brilliant lights will cease to burn (by my hand i'll reignite them)

by novalotypo

Summary

Midoriya Izuku is quirkless. This, he knows very well.

This is also what he knows:

Weekends and vacations are reserved for walking neighborhood dogs. The elderly are the most powerful people on Earth. Local gods are picky eaters. Trust is a feeble, feeble thing. Magic cards are incredibly difficult to seal, especially when the world thinks you're a vigilante. Heroes are not magicians, but magicians can be heroes.

Becoming a cardcaptor wasn't on Izuku's bucket list, but he'll be damned if he doesn't make the best out of it.

Notes

bnha and ccs are both great shows that make me happy.
i haven’t watched ccs in a while but by god i love that show, so here we are.

See the end of the work for more notes.
It happens like this:

Midoriya Izuku is born quirkless. This is a fact that he hates, detests, abhors for the majority of his adolescence. Kacchan certainly doesn’t help, and neither do the rest of his classmates. Luckily, Izuku accepts his quirklessness rather elegantly. He doesn’t give up his goal of becoming a hero, mind you, but he does throw himself into his hero research with a newfound vigor.

In another universe, Izuku begins his collection of hero notebooks, running to whatever villain fight he can. In another universe, Izuku stands on the sidelines and lives his life, quietly nursing his ambition. In another universe, Izuku unknowingly sets himself on the path that crosses with All Might’s.

In this universe, that’s not exactly how it goes.

When Izuku turns ten, he makes a resolution: to memorize every detail, every shop, every person, every hