ground, Shouta saw him dangling off a landing skid. If the reporters hovering up there doing nothing to help the rescue efforts had at least gotten a little fright from the sudden burden that had briefly offset the helicopter, that gave him some personal satisfaction.
All Might landed next to him again after a moment of surveying the park from above.

“That’s all of them! I don’t think they could easily hide under the trees.” His expression, which had teetered on the edge of ordinary for a brief moment there, pulled back into a broad, shining grin. “Thank you for your help, Eraserhead! It would have gotten messy without you!”

“Hm,” Shouta made. It still felt a little like All Might was about to pat him on the head for a job well done. Something about the combination of too much sincerity to be believable with that stadium announcer voice. It wouldn’t surprise him if All Might just saw most of his colleagues as the clean-up crew, though to be fair Eraserhead had never heard stories of him treating other pros as such. Still, someone this focused on the limelight had to be acutely aware of how much everyone else paled next to him.

“Would you like me to take you back?” All Might asked, reaching for him.

Quickly, Shouta took a step back.

“I’ll walk,” he said.

Shouta noticed All Might looking after him with a slightly dejected expression on his face as he glanced briefly over his shoulder once more.

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“Ah, good evening.”

Shouta turned his head. The night was cold, too cold to stick out his head of freshly-washed hair, but he had wanted to check if Momo was out there waiting for someone to give him shelter until the morning. A few metres to his left, Yagi’s long, stick-thin arms were folded on the sill of his own window. He was wearing an oversized All Might jersey, the collar falling forward, revealing the soft curves of his collarbones. The wind blew through his hair. He looked tired and his voice was a bit raspy, but he gave Shouta a smile.

“Momo came in here a while ago. Did he stay with you last weekend?”

“Yes,” Shouta said. He looked at him again, the slender neck sticking out of the wide circle of the neckline where he could still see faint bruises. “How is your throat?”

“Much better, thanks.”

They looked out over the city together for a moment. After the screams of terrified civilians, the robots clanging through the park, the overtuned voices of Hizashi and All Might, consciously listening to nothing felt like a pause to breath. There was only the noise of traffic in the distance, the sound of tires on asphalt like the mechanical approximation of the wind in the trees, a rustling whisper that ebbed and flowed, not with the gusts but with the traffic lights.

“I heard you met my boss today. Apparently he didn’t have time to do it himself, but he wanted me to thank you in his name for helping me with the robber,” Yagi said, his voice simply an addition to the moment, low and unagitated enough not to bother Shouta.

“Does he know we’re neighbours?” he asked.

“Yes. I told him when I said that you’d saved me.”

Shouta nodded his head. That made sense. If All Might worked closely with this guy, he would have
wanted to know why he came to work with strangulation marks on his neck. He’d hope so, at least; after all, people often sported these kinds of bruises after attacks in their own home and any hero worth his salt should very well know to pay them special attention.

After hiding a yawn against his bony shoulder, Yagi pushed himself up.

“I’ll be heading to bed. Have a good night, Mr. Aizawa.”

Shouta watched him vanish and heard the window close, then turned back to look at the lights of the city shining behind the rooftops across the street. He found himself wishing that Yagi had stayed up, simply to chat or enjoy the quiet together for a little while longer.
Chapter 5

It was past ten when Shouta rang the bell of his neighbour’s door, wiping rain out of his face with his other hand, his eyes almost falling shut and his empty stomach rumbling. He’d been on his feet since six today, first in meetings with the teachers at U.A., then to discuss the recent robot attacks with a detective and finally out patrolling with Ms. Joke to find the latest incarnation of a drug dealing ring they’d both tried to stamp out before.

The workload would have been enough to do him in, but Hizashi in the morning and Ms. Joke in the evening was also way too much baseless exuberance around him for one day. At this point, he just wanted his bed and maybe a cup of instant noodles before passing out.

As Yagi opened the door, the first thing Shouta noticed was the smell of curry that wafted out into the corridor. He could feel his stomach tighten further. His attention was diverted from his appetite by the sight of Yagi, though.

For the first time since he’d known him, the smile on his face looked blatantly fake. It didn’t help that his skin was a shade paler than usual and his brow furrowed, casting his discoloured eyes into an even deeper shadow. Still, he stepped aside to let Shouta in.

“Good evening. Long day?” Yagi asked.

“You could say that.”

Shouta kicked off his boots so he wouldn’t track dirt into Yagi’s living room. If Yagi guessed how his day had been at a glance, then perhaps he looked about as bad as Yagi did. Really, he was surprised the man could tell. People often told Shouta he always seemed strung out and tired, so apparently Yagi paid more attention than most.

He watched Yagi shuffle over to the kitchen counter where he grabbed a see-through plastic bag sitting next to the fridge.

“You look like your day wasn’t great, either.”

“It was something,” Yagi answered vaguely, voice barely more than a mumble. “Here, I think this is everything you wanted?”

This morning they had met by the mailboxes in the small entrance hall. After a brief chat, Shouta had found out that Yagi was leaving work early to go to the doctor today. Since he’d also said that he would go to the supermarket after, Shouta had asked whether he’d be able to get a few things for him, knowing he would probably get home after most shops closed.

Shouta dug through the bag Yagi handed him to find several ready meals, cat food and three bottles of water. He nodded his head and took out his wallet.

“How much was that?”

“About 2000 Yen, I think.” Yagi poked at the food in one of the pots on the stove and that seemed to trigger motivation somewhere inside himself to actually turn to him and look at Shouta like he saw him. “Have you had dinner yet? I made too much. You could eat with me.”

While he put the money on the counter, Shouta weighed the necessity of more social interaction against the waiting time for one of the ready meals that would probably taste like lukewarm
cardboard sludge once prepared. However, he found it was his curiosity about Yagi’s uncommonly dark mood that became the final stone in the scale pan.

“Sounds good,” he said.

While Yagi turned off the stove, he directed Shouta to grab two bowls and chopsticks from the cabinets. He didn’t have a lot of cutlery or plates, Shouta noticed, sufficient for one man who didn’t want to do the dishes every evening, but not enough to entertain even a decently sized crowd.

They took the rice and chicken curry right out of the pots and sat down at his western-style dining room table. Yagi’s portion would have better served a child than a grown man which went some ways in explaining why he looked like a skeleton with skin, though not how he sustained a body his tall size. Yagi coughed into a balled-up tissue before he picked up his chopsticks, rubbing roughly at the corner of his mouth to remove a red stain.

“What did the doctor say?” Shouta asked. He had a feeling he knew the origin of Yagi’s crestfallen expression.

“Oh,” Yagi looked up as if he’d forgotten Shouta was there for a moment. “It’s fine, I’m not dying or anything.”

“Lots of stages between healthy and dead,” Shouta pointed out, taking a bite of the curry. It was good – sweet, thick, with tender pieces of chicken, nothing outstanding, just the kind of food people cooked at home, simple and well-made for what it was.

Yagi grimaced, hesitated, his chopsticks nervously chasing a clump of rice across his bowl.

“They have to remove my left lung,” he said quietly.

Lowering his chopsticks, Shouta tried to imagine scenarios in which ripping out a whole major organ became the most viable way to treat a patient. Cancer was all that came to mind, but he was no doctor and he’d never met a man who went about his daily business regularly throwing up blood. Besides, he doubted that cancer metastasised to the point that you had to cut out a lung could honestly be described as ‘not dying’.

“What happened to you?” he asked.

Yagi glanced down at his food.

“I got in an accident. It never really healed right. Lots of follow-up operations…” He sighed and tried for a smile. It looked off, but a bit better than the one he’d forced at the door. “The other lung is still working pretty well, at least.”

“Sorry to hear that’s necessary,” Shouta said honestly.

As senseless as it was to be angry about who did and did not deserve to get sick – a nonsensical moral debate entirely separate from reality, where accidents and illness so often happened at perfect random –, it wasn’t pleasant when good people like Yagi got the short end of the stick.

“Is the operation soon?”

“They haven’t set a date yet,” Yagi said, shaking his head. He finally picked up a cluster of rice grains. “Uh… thanks for listening.”

Shouta thought he’d only done quite little of it to be thanked already, but then Yagi didn’t seem to
ever get visitors or keep company, really, if Shouta’s ears didn’t deceive him. Maybe he didn’t have many people to speak to, surprising as Shouta found that. Yagi had managed to attract him and he was not someone easily pulled into the circle of a person; there was a reason his two only true friends were relentless extroverts who had been impossible to escape once they had set their sights on him. If Yagi could lure Shouta, others would surely have fallen for his charms.

“What did you do today?” Yagi asked.

“Patrol and look at the school.”

“You’re preparing for teaching,” Yagi said, a little more engaged now.

“I already wanted to talk about classes with colleagues in the Imperial Palace East Gardens, but then the robots interrupted us.”

Yagi laughed quietly.

“My boss was very impressed with you during that incident, by the way.”

“I was mostly there for rescue,” Shouta said, after chewing another mouthful of rice and curry. “All Might beat up these things.”

“Still, he said since you couldn’t use your quirk at all, it was brave for you to be so close to the action.”

Shouta shrugged.

“I’ve been in that situation quite a bit. My erasure doesn’t even work on all types of quirks and I don’t always know what I’m up against before the fight starts.” He raised a brow. “Of course, All Might doesn’t have to think about that. His punches work on just about anything.”

Yagi regarded him quietly for a moment.

“You don’t like All Might, do you?”

“Not particularly,” Shouta answered, without hesitation. “I don’t mean to say that he’s not necessary or that I dislike what he does. His quirk is massively useful and Japan would be worse off without him. It’s also not debatable that he made our society as a whole a lot safer. Still, I think he sets a bad example for some people, too.”

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“How so?” Yagi asked, looking concerned.

“He can get away with the things he does because he has one of the most powerful quirks we have ever come across. Most people are not that lucky and jump headlong into danger without thinking because he makes it seem like a right thing to do. It gets people hurt.” Shouta snorted. “I’m surprised it hasn’t gotten him hurt, all his strength aside.” He frowned. “Then there’s the unregistered vigilantes who all consider themselves the underground All Might… if he didn’t play ball with the media so much, then maybe that would help rein it in.”

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“But the media is necessary to spread a message.”

“It’s always hard to get the actual narrative you want across, though,” Shouta said. “As a person, I don’t know All Might, although the massive ego doesn’t seem to be for show. I think the rest of what people get to see of him is a persona. I trust him to be on the right side and wherever the cameras flash. However, I think anyone who thinks they know more about All Might than that is naive...
“Aside from you, maybe, but you’re a different story than the average fan.”

“You’re quite honest,” Yagi said with a lopsided, slightly pained grin.

“I’m not telling you anything I wouldn’t say to All Might’s face,” Shouta answered. It would have been foolish to. Why would Yagi not repeat all this to his boss if he asked him? He had more reason to be loyal to All Might than Shouta.

“Well, uh, that’s good. All Might likes you, though,” Yagi said, after taking another bite of his kid-sized portion.

“I haven’t given him a reason to,” Shouta answered, just as earnestly as before. He had not been particularly friendly to him.

“You saved a lot of people. That’s not a bad reason,” Yagi found.

Silently, Shouta cleaned out his bowl of rice and watched Yagi struggle with the rest of his food. He wondered how much of this was Yagi’s own inference from what might only have been a throwaway comment by his boss. All Might probably claimed to like everyone who hadn’t proven themselves an outright villain.

“Thanks for having me over,” he said, instead.

“It’s my pleasure. I had too much food, after all. Besides, you distracted me. I needed that.”

Shouta looked him over again and felt affection curling in his chest, undeniable, tangible at this point. He would have swallowed it, would have kept to his own promise to leave this be if Yagi hadn’t still looked so unhappy.

“Maybe I can pay you back tomorrow if you’re not working. We could have something to eat and watch a movie.”

Yagi missed a beat before he answered, pausing in his movement of raising from his chair with the bowls in hand. For a moment Shouta thought he had made him uncomfortable, but he looked more guilty than anything else for some reason that Shouta couldn’t figure out.

“Yes, I would like that,” Yagi answered, finally recovering his smile.
Chapter 6

“Choose whichever one you like. I like all kinds of films, but I haven’t really had time to sit down and watch one in a while. I usually fall asleep...”

Yagi plucked Momo off the windowsill, carrying him over to the couch where Shouta was switching through the library of the streaming service he shared with Hizashi. He paused briefly to glance at Yagi lowering himself on the sofa, the cat still draped over his thin arms, sinking back with a soundless sigh into the soft cushions. Momo looked happy seated there and while there were no doubt some bony edges to Yagi’s body, Shouta imagined it was comfortable to be held against his chest nevertheless.

While Shouta had his eyes on him, Yagi was looking at the TV.

“That cat looks like Momo,” he noted.

Shouta halted the cursor on the movie poster image of a black cat sleeping curled-up in front of a window. The service threw up a description for some award-winning family drama as he hovered over the picture.

“We can just watch that one,” Shouta said.

Not that he cared especially for drama, but most of the stuff on here were summer blockbusters about pro heroes and those were even less exciting for him when he spent a good chunk of his life in his own action film with significantly more realistic effects and much higher stakes. Besides, this movie was being praised for its innovative use of the generations of cats that lived alongside the family as point of view characters in one of the review snippets attached to the summary, which sounded like a plus to him.

“Sure,” Yagi answered lightly.

While the movie started buffering, Shouta got up to find the sweet rice dumplings he had bought on his way home and the energy drink he’d picked up for Yagi at the corner store, remembering that he couldn’t drink his beer. He fell down on the couch next to Yagi and handed him the can, dropping his hand briefly to pet Momo in his arms, thumb rubbing over the cat’s head.

“Have you had cats before?” Yagi asked.

The movie had started, but so far it was just silent establishing shots of a suburban house, a black stray leaving small paw-prints that disturbed the immaculate gravel lines of a rock garden.

“My parents did when I was young.”

He’d been devastated when Azuki had died when he was seventeen. She had been two years older than him, so ancient for a cat, but he’d grown up with her. You couldn’t replace her, but he had always wanted another cat at some point.

Yagi took a sip of his drink. On screen, a young woman was saying goodbye as she headed out for school and a boy sat sullenly at the table, trying to motivate the cat sitting next to him to play. However, she would only bat at his fingers.

Yagi smiled.
“It makes sense that you like them, you know? You’re a bit cat-like yourself,” he said.

It was not the first time Shouta had heard that, though usually from people who had known him for longer than Yagi and sounded less like they were complimenting him.

“How so?” Shouta asked, curious how he’d come to his judgement.

Yagi picked up one of the dango sticks and Momo lifted his head, sniffing interestedly.

“You seem to take your time before you approach people.” He cocked his head. “And you move the same. Kind of slow and sluggish normally, but then you can spring into action just like that.” He snapped his fingers. “I noticed when you came to save me.”

Usually more mentions of antisocial behaviour were made, which Yagi had skirted quite elegantly. Shouta smiled slightly.

“Being compared to a cat is not so bad. I’d say you seem like a dog person, but…”

He shrugged, looking at Momo hanging half-asleep in Yagi’s arms.

“Do I?” Yagi laughed. “I do like dogs. I guess I like most animals. Bunnies are my favourite, though.”

Shouta imagined a bunny flitting around its cage and then thought of Yagi, the skittish, nervous energy that sometimes emitted from him, how prone he was to blushing and stammering at the drop of a dime.

“That actually makes sense, too,” he muttered.

“Cats are interesting, though,” Yagi continued. He carded his fingers once more through Momo’s fur before he lifted him and sat him on Shouta’s lap. “You’re always especially happy when you can make a cat like you, since they usually don’t trust you from the start.”

“Is that so?” Shouta asked, slightly bemused.

It only seemed to occur to Yagi now what unwitting implication he’d made, moments after comparing Shouta to a cat. His ears turned pink at the tips and then he chuckled again, rubbing the back of his neck.

“Yes,” he said.

“If you share some traits with a bunny, maybe you should be more careful around me. I could decide to hunt you down.”

Yagi coloured a little more and huffed a laugh. Shouta felt unnecessarily satisfied with himself.

For a while, they watched the plot of the movie unfold, Shouta with the warm, purring bundle in his lap. He’d missed switching his brain off and simply allowing someone’s fictional life to take the place of his own thoughts. Right now it kept him from focusing on the way Yagi had smiled at his advance.

Around the time the first act wound to its end with a tearful divorce, Yagi placed the stick of dumplings back on the table and shifted away from Shouta. He turned his head as he coughed, obviously trying to bite down on the sound, but it became less subtle when he started to choke on his own blood.
Shouta sat up, gently nudging off Momo, who had pricked up his ears as he watched Yagi’s shaking back with suspicion. Usually Shouta may have clapped him between the shoulder blades but who knew what he would break within Yagi if he did so. Instead, he looked around and spotted an old shirt he had left draped over the radiator last night to dry it before it went in the laundry. He handed it to Yagi to spit blood into and pulled a strand of his long bangs back behind his ear to save it from being drenched in red.

The coughing fit took long enough that Shouta began to mentally go through the emergency numbers in his phone. Before he could call in outside help, though, Yagi sat up a little.

“Thanks,” he said quietly, roughly.

“I don’t think you’ll miss your left lung much in the long run,” Shouta answered dryly.

Yagi chuckled, which made him cough again, and shook his head.

“I don’t think I should laugh,” he said, sounding grateful regardless.

Yagi looked at him instead of the screen and his hair had tumbled forward again, one strand grazing the blood-stained shirt. Slowly, Shouta reached out once more, brushing it back, his fingertips moving along the shell of Yagi’s ear, the curve soft against his skin. Yagi glanced at his hand and then back at him and Shouta noticed the sudden absence of the slightly rattling sound that was the tall man’s breathing. Though Yagi had wiped his mouth on the shirt, there was still a little blood on his lips. Shouta’s gaze traced the sharp lines of a face that should have been marred in its handsomeness by the ravages of illness, but only made him marvel how little Yagi seemed willing to give in to this affliction that should have brought him to his knees already. His hand slid down to cup his jaw.

Shouta was the one to lean in for a kiss, but Yagi angled his head when their mouths met. His lips were wet and tasted of iron, but his whole body radiated a comfortable warmth that Shouta wanted to push in on, feel closer.

It was a chaste kiss, but Yagi pulled back so suddenly and with an expression of such abject shock that one could have thought he’d woken up naked in bed next to Shouta right that moment. He raised a hand to his mouth.

“Sorry, that must have been…”

“It’s fine,” Shouta said. He knew the taste of blood, though it was usually his own.

Yagi ruffled his own hair and shook his head. A frantic quality was bleeding into his movements now.

“I… I should probably head over to my apartment. I’m sorry.”

Shouta didn’t really know what he was apologising for, but before he could ask, Yagi had scrambled to his feet and fled out the door. It fell shut behind him with such an echoing bang that Shouta did not think it wise to follow.

“Yo, Eraser!”

With a fumble, Shouta managed to save the water bottle he’d been holding and sent Hizashi a poisonous glance.
“What?”

“Oh, hey, there’s someone left in there after all!” Hizashi shouted in mock surprise.

“Did you want something?” Shouta asked with a frown, screwing the cap back on the bottle and leaning against the back of the bench, watching grey clouds move overhead.

“I could think of better things to do than going back to that meeting, too, but I’m not sure it warrants your level of a shitty mood,” Hizashi said, pointing at him with chopsticks holding the last of his Chinese noodles they had gotten from the food cart. “So what’s up, buttercup?!”

With a voiceless sigh, Shouta turned to look at the street stopped-up with traffic, the naked cherry trees around them, back up at the sky that threatened to release the waterworks any second now. One didn’t really need an excuse to be in a bad mood today, especially at the halfway point of some local level police pissing contest that they were mostly witnesses to, but he knew Hizashi wouldn’t be that easy to fool. It was one of the dangers of long-term friendships.

“I spent last evening with Yagi. We kissed,” he said.

Now that he’d decided to tell, there was no reason to let Hizashi wait for the important detail.

“And? Did he have bad breath or something?”

“Only if you’re afraid of blood,” Shouta said tiredly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Hizashi grimaced.

“Tasty.”

“I decided to kiss him after he spat blood on my old shirt,” Shouta clarified. “He kissed me back. Then he ran away.”

“Maybe it bothered him,” Hizashi said with a shrug. “Didn’t want to make out worrying he’d throw his insides up on you?”

Shouta shook his head, frowning. It wasn’t like he didn’t know Yagi was sick. He’d told him he was about to have his lung removed just the day before their kiss. Besides, Yagi could have just said that. Shouta liked to think he came off as the sort of man that would keep his hands to himself if the object of his affection told them to.

“It looked more like regret to me,” he admitted, though he hadn’t wanted to put it in words before, not even in his head.

“So talk to him.”

“You don’t say.”

This morning, Shouta had been off too early to casually drop in next door, but he would do it as soon as possible. Yagi’s behaviour had been strange enough to deserve an explanation.

“Interesting!” Hizashi announced, pointing a finger gun at him. “So you know what you have to do! Usually you put matters aside once you have a logical course of action planned. What’s bothering you, then?” Hizashi leaned closer towards him, an insufferable grin spreading over his face. “Could it be that someone has a crush?”

“I’ve kissed him once,” Shouta said, staring straight ahead.
“I’m pretty sure there’s no requirement list for being in love.”

“You’re not improving my mood,” Shouta pointed out, flatly, and dropped his head back to look at the storm clouds again. It could be supremely annoying when Hizashi was right.
Chapter 7

In the end, Shouta’s plans to visit Yagi were intercepted by the man himself. At ten in the morning the next day, the doorbell rang and Shouta fidgeted his way out of his sleeping bag on the sofa to find Yagi stand in front of his door. His sleep-deprived annoyance dispersed somewhat at the sight of him. He’d not heard Yagi come home last night, despite how little noise isolation the walls had, and the rumpled suit and dark circles under his shadow-dark eyes told him he’d probably never arrived here to sleep.

“Do you have a moment?” Yagi asked, his left hand’s twig-like fingers crinkling the cuff at the right arm’s sleeve.

“Yes,” Shouta said, leaning in the doorway. He could have given him more prompting than that, but he wanted to know what Yagi had to say for himself.

Yagi took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry for running out on you the other night. That was childish,” he said, contrite, rubbing the back of his neck. “I should have stayed and talked to you.”

The fact that he came here with an apology ready was unfortunately a point in his favour. Shouta had already collected more of those than he needed. If he were not already too lenient on him, Yagi’s irrational behaviour would have pissed him off a lot more.

“Why did you do it?” he asked.

There was another pause. Yagi wrung his hands and avoided his gaze.

“It’s not because I didn’t want to kiss you,” he said, “but there are some very important things you don’t know. Things that might change your mind about me.” He sighed. “I don’t have much time, I’m really just here to change and – maybe we can talk in the evening? It will take some time and I want to do it in private.”

What could a man like Yagi be hiding? Was he in for an ‘I’m not actually gay’ speech? An ex-wife and children somewhere? Maybe he’d helped All Might with tax evasion? No option fit. Yagi just seemed too inconspicuous and genuine to have skeletons in the closet. Of course, that could be why the notoriously secretive All Might had hired him.

“That’s fine,” Shouta said, suppressing his curiosity.

Just for a moment, Yagi’s expression brightened.

“Thank you.”

- 

“We have to get the people off this bridge. Where is Kamui?”

Shouta looped his capture weapon around a high post holding up a billboard and used it to clamber up the metal rod and perch on top. Hizashi’s text had brought him here, alerting him to a ward-wide call for pros on the Hero Network, and his promise of a ‘big time clusterfuck’ hadn’t been an exaggeration, Shouta thought, surveying the damage.
The old bridge stretched across a wide underpass with a four-lane road and houses underneath, some 150 metres from one side to the other. Before heroes had arrived on the scene, a robot had taken out two of the bridge’s supporting pillars and blown a hole in the anchorage keeping it connected to the hillside.

The robot was not particularly big, only twice as tall as All Might who was currently wrestling it. From his vantage point, Shouta saw that he was herding the thing more than fighting it. No wonder – it had hands made to take down steel and concrete and there were squat buildings on both sides of the street. The asphalt down there in the underpass was pieces and dust where the drill-hands had been stabbing for All Might. Chunks of road had been punched out of the ground, revealing naked earth underneath.

Shouta turned his head. All Might would handle the metal monster himself; he had to, because none of them could afford to give him a hand. The bridge itself was packed with panicking people precariously close to the railings as they all tried to get away, their flight hindered further by their own parked cars. From up here he could see them moving wild, like ants on a hill a wanderer had stepped into, and rivers did not flow in five directions at once; at the moment, all they managed to do was body block both ways off the bridge by running into each other.

He shifted his gaze again. One way, he corrected himself. The side at which the anchorage had broken was separated from land by a three foot wide gap filled with rubble that crumbled where the stone had been smashed and the support beneath had dropped.

“There’s one floor beam still holding. Kamui’s keeping it in place,” Hizashi called up to him.

“Half the bridge will come crashing down right now if they keep going that way. They’re putting more weight on it,” Shouta pointed out, hopping off the billboard and landing next to Hizashi on the ground. “Did anyone call Mt. Lady?”

She was a relative newcomer and usually more useful working the edges of the city due to her enormous size, but the street passing under the bridge was broad enough to give her enough room and they could use someone who could pick people off the bridge with her bare hands.

“Kamui said she’s out of town,” Hizashi answered, waving the idea off with a flick of his hand.

“Great. Anyway, we need to get them moving the other way.”

“Well, people do tend to listen to me!” Hizashi said with a wry grin, fiddling with the direction of his speaker system as he sprinted towards the bridge, already shouting a hello that droned out even the multitude of screams and honking cars.

Beneath Shouta, there was a smash like a truck hitting a wall at full speed. All Might had hammered the robot into the road and, after checking for something in a bunch of exposed wiring with cables thick like fingers, climbed up the steep, smooth walls of the concentric circle of scrap metal he had created around himself. When he spotted Shouta standing up the hillside looking down at him over the chest-high wooden fence, he jumped.

“Eraserhead! Good to have you here, too,” All Might told him. For the first time that Shouta could remember, he sounded out of breath, though he obviously still aimed for too loud and exceedingly energetic. “Is the police sending emergency road crews?”

“Yes, but I doubt they’ll set up fast enough,” Shouta said. “Cementoss is coming in, he’ll be able to keep the bridge standing if he arrives in time.”
“Great!” All Might boomed. “That will help! And now that the fight is over, we can evacuate the houses in the underpass.”

“Present Mic told me Manual and a couple of his sidekicks were assessing the damage to the bridge,” Shouta said, already hurrying towards the crumbling hole in the road with All Might following him, his long legs taking one step for every two Shouta walked. There was no water around that Manual could make use of, but that didn’t matter. Maybe a sidekick had a helpful quirk. Besides, it was more important to just have a few people who had emergency protocols memorised and wore bright costumes so civilians knew to take their orders.

They did not have to search for Manual’s people; one of the sidekicks all but barrelled into them.

“The beam is cracking! Kamui can’t hold the bridge up much longer!” he shouted.

Shouta turned to the bridge and felt his stomach tighten. The people had not been able to ignore Hizashi, who had turned up his volume until walking towards the gap must have been impossible with working eardrums. Still, a panicked crowd only moved this fast. If this half of the bridge crumbled, there were still dozens of people making up the tail end that would fall, not to mention the debris and empty cars that would be hurtled onto the homes below. That was not even to think about what the damage could do to the rest of the bridge as more beams and anchorages would be pulled out of position in the collapse. The robot had notched several of the other supporting pillars, too, leaving the bridge like a precarious house of cards, one missing piece away from tumbling, and Shouta was not looking forward to finding out which one it was.

“Let’s get poor Kamui out of that pickle!” All Might announced. “I’ll replace him down there.”

Shouta stared at him.

“Don’t be ridiculous. Kamui was trying to keep a beam in place. It’s broken now, didn’t you hear? You can’t hold up a bridge by yourself,” he said.

“You haven’t let me try yet! Besides, they do call me a pillar of society!”

Shouta looked at All Might and back at the bridge. If he gave his consent to this crazy plan, then he was potentially responsible for allowing a hero to get killed on the job. If All Might could not hold the bridge, it would fall on him and much like he acted like it sometimes, his head was not a concrete block. On the other hand, maybe he could buy these people some time. You always endangered the lives of pros before those of civilians. That was what they were trained for.

He grabbed the sidekick by the shoulder.

“Go get your boss, the houses under the bridge have to be evacuated right now,” he ordered before vaulting over the wooden fence after All Might.

Kamui was standing with both heels rammed into the steep grassy slope next to the bridge, leaning back his whole weight, a mass of wooden tangles sprouting from his arms.

“It’s coming apart!” he gasped out, twisting his neck to look at them.

Both All Might and Shouta stared at the large stone beam. Cracks had spread, some thin like cobwebs, other deep gashes in the stone, the biggest widening slowly as they watched. The thought of the weight above him made even Shouta nervous and he’d been a hero on the job for a decade now.

“It’s fine, I have two hands! I’ll keep it up as long as we need it!” All Might said in a way Shouta
might have believed if he hadn’t been looking at stone breaking like chalk right now. “You go rest a little, Kamui, my man!”

With a grin, All Might brachiated through the mess of Kamui’s vines and the bent and broken iron bars of the bridge, some support and some decoration, that had been split by the robot or torn out of the hillside as the bridge shifted its weight. When he had arrived in the middle where the beam showed the deepest crack, he came to a halt and turned. One of his hands was positioned on each side of the fissures before he straightened out of his crouch and the whole bridge shivered and groaned as it was straightened back into its original position from where it had started to sag in the middle. All Might stood tall and the bridge held.

“I can’t believe this is working,” Shouta murmured as he grasped Kamui by the elbow and dragged him back up the hillside, the hero stumbling next to him, his wooden appendages wrapped around Shouta’s arm. He also didn’t know for how long it would so they’d better hurry the hell up.

“Did Cementoss turn up?!” Hizashi shouted at them, only remembering halfway through the sentence to adjust his volume from its ear-splitting call that had kept the people going the other way.

Shouta sat Kamui down on the pavement.

“Shouta glanced along the length of the bridge, the cars two bands of multi-coloured metal glittering in the sun. “You make sure no one tries to come back here. I’ll go check the cars for stragglers,” he added.

“Hey, that bridge is about to collapse, you can’t -”

But Shouta didn’t listen to Hizashi, as he was quite sure Hizashi wouldn’t have listened to him had their places been reversed. Some risks you had to take. Behind him, he heard Hizashi groan.

He walked between the two lines of parked cars, dodging doors left open and jumping over fallen bags and jackets and looking into every window. The crowd jostling at each other at the stable end of the bridge told him most people where on their way to evacuation, but Shouta would rather be safe than sorry when the alternative was that some unfortunate first responder would dig a corpse out of a car crushed under the rubble that the bridge might soon turn into.

There was no one left inside the cars, but Shouta had to turn around a few people trying to run back, too nervous to wait for the crowd to push out onto solid ground. They rejoined the masses struggling past two parked trucks that stopped up the flood, hustling and shoving as they went. Shouta pulled back a man trying to elbow his way past two elderly women and instructed parents to carry their children if they could at all to get them away from trampling feet.

A hoarse scream sounded just to his right. Shouta whipped his head around in time to see a young man who had been pushed against the fence by the throng tipping over his point of balance, feet lifting off the ground. Without thinking, Shouta charged forward, tightening one end of his capture weapon around the railing as he threw himself off, swinging down. He collided with the falling man, grasping him around the chest. The band around his arm, the one thing connecting them to the bridge, tightened as sharp and painful as a vice with both their weights hanging off of it, damn near tearing his arm out of its socket.

“You,” he said, once the man had stopped screaming, “can you pull yourself up the rope?”

“I, uh…” He swallowed, looking at Shouta with his eyes glassy and wide. “I think so?”

It was a slow climb, but at least people paid attention now, reaching down to help the man when he
came into range. Dangling from the bandages, the wind tearing at his hair and blowing it across the
glasses of his goggles, Shouta squinted between his strands to look over to the other side. All Might
was just smidges of blue, red and white from so far away. Shouta wondered if he could still feel his
body.

The man had managed to lift himself back over the railing and Shouta followed, moving up the line
of taut bandages quick as a spider. He unwrapped it and then climbed on top of one of the trucks.
From here, he saw that Gunhead had just arrived with three of his people on the street the bridge
spilled people out onto. Shouta waved at them and waited for the last stragglers to make it over
before he jumped down.

“We’re waiting for Cementoss. All Might is carrying the bridge and Manual is evacuating the houses
under it,” he said, wasting no time to bring Gunhead up to speed. “Can you keep people off the road
here? I know there’s going to be some moron who’ll try to save his car.”

“There always is,” Gunhead replied.

Shouta turned, taking a look at the long stretch of the bridge. On this side the plunge downwards was
not made up of a grassy slope but a steep cement wall. It didn’t stop Shouta. He roped down on the
capture weapon, pooling it back around his neck. As he crossed the broken asphalt of the broad road,
he watched Manual and his sidekicks escort people out of their homes. Police cars were closing in
with their sirens howling and stopped by the remains of the robot

As the cars screeched to a halt, Shouta saw Cementoss climb out of the one that had led the charge.
He let out a silent breath he hadn’t known he was holding.

“ Took you long enough,” he told Cementoss as he sprinted towards him and the police escort. “The
damage is all on the left side. They hit the support pillars and the anchorage. I’ll bring you. Don’t
wall in All Might, he’s still holding this thing up.”

This time, he could not really fault the police officers following the direction of Shouta’s pointed
finger with their mouths open in awe. He hoped All Might did not pay with too many fatigue
fractures for this impressive stunt.

Together with Cementoss, Shouta scrambled up the hillside. All Might still stood as he had before,
knees and elbows locked and a smile on his face that was more of a grimace at this point. He seemed
to want to say something, but couldn’t get his teeth apart.

Cementoss reached up and raised two columns from behind him, then up, shaping new stone out of
what had fallen.

“You can let go,” he told All Might.

Gasping for air, All Might let his knees buckle. His limbs were shaking violently and he looked pale
and feeble even as he put his hands on his hips and tried to stand up tall. It was an odd sight, All
Might exhausted, and Shouta chided himself for that thought. Since when did he buy the media
bullshit? Obviously All Might got tired doing things like this.

“Thank you, Cementoss,” All Might managed. “Your quirk is perfect for us.”

Cementoss nodded his square head.

“Thanks for your help. I got it from here. The police will help with the evacuation.”

“Gunhead is on the other side of the bridge if you need back-up,” Shouta added towards Cementoss,
wondering if he should offer All Might a hand and also whether he could even be of any use if All Might leaned his full weight on him.

The decision was taken from him as All Might slowly, clumsily shuffled out of the frame of pillars that Cementoss had drawn up around him under the bridge. Shouta followed, leaving Cementoss to do his work. He reached the top before All Might who had to move almost on all fours to pull himself up the precipitous plane.

“I think I saw you jump off on the other side, Eraserhead,” he breathed out. “Someone fell?”

“People get careless during evacuations,” Shouta said by way of agreements. “I caught him. He’s fine.”

“You have to be hiding a physical quirk from us after all. You have an amazing reaction time,” All Might noted. The compliment sounded less jubilant than those he usually handed out and more honest for it.

Before Shouta could answer, Hizashi joined them. All Might was brushing earth from his quaking hands.

“How is Kamui?” Shouta asked.

“Fine, just needs about thirty hours of sleep,” Hizashi said with a grin. “You doing alright there, All Might?”

“Yes! I just, I… think I should probably take a breather, too.”

His voice was swaying now, straining ineffectively to keep his usual cadence and volume. Shouta pushed away the stray thought that he sounded familiar in a way he couldn’t place and exchanged a confused glance with Hizashi as they watched All Might stumble past them towards a small back alley.

“Yo, All Might!” Hizashi called, taking a few steps towards him. “Maybe get in one of those police cars down there? They could drive you to the hospital.”

All Might didn’t answer. He staggered and fell against a brick wall, clutching at his side. A cough ripped from his throat and blood painted the brown bricks and cobblestone ground. As Shouta and Hizashi darted forward, there was a sudden pop, like a balloon meeting a nail, and a cloud of dust enveloped All Might.

Shouta arrived by his side to see Yagi kneeling on the ground, drowning in the All Might costume.
With blood dripping down his lower lip, Yagi gave another wet cough, a treacherously familiar sound to Shouta’s ears. It took him a long moment to finally tear his gaze from the man cowering on the ground to turn it to Hizashi. Shouta found that he had the same look of uncomprehending shock on his face that he imagined was plastered over his own.

“What the fuck?” Shouta muttered.

“I can explain,” Yagi – All Might – rasped, voice faltering, raising one hand as if he feared he would have to divert a blow. The sleeve of his shirt fell back, revealing his bony arm, pooling at the crook of his elbow. “But we have to go somewhere private. Please, I can’t be seen like this.”

Hizashi was the first to shake off the surprise.

“My car,” he decided.

Clawing at the brick wall, All Might pulled himself to his feet, waiting for Hizashi to lead the way and then limped after him with his hand still covering his left. He walked hunched forward, shoulders hanging, his cape left to drag through the dust and grime on the cobblestone ground. Shouta found himself looking at the dirty hem as followed, tongue-tied.

Hizashi’s car was parked at the curb not far from the other end of the alley. With a beep of his key he opened up and All Might awkwardly folded his body into the backseat, drawing up his long legs to fit them behind the seats and moving to the middle so that both heroes could look at him as they filed into the front.

“This is what you wanted to talk to me about,” Shouta said blankly after he had slammed the door of the passenger side shut.

“Yes,” All Might muttered, brows drawn together, his elbows leaning on his pointy knees. “I don’t usually tell people. Only a few know, mostly out of necessity or because they found out like you did. But I was sure you are trustworthy and considering we, uhm...” He stopped himself, glancing briefly at Hizashi. “To be honest, I’d rather no one else would have found out. However, in your case, it would have only been fair.”

“So is this a transformation quirk?” Hizashi asked, turning in his seat.

“No.” All Might paused, thinking this over. “Maybe it kind of is now, but that’s not what it started out as. It was just what I looked like. When my body grew weaker, I learned to focus to adjust the size of my muscle and level of my strength.”

Again All Might hesitated, choked up more blood, a quiet little hiccup, and wiped it off with his wide sleeve. Then, gaze lowered, he drew the top part of his costume out from under his belt and pulled up the fabric. Shouta looked back to see a crater in his flesh. The whole left side of his skeletal frame was covered in cuts and scars and burns, running outwards from the central hole in tendrils. An image of the cracking support beam flashed unbidden through Shouta’s head.

“Ouch!” Hizashi hissed.

“You are pros, so I guess you know about All for One. I won, but it was not a clean victory, as you can see,” Yagi said, sounding as deflated as he looked. He let his shirt drop and tucked it back under the belt. “I can still activate my quirk, but it’s only for a time now.” He gritted his teeth. “I worked
the night – I usually can’t go for more than ten hours a day, I was pushing my limit. I couldn’t just let
the bridge drop, though.”

None of them spoke as All Might allowed this information to sink in. All Might wouldn’t have been
the first hero to be taken out of the game that Shouta had known by a long shot, nothing special in
that regard. However, Shouta realised he did not truly know a world without him. When All Might
had made his debut, Shouta had been eleven or twelve and for how much he was annoyed with what
All Might’s image had done for the perception of heroes, it had been a constant undercurrent and
counterpoint of his own career, too. Even Shouta may have defined his role as a pro differently if it
wasn’t for All Might.

What if people saw this, civilians, villains, hopeful young would-be pros? All Might broken down
into a sickly, perfectly ordinary man as a result of a villain’s attack, no less. That would be an
advertisement for villains as much as All Might’s existence was one against them.

He had always said that All Might’s persona was not healthy for the hero community in the long run
because no man could remain perfect forever, but he hadn’t expected to be proven right with such
brutal certainty. It was difficult to feel smug about it, too, watching All Might spit blood in the
backseat.

“You’re afraid if people knew, they would lose faith,” he said slowly. “If you could be hurt, then
who couldn’t the villains take down?”

All Might nodded his head.

“That’s why I can’t stop until someone takes my place. Otherwise, people will suffer. As long as I
can somehow do my job, I can’t let that happen.” He looked between them. “Can you please keep
this a secret?”

“Obviously,” Shouta said, staring ahead.

“I’m pretty sure even if we told on you, no one would believe us,” Hizashi added, turning the key in
the ignition.

Shouta watched All Might in the rear-view mirror, doubled over with his hand on his scarred side.
He tried to make out All Might’s face in Yagi’s. Now that he knew, he thought he saw remnants of it
under the dark shadows and behind the sharp edges, but he had to strain to find anything of it in the
raspy voice, the drooping shoulders and limbs devoid of tension. He should have felt like an idiot for
not recognising him, but they really were like night and day. He supposed there was a thread of All
Might’s needless optimism, readiness to help and good humour in Yagi, but he was a real person
whereas All Might had always distinctly seemed like some parody, a TV show’s idea of a superhero.

“So which one is the act?” Shouta asked tightly.

“Act?” All Might lifted his head.

“All Might or you?”

“I, er… neither, I guess.” He looked unsure. “I believe in what All Might stands for. There’s a little
acting, of course. I don’t think anyone sane really laughs at a disaster site, do they? But people can
use that sometimes. I’ve been taught you should smile when you save someone. They’ve been
through enough.”

Shouta wondered distantly whose wisdom that was.
“Where do you want me to drop you off, All Might?” Hizashi asked. “You sure you don’t wanna visit a doctor?”

It was good one of them still had their head in the game, Shouta thought. Hizashi was more reliable in that regard than people gave him credit for.

“Thank you, it’s fine… do you know the way to our apartment house?”

“Yeah, of course. You wanna hop off, too, Eraser?”

“No,” Shouta said simply.

They drove without speaking, which was something that should have been impossible with both Present Mic and All Might packed into one car. From the corner of his eyes, Shouta noticed All Might looking at him from time to time, but he didn’t react. What could he say to this? He understood why All Might had lied, but that didn’t mean that he hadn’t just taken away the person that Shouta had slowly grown accustomed to and started to feel comfortable with to replace him with this mutant amalgamation of two things that should not go together.

When they were home, All Might dragged himself out of the car and bowed towards it before he walked to the door. His cape was still cleaning the ground. Shouta and Hizashi watched him until the door had closed on him. Shouta kept silent.

“So what now? Back to the bridge? They probably have support enough now,” Hizashi asked, eventually, turning to him.

“I need a drink,” Shouta answered.

-  

“Oh, come on, Shouta! You look like someone threw your cat out the window!”

The pat Hizashi gave him almost made Shouta spill his sake. He scowled at him and took another sip. They had ended up in the first backstreet dive that they had found while Hizashi had complained that Shouta hadn’t even tried to look around his new home for a decent place to drink. Shouta’s answer that he actually wanted to sleep every once in a while hadn’t seemed to impress him.

“So you have a crush on All Might. You and half of Japan! It’s practically a national pastime.”

“I don’t have…”

Shouta stopped himself short. No, it was idiotic to deny it. He took a large gulp of his drink instead.

“Man, if anyone had told me I’d be saying those words a week ago, I’d have thought they must be insane,” Hizashi said, beaming as he emptied his glass.

“I’m glad you think this is funny,” Shouta gave back.

“It is a little,” Hizashi decided. “Other than the fact that he looks like he’s on his way out. I don’t think you get to have that kind of wound and still do stuff like his bridge adventure today.”

To that, Shouta could only nod his head. That was an odd realisation, too. All Might was apparently a better actor than Shouta had given him credit for; he’d thought that someone like that must be hiding something, but he had veered more in the direction of some dark secret rather than a debilitating illness.
How long until he broke, Shouta wondered, how long until that frail frame that hid within itself All Might had been used up to the last?

Yagi had always worked a lot. The question of whether that was smart, given his health, had come to Shouta’s mind before he had seen him carry bridges. Perhaps that part, then, was simply writ large now, yet so much else remained obscure.

“It’s not like he’s a different person than he was yesterday,” Hizashi ventured. “It just looks like that to us.”

“I don’t even know if Yagi is his actual name,” Shouta gave back.

“Then you have something to talk about next time you meet him,” Hizashi answered with a shrug.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Please let me briefly direct your attention to this awesome picture by ewebean showing Aizawa being a big damn hero earlier in this fic. Thank you again, ewebean!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Shouta came home drunk enough to collapse on the couch that night and in the morning, the muffled noise of the door slamming down the hall told him that All Might was gone. Thus, the sun had set on the day after All Might’s revelation by the time Shouta rang his doorbell.

It had never really occurred to him not to do so, though his pride pushed against the idea. Whatever else he had lied about, All Might had not faked his affection for Shouta – there would have been no benefit in doing that. And because Shouta could not easily shelf the feelings that had taken root against his will, either, there was no other sensible option.

He was greeted by a deflated All Might in another vastly oversized suit that made a whole lot more sense now that Shouta had some context.

“Aizawa.” All Might looked at him with wide eyes, halting a moment before he stepped hastily aside. “Please come in.”

His demeanour hadn’t changed, Shouta noticed. His expression was fraught by confusion and insecurity that seemed alien to the image of the Number One Hero and he carried himself with a lot less tension than he did when he was his alter ego.

“Are you feeling better?” Shouta asked as he closed the door behind himself. He wouldn’t be having any discussions about their relationship while All Might was mostly focused on his body breaking down.

Maybe he was also looking for an out.

“A bit. I overdid it, but I will be fine.”

Before he could talk himself out the door with some excuse, Shouta walked over to All Might’s couch and sat down. It was rude to invite himself further into the living room like that, but he didn’t much care because it was rude to kiss someone under your secret identity, too, and he didn’t want to have this conversation standing by the door. All Might followed him and sat down. There was distance of a couple feet between them.

“I wish I’d actually gotten to tell you before you found out,” All Might said after a moment, the first to speak. “But I was late, I…” He heaved a sigh. “I try not to make friends as Yagi at all, since I have to lie so much, but I got carried away. You were nice and I really didn’t think I was in any danger of something more happening between us, the way I look now. I didn’t see it coming almost up until you kissed me and when I did, I was too selfish to stop.”

Shouta considered him briefly, wondering if he was fishing for compliments. No, he decided. Especially in comparison to All Might, he wasn’t handsome at first glance. Sickness never was.
There was still a lot to like once you discounted the marks of the injury that ate him up from the inside. There was no denying it, Shouta had been attracted to him almost from the start, even if All Might thought that impossible.

“Are you actually called ‘Yagi’?” Shouta asked, remembering his conversation with Hizashi.

“Yes. Toshinori Yagi. Barely anyone knows All Might’s name, so I thought it was fine if I just used my real one.”

It made sense, Shouta supposed. All Might didn’t really have a civilian life that anyone knew about and Yagi came out when he couldn’t be a hero anymore. Each of them only needed one name. He wondered if there had ever been a balance or if there hadn’t really been a Yagi before All for One. With the workload All Might was known to take on, maybe he simply hadn’t paid attention to anything outside his hero duties at all before his body forced him to.


Put on the spot, All Might looked deeply unhappy.

“You don’t like All Might and I know that, so –”

“Obviously I was wrong about All Might because I lacked some crucial information,” Shouta said impatiently. “Or, I guess, I knew much more about All Might than I was aware of. Now,” he gestured at All Might’s emaciated form, “things have changed.”

Looking down at himself, All Might gave a wry, humourless smile.

“I never thought that this would count as a point in my favour,” he said.

“This, as in, what? You?”

The other man remained silent.

“If you want anything to happen between us, you will have to be honest,” Shouta told him. “I don’t demand you tell me anything as things are now, that’s not my place. It would be if I were to become your partner, though.”

All Might coughed once into the crook of his elbow, leaving red spots on the shirt, and looked startled.

“You would still consider...”

“Under that condition,” Shouta warned.

For a moment, All Might hesitated. However, he let his shoulders sink.

“Yes. I mean... you really should have heard all of this before I kissed you. It’s the reason I don’t get involved with people. You just...” He shook his head. “Not that I mean to say it was your fault. It wasn’t.”

“You certainly go to great lengths to protect your identity,” Shouta noted. “You could have gotten hurt toying with that knife-wielding idiot I pulled off of you.”

“Well, that’s why I’m grateful you came to save me before I had to think of some more complicated way to get out of the situation,” All Might said with a small smile.
It did explain the strange unaffectedness after the attack, Shouta thought, slotting the information into its proper place. Someone who had faced All for One was bound to be unimpressed by a common robber.

All Might grasped his own hands tightly.

“Should start,” he said. “I didn’t lie about my health. I don’t have a stomach anymore and my lung will have to be removed. However, that won’t fix the damage done to the rest of my respiratory system. The operations had their own complications. I’m getting worse. In fact – you know Sir Nighteye?”

“Of course.”

All Might frowned at his lap.

“He said I’ll die in three years. In a fight, at least... not in a hospital bed.” That brought a look of grim determination to his face. “If he looks that far ahead, his predictions can be off so maybe there’s time for me to change the future. I don’t know. I can’t promise. I just know he’s never been wrong before.”

All Might fell silent and Shouta let the information settle. Sir Nighteye was a seer with an exceptional success rate who could seem almost mythical despite the biological origin of the quirk; however, he was only human and fate did not exist in Shouta’s world. With a slow nod he prompted All Might to go on.

The man only looked at him in confusion again.

“I thought that would be the dealbreaker,” he admitted.

“Regardless of Sir Nighteye’s quirk, I don’t believe in predetermination,” Shouta said. “And I think more importantly... you were Yagi to me before and no offence, I think I already got used to the idea that you might not live to ninety. I don’t like it, but I’m a pro. I can’t promise you not to kill myself on the job, either.”

Life was fragile, he had come to terms with that. Shouta couldn’t say whether a villain would smear him across the pavement tomorrow or if a flower pot falling off a twenty story building would take him out. He had come too late to too many incidents, had pulled too many mangled corpses out of too many mountains of wreckage to think the next day was always guaranteed.

All Might turned his gaze to look out the window.

“You’re right, I guess we’re all playing fast and loose with our lives in this line of work. Still, you’ll always be a hero, but in the end, Yagi is all I am,” he said quietly. “The quirk I have... well, this is a secret for obvious reasons, but I trust you.” He sighed. “My quirk can be passed on. I won’t die with it, I want a successor like I was one who can push it to even greater heights than I have. When it has left me, I’ll be quirkless like I was before. I’ll be without any power and I have no idea if I will still manage to twist my fate then.”

For someone who had seemed like the most ordinary person in the world before when he had just been Yagi, All Might sure knew how to pull out the surprises. Shouta had never before heard of a quirk that was transferable, but considering all the odd shapes they could take, it was no more strange than many other quirks he had encountered.

“So? That’s just your strength gone,” Shouta said, surprised All Might didn’t seem to see that himself. “That’s not you gone. It takes more than just raw muscle to work up the nerve to hold up a
bridge that could collapse on you.”

That was not to mention a lot of the other feats that All Might had done in his lifetime. Even Shouta would admit, quietly, to himself, that All Might was exceptional.

The skinny man lifted his head to look at Aizawa with a careful smile.

“That’s nice of you to say. I hope so.”

“It’s not nice, it’s true.” Shouta regarded him for a moment. “Anything else?”

“Ah... no, not really. That’s all. Maybe that, uh, I’d make a bad secretary because I actually hate paperwork.”

He gave a strained chuckle.

Shouta remained quiet. There was a lot he hadn’t known, to a point that the person who sat here and the one he had kissed on their movie night really were too different to call them the same still. On the other hand, now that the puzzle pieces were fitted together, he realised that the incongruencies were not as big as he had previously thought. The lines that bound Yagi and All Might showed brighter in his mind as he allowed himself to listen and try to find one person in the other.

He extended his hand towards All Might – Yagi, he amended in his mind. He was still Yagi. When he grabbed Shouta’s hand with his expression full of hesitant hope, it didn’t matter so much that he could pump himself up to All Might because when it came to their relationship, he seemed to be honestly anxious, doubtful and drawn to Shouta nevertheless. All Might’s ego, always Shouta’s biggest gripe with him, had obviously long been tempered.

Pulling him close, he kissed him again. It didn’t taste too much like blood and so he pushed his tongue into All Might’s mouth and noticed his large hands scrambling at his sides.

This felt as good as he remembered it.

Toshinori broke the kiss after a long moment to draw in air, then turned away and coughed, winced, and coughed some more. Shouta waited for him to recover.


“Did you go to see a doctor after we left?” Shouta asked.

Yagi nodded his head.

“I had trouble breathing in the night. It’s okay, though, I just need to take it easy for a couple of days. Transforming should be fine, but no hero work,” Toshinori said sheepishly. “My doctor’s also been looking to prepone my surgery.”

“For someone who is trying to avoid a death sentence, you’re very irresponsible with your health,” Shouta said. It was not an accusation, but a statement.

“There are still things more important than whether I live.”

“In that instance with the bridge, we had no choice but you,” Shouta admitted. “But usually there’s other heroes who can tag in if you’re not at your best. If you want something to happen between us, you can’t expect me to sit by and watch you burn yourself up needlessly.”

“No,” Yagi said, reluctantly but with a nod. “I would have a responsibility to you, too.”
Why that responsibility did not exist to his own survival instincts, Shouta didn’t know, but a little bit of that tendency needed to exist to become a pro in the first place, he supposed. Still, there was a difference between necessary risks and reckless abandon.

Shouta placed another brief kiss on his lips.

“Our bedrooms are next to each other. Bang against the wall if you can’t breathe tonight,” he told him.

Yagi nodded his head.

He brought Shouta to the door and made to say something just as Shouta opened it, hesitated, and finally just pulled him into a hug, his long arms squeezing him until Shouta couldn’t breathe, either.

Chapter End Notes

Because of Erasermight Week and NaNoWriMo coming both at once I probably won't be able to post a chapter in the next one or two weeks, but there'll be eight Erasermight one-shots from me.
They had their first date that Saturday evening, which didn’t feel a lot different than the other times they had met up, making Shouta wonder how much his subconscious had worked towards this before. Yagi cooked for him and they talked about the investigations into the robot attacks while the food simmered on the stove and Yagi spoke a little more freely than Shouta was used to, no doubt motivated by the fact that he didn’t always have to recheck every sentence to make sure it was something the secretary would know about.

With their plates balanced in their laps, they sat down to watch the news on Yagi’s big, pillow-choked couch. As a political talk show discussing the minutiae of hero registration took over, Shouta saw Yagi glancing at him from the corner of his eyes and smile sheepishly when he noticed he’d been detected. Yagi leaned over to him.

Depositing his empty plate on the couch table, Shouta grabbed Yagi’s loose tie and pulled him into a kiss. This one didn’t taste too much like iron, just like the curry they had eaten. Yagi’s hands settled on Shouta’s sides and Shouta tugged Yagi even closer, pleased with how easily he let himself be led him, like a dog on a leash.

It took a moment or two, but Yagi opened his mouth, their kiss growing sloppy and eager. Shouta teased his fingers along Yagi’s thigh. When they brushed up the side where the scar was, Yagi shifted away from his hand, so he let it run over his back instead.

Yagi separated to take a deep breath and chuckled, without comment, just a small sound of delight. Shouta pressed another brief kiss on his lips before he moved to the thin neck, flicking his tongue against the skin. Yagi’s breath caught as he mouthed against his throat.

His broad hands nudged Shouta backwards.

“If you continue like that, you’ll make me want to go all the way,” he warned him.

“So?” Shouta asked.

They had known each other for quite some time. Maybe they hadn’t been on many real dates, but they’d gotten to know each other and trying to keep a bridge from crushing a whole residential subdivision with the weight of several hundred tons of concrete and the dead bodies of those on top was a shared experience if there ever was one.

Yagi seemed to consider his succinct one-word argument and lowered his head in assent.

“I still have some power left over,” he said.

“Are you going to…” Shouta gestured with his hand, unsure what to call it, seeing as it was not in fact a transformation quirk, “be All Might?”

“That would be much better, wouldn’t it?”

Shouta didn’t think so, but from the nervous expression on his face it didn’t take a genius to see that Yagi wasn’t going to be comfortable the way he was.

“I don’t care either way,” he said evenly. “Do what you like best.”

Yagi backed off a little and closed his eyes, his shoulders lowered. Then, he grew. It was
instantaneous, not much less jarring than when he had collapsed into himself in a cloud of smoke. Suddenly, he took up twice as much space as before and Shouta found himself looking up, dwarfed by the giant man in a shirt fitted tightly over bulging muscles. Yagi grinned at him.

“Would you like to go to the bedroom?” he asked. He didn’t speak the way All Might usually did, like he was trying to let a whole stadium hear, but his voice resonated differently when his chest was blown out like this, deeper and fuller and more steady.

Shouta got up and let Yagi lead the way, Shouta looking at his broad back. His bedroom was small just like Shouta’s, floor-space mostly covered by a king-sized bed with one big pillow. Now that he was fluffed up, his awkwardness had vanished. Shouta found himself grabbed by the waist and then gently eased onto the bed before Yagi himself sank down on the mattress next to him to kiss him.

Was it confidence or show? Both? Yagi was grinning the way he did at victims; the way he did, apparently, to make others feel better. Looking at Yagi now, Shouta felt his old exasperation flicker in his head. Maybe he shouldn’t have allowed him to hide behind his hero persona after all. Yes, he looked like an ancient Roman statue brought to life, but as Shouta was carefully pushed down on the mattress, cradled in Yagi’s arms the size of young tree-trunks, he felt like Yagi was going through another well-trained act.

He had to get him off balance, then. Shouta did not lie on his back but sat up, one hand tousling Yagi’s hair a little; he liked it standing in all directions, but it tended to look more orderly when he was big.

“Yagi,” he said, with a thin smile, “I have a question.”

“Of course!”

“Can I fuck you tonight?”

That had done it. Yagi backed off a little and looked at him with surprise.

“Oh, well… yes,” he managed. “Sure.”

“Only if you want to.”

“I do. It’s just not usually what people are interested in when they are interested in me.”

So Shouta had been slotted into some pre-configured program as he’d expected – not one for a large audience this time, but one for the kind of lover who’d end up in bed with All Might, no doubt full of adoration and expecting a flawless performance of strength and gentle dominance. Shouta, for his part, just wanted to have sex with a man he liked and if Yagi spent his time in All Might mode, it’d be damn hard to concentrate on that.

“I’m not ‘people’,” Shouta reminded him as he kissed him.

If he could have had his way without making Yagi uncomfortable, he probably would have picked small Yagi over this version. The sensation of being completely enveloped in his partner’s embrace like this was odd. He tried not to concentrate on how small it made him feel and instead petted along his rock-hard muscle and thick biceps and, experimentally, pressed another kiss to Yagi’s throat. The shiver it resulted in told him that this body was not so different from the other one after all.

Yagi took off Shouta’s pullover, leaning back a little to admire his naked chest, hands slowly brushing over his shoulders and down his arms.
“You are very handsome,” he said, his cheeks a touch pink.

Shouta didn’t doubt that someone like All Might had gotten much more attractive people in his bed and he also didn’t care because Yagi looked at him with affection and his pants were tented, so Shouta was having the right effect on him regardless of who had come before.

“Is it worth it, complimenting you back?” Shouta asked as he opened Yagi’s belt. “I know there are hundreds of DVDs with bleached-blond bodybuilders pretending to be you lining the walls of every sex shop in the nation, so you’re probably aware people think you’re good-looking.”

Groaning, Yagi dropped his forehead against Shouta’s shoulder.

“Don’t remind me.”

“Regretting your fame?” Shouta said with a smirk as he traced the muscles of his impossibly broad back.

“It’s nice they’re so… enthusiastic and they’re not hurting anyone, after all,” Yagi said, grimacing as he kicked off his pants. “Still, it’s awkward.”

Shouta took care of the rest of his clothes, too, so that left only Yagi’s shirt. When Shouta started peeling it off, Yagi didn’t resist, though it would have been too much to say he looked happy about it.

It was impossible not to notice the giant scar that covered his left, so Shouta didn’t pretend that he didn’t give it a look. He had only seen it for a moment before, looking over his shoulder in the car.

The skin was twisted by burn marks, incisions and stitches, ruined by the attack just as much as by the attempts to knit the flesh back together and repair what was underneath. The way the lines of the surgical scars on top of the injury ran, they looked like the dark mirror of a drawing of a flower in bloom.

“It looks pretty bad, doesn’t it?” Yagi asked quietly.

“It looks like it hurt a lot,” Shouta answered matter-of-factly.

Then he leaned in to kiss his chest.

Yagi felt like a furnace in his arms, radiating comfortable warmth as he loomed over him; he wondered if using his quirk to power up like this created some heat of itself because he didn’t look feverish. The thought was chased away by the feeling of Yagi taking his cock in hand while he mouthed against his shoulder. Shouta reached down to cup his ass, which was hard with muscle, perfectly sculpted.

“Do you have lube? Condoms?” Shouta asked, hoping he wouldn’t have to get up and walk over to his place.

“I think I do, but they’re older… I hope they’re still good.”

From his nightstand, Yagi produced a tube and a small cardboard box, checking the dates and nodding his head. As he joined Shouta again, gathering him up in his arms, he dropped both on the bed next to them were they remained forgotten for a little while as Shouta enjoyed rutting against the ridges of his stomach while they kissed. Finally, Shouta pushed against his chest to make him roll off.
As he moved between Yagi’s legs, he felt like he was bracketed by two pillars. Everything about him was out of proportion with a normal human being; even his cock would have looked huge on any other man whereas it simply seemed fitting on him, though in regards to possible future encounters Shouta was grateful that at least it didn’t outpace ordinary humanity as much as the rest of him.

Yagi pushed himself up on his elbow to get a better look at him just as Shouta leaned down to give his cock a few flicks with his tongue before he spread some lube on his fingers, rubbing them briefly to warm it. The muscle in Yagi’s legs flexed as he began massaging the skin around his hole and Shouta pressed his mouth against one thigh and bit until he left teeth marks. Maybe there was something to be said for this body; he did feel a small rush of power as he pushed his finger in, watching the ridiculously cut muscle in his stomach tense and the relax again as Yagi breathed out. All Might was largely untouchable to the world, but Shouta was going to have him writhing under him.

He placed another kiss on Yagi’s thigh, sucking until he left a red spot on his skin as he moved his finger inside him. Yagi chuckled.

“I didn’t think you liked making marks that much.”

“Do you mind having some?”

“No, just keep them under the collar. Otherwise I’ll get a thousand questions during my next interview,” he said with a lopsided grin.

“I think this is far down enough,” Shouta answered, sucking another love bite into the skin over his hipbone to make a point.

While they were talking, Shouta added a second finger, feeling Yagi’s shovel-sized hand card very gently through his hair. He was tight, but gave himself to Shouta easily, never seizing up more than instinctively and the smile on his face was stupidly affectionate, a notch down from the usual beam for the cameras. Shouta liked this one a lot more.

He kissed the tip of his cock again and Yagi gave a shuddering breath.

“I’m fine, Aizawa,” he said. “I want to… uh, we can go on.”

If Shouta had been a slightly meaner person, he may have asked Yagi to tell him exactly what he wanted, and since he was not exactly a nice guy, maybe he would at some point. For now, however, he was fine with simply seeing the crimson he had painted on Yagi’s cheeks.

He pulled out his fingers and gave himself a couple more strokes to get back to full hardness, pulling the condom on and shifting to position himself. As he sank into him, Yagi was holding on to his shoulder, cupping it rather than gripping in earnest, which could have been dangerous for Shouta’s bones. Shouta closed his eyes, enjoying how he was enveloped by his heat while Yagi’s massive thighs pressed against his sides. He ran his hands up the perfectly built body with its massive, frightening blemish, not dodging the scarred skin.

“Ohay?” he asked Yagi, opening his eyes again.

“This form can take a little pain,” Yagi pointed out with a chuckle.

“Great, but we’re not in a battle right now.”

Shouta didn’t move and Yagi pulled him a little closer with his legs, making him breath out loud as
he bottomed out inside of him.

“Yes, it’s okay,” Yagi said, smiling.

He grasped his hips more to anchor himself rather than to keep Yagi in place, since he really had no chance to keep him still if Yagi didn’t do it by himself. His pace built slowly, steadily, pushing into the body that was so open for him.

The first thing to notice that made Shouta’s toes curl were the noises that Yagi made. With every movement of his hips, Yagi gave a quiet moan and grew louder as Shouta put his back into it. The choked quality of some of the reactions told Shouta he was trying to keep his mouth shut and failing quite miserably. Shouta wasn’t helping, leaning down to his chest (the highest he could reach from this angle) to suck at his remaining nipple and bite more blemishes into his skin whenever Yagi had successfully managed to swallow a sound. He was also quite fond of the red colour that spread out over his chest to his hairline and the way his hands pawed at Shouta’s back with some desperation, pulling him closer.

As he looked between them, he noticed that Yagi had gone soft again. Since he was obviously enjoying himself, anyway, Shouta didn’t think much about it. Bodies were different, this one especially, and not everyone stayed rock-hard just from being fucked. However, he wanted Yagi to come with him. As he sat up, wrapping one arm around one of his thick thighs and taking his cock in hand with the other, he earned another drawn-out groan.

At first, it had seemed to Shouta that they had been playing one rhythm, working up to the same peak, but when he could feel his own arousal threatening to overwhelm him, Yagi had only just grown a little stiff in his hand again.

“You have a lot of stamina,” he said, breathless.

At this rate, there was no way he wouldn’t finish before him. A bit of a slight to his pride, but Shouta didn’t want to make it a contest, either. He could suck Yagi off to get him to finish or finger him, there were other ways.

“I guess so!”

The unwarranted hastiness in his tone tripped Shouta up, made his movement falter, and the guilt that spread over Yagi’s face as Shouta looked up proved him right. He halted, feeling his own blood cool. This habit of hide and seek that Yagi had was not fun.

“Talk to me,” he demanded, annoyance clear in his tone. “What is going on?”

Yagi shifted on the blanket and seemed desperate for something else but Shouta’s face to look at.

“I haven’t slept with anyone since I got the wound. I didn’t realise how much I would have to concentrate on staying this size while… well, you’re very good at making it hard to focus.” He smiled nervously. “It seems if I can’t let go some, it’s more difficult to stay, uh, excited. I really like this, though!”

Idiot, Shouta thought. He didn’t say it because Yagi looked like he didn’t need another metaphorical slap over the head with a newspaper and you didn’t speak like that when you had your cock buried in someone’s ass, anyway. It was still true.

“So relax,” he said slowly.

“But…”
“I liked you as Yagi first. Don’t be illogical – your body doesn’t bother me. If I know you’re distracted, though, I’m not going to enjoy myself. Maybe some of your admirers would be satisfied with an All Might sex doll, but I am not.”

Reluctantly, Yagi nodded his head. He closed his eyes and, with a sudden, quick puff of smoke, he sank bank into his now natural form. It was supremely odd to feel the change on his skin himself, since Shouta still had his cock inside him; the spasm of Yagi’s muscles went through his whole body, too, making him wince.

Yagi looked damaged in front of him, with his tiny waist and every rib pressing against the skin as if begging to be counted. He had muscle still, but it was lean and wiry. Yagi was looking at the ceiling.

“Good,” Shouta just said.

He had shrunken enough that Shouta could actually position Yagi’s body, push his legs up and make his spine curl a bit so he could reach up to place a kiss on his lips.

Yagi squeezed his eyes shut and gently knocked their foreheads together. Perhaps he held Shouta close because he didn’t want to be seen splayed out in front of him, but Shouta allowed that much hiding.

This body was weaker, but infinitely more responsive. Yagi met him now; his finger scrambled over Shouta’s back and his legs tightened around his waist and it seemed he barely had to touch himself in time with Shouta’s strokes to overtake him. His hips stuttered and his heel dug into the back off Shouta’s thigh as Shouta felt the orgasm course through him.

He dropped his head into the warm crook of Yagi’s neck, tasting salt as he kissed him. A couple more deep thrusts that shook the body under him and Shouta spent himself, grasping the sheets and then collapsing against Yagi’s body.

For a while, he didn’t get up, feeling supremely comfortable tangled in Yagi’s long, thin limbs, surrounded by his warmth in all ways. However, the body under him was hard with edges of bone and Shouta eventually rolled off, pulling out. He tied the condom into a knot and took a tissue to roll it up in.

“That felt amazing,” Yagi said and the happiness in his voice made it difficult for Shouta to work up anger for his dishonesty.

“You need to speak more,” Shouta said, anyway, turning to him. “You don’t seem to have an issue with that most of the time – All Might practically never shuts up. I assume at some point your lungs may become a problem, or I press on your injury the wrong way, anything. I don’t care, though, I’m not going to be stupid and get mad over that. These things only become a nuisance if you make me fish for them.”

“Sorry,” Yagi said, appropriately contrite.

Shouta pressed a kiss to the sharp cheekbone before he fell back against the sheets. His home was a wall away, but he was tired and warm and satisfied and Yagi settled in next to him, which to him was a silent permission of his presence here. The unasked question was answered in full when Yagi put an arm around his middle. Shouta placed a hand on his twig-like wrist and turned his head, falling asleep with his face buried in Yagi’s soft blond hair.
Chapter 11

“I’ve never been here before,” Shouta said, as he let himself fall down onto the scuffed cushion of the chair, which sank deeply under his weight. “I don’t think I ever even noticed the place.”

“It’s easy to miss,” Toshinori agreed as he sat down opposite of him, trying to accommodate his long, thin legs under the rickety table.

He’d become Toshinori in Shouta’s mind a couple of weeks ago, after their first night together, and now when he saw posters of All Might in the streets his mind was slowly getting used to the fact that this was also his boyfriend. Toshinori punching out giants, supporting crumbling buildings and talking into a bouquet of microphones being shoved in his face after yet another daring rescue or victory; and Toshinori who would fall asleep in Shouta’s bed with Momo curled on his chest, who came over to watch a movie in the evening and talk shop or cooked for them when his illness forced him out of the office early. The streak of kindness that ran through his being could be found in both sides.

They were starting to get used to each other, but because all that separated them was one wall and a few steps down the hall, they had sort of skipped over the whole dating thing. Shouta was completely fine with that. He’d never liked the codified one-two-three-sex rules of the game or forced conversations in cafés.

However, Toshinori had managed to convince him it wasn’t so bad to leave the house every once in a while, since they hardly ever got out when it wasn’t for their jobs. It helped with Shouta’s motivation that the restaurant they visited was just down the street in a small hole in the wall. Hidden behind a door that even Shouta had had to duck through was a cramped, comfortably warm Korean place with white lanterns dangling from the ceiling and too many potted plants. Only a few tables were filled, mostly with quiet men in suits, alone or in groups of two or three.

He had just picked up the menu when his phone buzzed in his pocket. Hizashi’s name blinked on the screen and Shouta dragged his thumb across.

“Your expertise is needed!” the voice at the other end said, loud enough to make Toshinori look up, too. Shouta had long stopped making the mistake of holding the phone too close to his ear when Hizashi called, so at least he escaped with his eardrum intact.

“For what?” he asked, without much enthusiasm. Now that he was here, he didn’t feel like interrupting the date.

“Big robots. The police investigation turned up the workshop. They want the two of us there because we’ve been around the things before. I hear your most favourite hero is supposed to be contacted, too…”

Shouta did his best to ignore the tone because he could not actually punch Hizashi through the phone.

“They can stop that, he knows now.”

Hizashi made a long ‘oh’ sound.

“Well, I didn’t know I was interrupting the lovebirds,” he said, quiet enough for Shouta to have to hold the phone closer after all. Hizashi was probably trying to make sure that no bystanders could connect the word ‘hero’ and the figure that sat in front of Shouta, if they happened to listen in.
Despite his exhausting volume, Hizashi was not an idiot. It really did make it a bit worse sometimes, though, that he knew exactly what he was doing and did it anyway.

“We’ll be over. Text me the address of the meeting place.”

“Roger. See ya!” he shouted.

The connection was cut and Shouta lowered the phone. Toshinori was watching him attentively. He had already grabbed his jacket.

“Did you get that?” Shouta asked, as he forwarded Hizashi’s message with the address to Toshinori’s phone.

“Hard not to,” Toshinori said with a smile. “They have a trail, that’s great! Let’s go!”

Together, they hastened out of the restaurant again, Toshinori waving quickly at the waitress, telling her they’d be back tomorrow.

“Do you even have time left today?” Shouta asked as they stepped into the cold night air. “If you’re not around, they’ll have to call in other heroes who can handle the big guys.”

“It’ll be fine,” Toshinori said, which was what he always said and since Shouta had to accept the fact that he was a grown man he had to let him get away with it. Besides, as much intel as Hizashi and him might be able to provide, All Might was their trump card against the robots.

“I just need my suit and then we can go,” Toshinori added.

Since they’d only walked down the street, Shouta didn’t have his goggles or capture weapon, either. Together they went up the stairs and split before their doors.

“I’ll meet you by the supermarket parking lot?” Toshinori asked. “You could come with me. I will make it clearer when I’m about to jump this time…”

After a moment of stubborn hesitation, Shouta nodded his head. The parking lot would be a more inconspicuous starting point than All Might climbing out of a window here and his flight-like jump was the fastest way to get to the rendezvous point. Someone who had the ability to create giant robots shouldn’t be left unchecked for longer than necessary for any reason, not even Shouta’s pride.

It didn’t mean he had to like this, but he did see it was logical.

When he arrived on the parking lot, it had started to rain. Shouta stood by the edge, looking out over the drab greyscale that the early evening had left the place in. It would be dark soon and that always made rescue work more of a hassle than it already was; without an appropriate quirk, it was harder to see people, and the loss of light meant it was much more difficult to keep them calm.

Something hit the floor next to him hard, splashing his pant legs with water. He frowned at Toshinori now standing in the puddle next to him and giving an apologetic smile.

“Are you ready?”

“As much as I’ll ever be,” Shouta muttered as he stepped up to Toshinori.

“How would you like me to carry you?” Toshinori asked.
Apparently, he had learned from the reaction he had gotten last time. Good.

“Anyway that you don’t drop me. But if you carry me bridal style in front of Hizashi, I’m breaking up with you.”

Toshinori laughed.

“Understood!” he said. “Although if I have to swoop in to save you, I can’t promise I won’t.”

He leaned down a little and Shouta put his arm around Toshinori’s giant neck. Toshinori closed one arm around Shouta’s middle, holding him tight to himself, and shot up into the air.

The rain hit Shouta in the face as they were catapulted up by Toshinori’s muscular legs and he squeezed his sensitive eyes shut as the wind rushed into his face. Instinct made him tighten the grip on Toshinori, but he knew he may just as well have let go completely. Toshinori’s arm could not have been more secure if it had been a steel beam welded around his middle.

Curiosity finally urged Shouta to peer downwards just as they had reached the zenith of Toshinori’s jump and descended in a sloping curve. The city was laid out like a tapestry painted with lights beneath them, framed at the horizon by a purple sky above a skyline that would never let it turn truly dark and which blotted out all the stars with its neon shine. Even as the city rushed towards him in a haze of cold rain, it was nothing but magnificent.

He counted the jumps Toshinori needed to cross to their meeting point; all in all, he covered several miles in four, landing on flat rooftops when necessary, and finally in a small backstreet a hundred metres or so away from where Shouta saw a collection of police cars as they fell, their red lights lined up at the curb. They were more noticeable here in the office-and-warehouse district at the edge of the city, which was a dark blotch compared to the entertainment districts and residential areas at this time of night.

“I would have thought you would make a dramatic entrance,” Shouta said as Toshinori gently sat him down.

“Well, I usually do, but I thought you’d get angry at me if I did it while carrying you.”

Behind the coils of his capture weapon, Shouta hid the hint of a smile. The overly blunt mannerisms of All Might made him forget sometimes that Toshinori did have a pretty good read on him.

Together, they strode down the road past rows of office buildings. Some entrance areas were dark, in some he still saw receptionists under fluorescent lights staring at screens. A few windows in the upper floors were also lit, but most were dead eyes looking over the street.

Hizashi was waiting by the police cars, Cementoss standing by his side. One of the police officers, an unassuming man with a kind face topped with a hat, smiled at All Might as they approached.

“Ah, there you are,” he said.

He was lacking the awe most members of the service usually showed the number one hero and instead Shouta heard familiarity in his voice. All Might beamed at him.

“I didn’t know you were part of the investigation, Tsukauchi!”

“I wasn’t, really, but since you are the lynchpin of our attacking force, I was called in,” he said, shaking hands with him.
“This is Detective Tsukauchi. We’ve worked together on several cases,” All Might said by way of explanation, turning to his pro hero colleagues.

Tsukauchi lifted his hand and nodded at them before glancing over his shoulder.

“I’m only a relative newcomer to these proceedings myself. Detective Watanabe leads this investigation. We should go talk to him.”

Though Watanabe had busied himself with something in his car, he seemed to have waited for this cue and put down whatever he’d been playing with to slap the door shut and walk over.

“We managed to track the signals that were controlling the robots to a warehouse out here,” he told them. “It’s registered to a construction company that seems to be nothing but a name. At least there were no proper records aside from some bare necessities to do with business taxes. Old building plans from six year ago show the warehouse has two floors and a basement, but of course we don’t know if it has been modified.” He looked between them. “Cementoss should work with the police force on securing the area so nothing can slip out. Eraserhead and Present Mic will no doubt be very helpful in detaining whatever human suspects we encounter. As for you, All Might, we need you to be our primary weapon against the robots themselves.”

Shouta thought that the man looked rather smug to be commanding heroes, especially All Might, and Toshinori indulged him with a grin and a quick salute. Shouta didn’t know where inside himself he found the patience to handle these things. As for himself, he simply shrugged his assent.

“What about security?” he asked.

“Considering the kind of tech knowledge they are obviously working with, we have very slim hopes of getting in undetected,” Tsukauchi said. “Therefore, it’s probably our best bet to strike swiftly instead and hope it leaves them scrambling for a while.”

“That sounds like a good plan!” Toshinori said warmly. “Is there anything else?”

Watanabe shook his head and Shouta untucked an end of his capture weapon as he followed him down the road.
The plan was decent, but their target’s alarm system was better. Of course, there was little to hide their approach, anyway. The parking lot stretching between the backside of a row of office buildings and the warehouse where normal companies would have handled loading and unloading goods was a wind-swept, empty space lit brightly by fluorescent lamps.

It took ten feet of them stepping into plain view of the concrete box before a groan and rattle signalled the opening of a garage door big enough to let a truck through. Instead of a car, however, they found themselves faced with a robot. It was smaller than its predecessors that Shouta had seen, but it had saw blades for hands that sprang to life with an ear-splitting whirr which made it impressive nonetheless.

“I must ask you all to step back a little!” Toshinori shouted over the din, spreading his arms and grinning as if he was trying to make room for some starlet walking through a crowd. You could almost believe he hadn’t been surprised, had Shouta not seen the brief twitch around his mouth when the door had clattered open.

Behind them, stone crackled and cracked and a wall pulled up between the police officers on one side and the heroes on the other. Cementoss lifted his hand off the ground.

“I can keep whatever they want to throw outside at bay and the police makes sure no one runs away. They’ll probably double down on defence, though!” he called.

“We will have a look at the warehouse!” Shouta decided.

As the robot descended on All Might, Hizashi and Shouta shot sideways. The door through which the robot had come was still left open, which made sense. When both Cementoss and All Might were on the call, you might as well leave it since walls were not going to protect you for much longer. Still, Hizashi and him were not of the variety that could part concrete with ease, so Shouta grabbed Hizashi’s elbow before he could barrel inside to make sure they wouldn’t be trapped.

In the darkness laid an empty warehouse in shades and outlines. The ground of what must have been the second floor Watanabe had spoken off had been broken through and mostly removed, though jagged edges of stone with beams sticking out of them were still clinging to the wall where the room’s ceiling must had once been. A metal staircase ended in the air, leading nowhere.

Instead of any kind of storage, the walls were lined with large mounts and scaffolding. Shouta imagined that this was where the bigger robots had been propped up before they were deployed.

An explosion behind them suddenly threw the large, empty room into stark orange light. The bright burst revealed a trap door in the ground, concealed by darkness before but not particularly hard to spot now. Shouta understood that, too. If anyone had come in through the door, the robots along the walls would have been enough of a giveaway that something which needed thorough investigation was going on.

He turned around, watching Toshinori flip away from the burning metal husk and then stamping on his smouldering mantle. He gave a thumbs-up to Cementoss before he strode towards Shouta and Hizashi. Despite a good effort to hide it, Shouta saw that he was limping. Blood blackened the blue on the leg of his costume. The saws had gotten him in the left calf.

“Are you alright?” Shouta asked, frowning at the wound.
“Of course! Let’s push further ahead!” Toshinori called. However, despite his enthusiasm, he did halt at the door. “Did you see any more mechanical buddies waiting for us, my friends? Or another way to give us an unpleasant welcome?”

It was gratifying to Shouta that Toshinori did not actually charge in with as little foresight as it often seemed.

“No, but it doesn’t mean there aren’t any. Trapdoor is in the middle of the room,” Hizashi answered.

With a nod, Toshinori took two steps into the hall, halted, then went on. Shouta made sure to follow directly in his footsteps, the soles of his boots spreading Toshinori’s blood, Hizashi close behind him. Unlike Toshinori, they could not tank a robot to the face quite so easily, so it was best to simply keep back while he prepared to take the brunt of a nasty surprise.

There was no handle on the trap door, so Toshinori jumped up into the air then came down hard with his heel. The heavy metal bent under his foot and one side rose, warped, just enough for Toshinori to push his fingers into the gap between the thick metal slab and the ground and pull the trap door open.

Something cracked underneath, giving a metallic screech. Shouta figured whatever clever mechanism had controlled the door was now capitulating before Toshinori’s blunt brutality.

Toshinori put the door aside and they all looked down into a black hole, then at each other. Hizashi reached for his belt and shone a flashlight into the darkness, but the light revealed nothing, a white cone touching only more black shadows.

“Don’t jump,” Shouta said, glancing at Toshinori.

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pair of handcuffs a police officer had handed him on the way, pulling off one end of his capture weapon with the other hand. Quickly, he tied the band around the handcuffs and then lowered the capture weapon foot by foot, keeping an eye on how much give he had to grant it by counting the times he moved his hand on the bindings.

“Ah – fishing for information!” Toshinori said and Shouta rolled his eyes at him.

There was a quiet sound of metal against stone.

“About twelve feet deep,” he said.

“I can take us down,” Toshinori answered. “My body absorbs landing hard better than yours.”

Again, Shouta was picked up by Toshinori, Hizashi holding on to his other arm, and they jumped. Shouta folded back his legs so he wouldn’t hit his feet on the concrete. As Toshinori let go off them, Hizashi’s flashlight revealed more concrete walls with loose wiring bundled by plastic straps and old, strained brass pipes. Wooden crates lined the room. There was no way further.

“Cover your ears, gentlemen!” Hizashi announced.

Shouta had barely enough time to follow the advice before his friend let out a shout. It reverberated through the room and he saw Hizashi standing very still as he paused, listening.

“There’s a hallway here,” he said, swiping the cone of the light over to a stack of crates in a corner.

“How did you hear that?” Toshinori asked with genuine awe.

“My ears are mutated to deal with my voice or else I’d go deaf! It might just be noise to you, but I learned to read the echo!” Hizashi announced.
They filed towards the boxes, Hizashi by Toshinori’s side with the flashlight, Shouta bringing up the rear with his gaze on Toshinori’s broad back, one hand already on the bindings from which he had untangled his handcuffs. As if lifting toy blocks, Toshinori pushed the crates aside to reveal a narrow hallway.

He took one step forward as suddenly lights flashed on all over the room, blinding Shouta. Reflexively, he squeezed his eyes shut, but they flew open again as a metal claw grabbed him around the waist.

Through the blind spots of glaring white in his vision, he saw metal arms stabbing out of the ground and the ceiling and the walls, some of which had already grasped Toshinori and Hizashi. His friend had been lifted by one leg like a spider and Toshinori was holding off one hand attempting to crush his skull.

Shouta tore his gaze from the sight, had to, instead focusing on the construct that was tearing at him. As long as he was wrapped up in metal fingers he couldn’t do anything to help them and dividing his attention would only serve to distract him from solving his own problem.

As the claw lifted him into the air, Shouta spotted one of the brittle, rust-stained pipes that covered the walls. Stretching, he grasped it with both hands. As he’d expected, the claw tried to break the resistance to its movement this created and jerked him in the opposite direction. Shouta hung on even as his shoulders burned from the strain and finally, with a crunch, the pipe partition was torn from the wall, rusty metal breaking as it lost support and ended up in his hands.

He shoved the pipe down into the gap at the base of the hand that he had spotted, where the major joint and hinges sat. Again, metal creaked, and the claw stilled and slackened a little, some program probably trying to account for the sudden resistance in its movement.

It was enough for Shouta to finally slip through its pointed fingers, his sides burning with future bruises. A second hand reaching for him he dodged, now prepared.

Two dozen arms of varying lengths and sizes were guarding the room. He looked for Toshinori and Hizashi, but both were already on the ground in a corner, where Toshinori staved off the arms reaching for them with another one he had torn out of its anchorage. Shouta vaulted over a writhing metal snake as he ran towards them.

“All Might, can you keep the arms under control?!” he shouted over the clanging of the metal.

“No worries!”

As he answered, Toshinori slapped away a claw making a grasp for them with the ripped-off one he was holding, his arms straining hard.

“We’ll go in,” Hizashi said. He seemed to have had the same thought as Shouta. They’d been working as a team so often, it didn’t surprise Shouta anymore. “This looks like self-defence, all bolted down to the ground. Someone might be down the hallway trying to keep their asses save.”

“If you meet more robots, turn back,” Toshinori warned them.

After he had said it, he pushed both of them into the small hallway, blocking them from attacks from behind with his own body, then charged forward, wrapping his arms around the stem of the claw trying to push past and make a grab for Hizashi’s neck. The last Shouta saw of him, looking over his shoulder as they ran, was a claw ripping up Toshinori’s costume and mantle, digging bloody trenches into his back. Another one hit him in the stomach hard enough to make him double over.
Shouta turned away and focused forward, trying not to think of Toshinori talking of his lung. Toshinori would do this. He had to. However, Shouta’s constricting stomach reminded him why he preferred the solitary hit-and-run style to combination missions like this. Logic dictated this course of action, but it had never felt quite right, leaving behind other people with something or someone that he knew was deadly.

Rounding a corner, they found themselves stopped by a door, the glass pane of it too milky to make out more than dark shapes behind. Shouta nodded at Hizashi, covering his ears with his hands as he stepped backwards. His friend turned the dials at the speaker system on his neck.

Though he had directed the sound forward, Shouta still found his ears ringing. When the high-pitched scream stopped, he saw the glass covered in cobwebs. Hizashi waited for him to lift his hands before he kicked the door in, glass shards falling like rain.

“Keiji, you have to—”

Whatever the voice in the room behind the door was going to say was drowned out by another shout from Hizashi. No more planning for these people. Shouta ignored the persistent noise to assess the situation as he climbed through the door’s frame. There were only two people he could see. One, a woman, sat at a broad computer terminal with several screens. The other, a white-haired man, was standing over a pile of metal which shivered and moved like water as he raised his hands, attempting to form a wall.

A metal shaping quirk. That would explain why the robots in the park that he’d gotten a closer look at hadn’t had normal welding seams. Shouta opened his eyes wide and the metal stilled, frozen in form.

Hizashi had already moved in on the woman, slapping her hands away from the keyboard, and Shouta slung his weapon around the man, pulling him over with a sharp tug. It wasn’t strictly necessary, but he’d watched too many of their robots rampage through the city to play nice.

“Stop your security system,” Shouta demanded, looking over his shoulder.

Predictably, he got only a defiant stare as an answer. Hizashi, who had handcuffed the woman already, glanced down at her black head of hair.

“If we throw you in there, can they differentiate between you and us?” he asked conversationally.

“We will have to get out of here, you know. We could use bait.”

To many peoples’ surprise, Hizashi tended to be more severe of the two of them when it came to punishment. His playful personality had lured many an unsuspecting villain into thinking him harmless.

The woman chewed on her lower lip.

“If you’re lying to us, we won’t hesitate to send you to battle your creations in our stead,” Shouta added, though he knew he wouldn’t and neither would Hizashi. Holding the bindings on the man tight as he gave her a chance to correct herself, he then nodded at Hizashi, never taking his gaze of his captive. His eyes stung.

The distant noise from outside subsided. They pulled the captive villains to their feet, careful, at least, to march them forward without shoving them into the edges of glass still hanging on to the frame of the door. As he pushed the man roughly forward, Shouta’s thoughts had already moved on from
him, though. All he wanted to know was the end of the battle he’d had to leave.

Toshinori stood in a tangle of robotic arms in the main basement hall they had fallen into. Loose metal parts, torn wires and broken joints were strewn between the thick silver trunks they had grown out of. He scanned Shouta and Hizashi first before his gaze fell on the two captives and there was a brief moment when he had to catch his breath, but he pushed himself up to a heroic pose in no time.

“Good work, you two!” Toshinori boomed.

There was blood running from the corner of his mouth and cuts and bruises all over, but Shouta found himself lulled in for just a moment by the brilliant smile on his face. He’d never much liked All Might, but there was a strange flutter of affection for him specifically, the beaming oaf that his boyfriend portrayed on the battlefield, this man who, stupidly, made your heartbeat slow down a little because it really did feel like everything was all right and nothing in the world could truly hurt him and, consequently, you as long as he stood in the way of danger. In silence, at least, Shouta would concede just a little to the effectiveness of Toshinori’s strategy.
“How did it go?”

Shouta unpacked the yaki imo that he had bought from an old, rust-stained food truck at the train station at the edge of the city, where he had visited one of U.A.’s outer facilities. The baked sweet potatoes were only lukewarm now, but they still smelled deliciously like wood smoke.

After kissing him hello, Toshinori had wandered back to the couch where he sat next to Momo, who was curled up on a pillow. It didn’t seem like he had heard his question. Shouta brought over the tinfoil-wrapped potatoes and put one down in Toshinori’s lap.

“Oh.” Toshinori looked up as if woken from a dream. “What did you say?”

“How did it go at the station?” Shouta repeated.

“It went alright! They confessed, not that they had much of a choice. She is quirkless, but a talented programmer. Her tech was what made the robots move in the first place. And you saw his quirk, of course.”

Toshinori’s long, bony fingers closed around the potato and he looked down at it, crinkling the tinfoil with the nail of his thumb.

“And what was the point of it?”

“Destabilisation, demoralisation. Killing heroes if possible, civilians if pros aren’t available.” Toshinori frowned. “The man was the leader and he’s been around for a while. It’s an older strategy, this directionless chaos… not much of a point to it without a bigger network to follow up if you get caught. But I guess some people get stuck in their ways.”

Shouta hummed his agreement and took a bite off his dinner. The butter had soaked into the sweet potato and the salt sprinkled over it contrasted with the taste.

“How was your visit to the school grounds?” Toshinori asked.

“Fine. The U.A. has a lot of space to train. This one is a fairly new place, too. It was always a good school, but Principal Nezu has really put in work to make it top tier.”

While looking at the different areas that Thirteen was presiding over, Shouta had already imagined several ways in which he could use the terrain to practice with young heroes. He wasn’t going to make a final judgement call on these ideas until he had actually put a class through its paces for a semester or so, but he had to admit the chance to shape them in all the ways he often missed in so-called pros was growing more appealing as he learned of his tools to do so.

“Sounds like you’re looking forward to it,” Toshinori said, staring out the window.

“Maybe,” Shouta admitted. He glanced at the potato in Toshinori’s lap. “Are you feeling alright?”

“What?”

Again, Toshinori snapped back to attention.

“Your food is getting cold.”
Quickly, Toshinori peeled off the tinfoil.

"Thanks for bringing dinner," he said, without taking a bite.

Shouta put his half-eaten sweet potato on the couch table.

“What’s wrong?”

Again the tinfoil took the brunt of Toshinori’s nerves, whispering as he squeezed at it.

“It’s not really important,” he admitted. “It’s, uh… the man, the one who was leading the operation. He was a former general under All for One. I’d even met him before, though that was years ago.” A shrug. “I thought he looked familiar when you brought him out.”

“Did he say anything about you?”

“No – I mean, Tsukauchi said he was talking about me sometimes, but it’d make sense he’d have a grudge. He wasn’t targeting me in particular. I don’t know.” Toshinori shook his head. “I thought I’d cleaned house on all of All for One’s more important followers.”

“He was sitting in a basement in an office district with some programmer. They were dangerous for what they were, but it wasn’t like you missed a whole operation,” Shouta clarified.

“You’re right. I just…” The furrows between Toshinori’s brows grew deeper and his fingernail finally stabbed through the tinfoil. “I haven’t heard All for One’s name from a villain in a while. I guess it reminded me of a time when it seemed like it was all I ever heard from any of them. It took me back. It’s stupid.”

Shouta thought about the big scar on Toshinori’s torso that was a clear enough indicator of what the fight had done to his body. He wondered if Toshinori had ever allowed himself to think about what marks it had left on his mind to have been disassembled like this by All for One. Trauma wasn’t just for civilians.

He reached over to put his hand on Toshinori’s neck, digging his fingers into the lean muscle, massaging. He’d never been the type to smother anyone with hugs and kisses, but Toshinori needed physical affection more than most people he’d met and Shouta liked how he would lean into it, slightly cat-like.

Toshinori gave him a faint smile.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Shouta tangled his fingers in the short hair at the back of his neck, looping the strands around his fingerpads, feeling them glide smoothly over his skin.

“For what?”

“It seems to me like you mostly get me at my worst, when I’m tired from work or when something goes wrong… but I should be smiling for you most of all, not just for the people out there. After all, I want you to feel safe and happy.”

The syrupy sweetness of that statement should have made Shouta’s cynicism bristle, but he couldn’t work up disgust facing that earnest look of doggish loyalty that Toshinori was giving him.

He pinched Toshinori’s neck regardless.
“You really are an idiot,” he said. “That’s not what relationships are about. You can act for the
cameras. You can cheer up the people you collect from the rubble. I want to know what’s actually
going on in your head.”

“But I…”

“Smile when you feel like smiling. Don’t smile at me to hide something. I don’t need to be protected
from the fact that you’re a human being.”

Since Toshinori looked his gaze with a sad frown after the lecture, Shouta did finally hook his arm
around his shoulders and tugged him closer against his side.

“I just like you a lot,” Toshinori said, his hand resting on Shouta’s thigh. “I don’t want to mess this
up.”

“Because you told me about how you felt? Why would that make me unhappy? You don’t share that
with many people. I’m special to you.”

Slowly, Toshinori tilted his head.

“I hadn’t thought about it like that.”

“I’d say you think too little, but the real problem is that you think too much and usually in circles,”
Shouta said and kissed him firmly. “If I’m not happy, I’ll let you know. Now eat your potato.”

Toshinori chuckled and chased Shouta for another kiss.

They had dinner and went to bed undressed, something they had as of late been too tired to do, and
this time Toshinori stayed as he was from the start. His smile was awkward and the red creeping up
his neck deep, but he pulled Shouta into his arms and when Shouta still kissed him and touched him
like he wanted him, his locked limbs unfroze just a bit. Shouta pinned him to the bed as he blew him,
enjoying the sensation of him squirming underneath, and Toshinori returned the favour after, looking
up at him through wild strands of hair that Shouta pulled out of his face to see the way he slid into his
mouth. When they were done, he traced his fingers along Toshinori’s ribs until he fell asleep.

- 

“Well, well, what do I see here! Someone has his sweetheart waiting for him! Isn’t that cute?!”

Shouta looked up from the bottle of water he was holding to where Hizashi pointed past the parking
lot behind the back entrance of U.A.. Wrapped in a long coat, Yagi was just getting up from one of
the benches at the side of the concrete swath and smiled at them. It was a cold, sunny day and Shouta
saw his breath in clouds before his face.

“Hello, you two,” he said.

His voice was still like a grater against wood. He had had a breathing tube down his throat for a few
days after the pneumonectomy, a word that Shouta had recently learned during a conversation with a
white-clad woman trying not to show she was worried that Toshinori took too long to wake up from
the anaesthesia while Shouta had sat rooted before the intensive care unit room he hadn’t been
allowed to enter as a non-relative.

“I didn’t know they let you out of the hospital,” Shouta answered.

“This morning,” Toshinori said with a nod. “I wanted to surprise you. I thought you might come out
after the entrance exams for a break eventually.”

The cooing sound that Hizashi made was enough to momentarily transform Shouta’s concern into more general annoyance. He sent him a sideways glare. Hizashi lifted his hands.

“I’ll leave you two alone,” he said. “I have to talk to Blood King, anyway. Don’t be too wild! We still need you back for the rest of the evaluations, Shouta.”

With a little colour rising to his cheeks, Toshinori coughed, wincing painfully, and waved Hizashi goodbye. Thanks to the teasing, Shouta granted his friend no such courtesy.

“You should have gone home to rest,” he told Toshinori as they sat down on the bench together.

The sharp wind was cool today, but the bright blue sky and slowly unfolding buds on the boughs of the trees did still give the impression of spring.

“I wanted to hear how it went,” Toshinori said.

He could have done that over the phone, but Shouta stopped himself from pointing it out, since it was not like Toshinori had honestly missed that fact and he could only chastise Toshinori’s impulse to want to see him so much.

“It was interesting. The test is geared more towards your kind of hero.” He made it sound a bit like an insult, but Toshinori didn’t rise to the bait. “Defeating these machines would have been difficult for me or Hizashi – as we’ve seen lately, robots aren’t our strength. I suppose it tests strategic thinking for those with other quirks and any hero should be able to hold themselves in a fight. However, I think some kids with helpful quirks will slip through the cracks and those who have physical quirks can act brain-dead and still pass.”

Toshinori smiled broadly at him.

“They’re lucky to have you there. You’re obviously thinking about this.”

“Well, I haven’t had to deal with children yet. We’ll see how that goes,” Shouta cautioned.

“You’ll be great. If you only manage to teach them to be like you when they’re on the job and nothing else, they’ll have a strong foundation!”

Though he tried not to admit it, Shouta may have grown a little anxious at the thought of his new job, considering his complete lack of experience, but the way Toshinori said things like this, you could almost believe them.

“I have a feeling most of them will want to be like you,” he answered.

Toshinori only chuckled and coughed a little more. Shouta squinted up into the pale beams of the sun shining through the yellow-green leaves throwing wavering shadows on them, then turned his head to find Toshinori looking at him.

“What?”

“Nothing.” Toshinori smiled. “Are you coming over for dinner tonight?”

“Yes. I’m going to buy something after I’m done here and bring it home.”

It occurred to Shouta that he wasn’t sure which home he was referring to. Toshinori and him didn’t spend all their time hanging onto each other, but there was a certain fluidity between their living
spaces that Shouta had come to accept without noticing. Much like Momo moved between their apartments as he wished, the two of them were not quite bound by the confines of their own homes. For how much All Might lacked subtlety, too loud, too tall, too broad, too colourful, he had found his way into Shouta’s life on cat’s paws.

Glancing at the clock on his phone, Shouta sighed and got up, Toshinori following his example. Shouta dragged him down by the loop of his scarf and gave him a brief kiss.

“Have fun,” Toshinori told him, gently grasping his shoulders.

“Go to bed,” Shouta retorted.

Grinning, Toshinori turned away and Shouta stood for a moment, digging his cold hands into his pockets as he watched Toshinori trot down the street.

Usually the standard verbiage about hope and happiness and the promise of new chances that cherry blossom season brought out on the postcards and calendars did not touch his black heart, but Shouta had a feeling that this was going to be a good year.

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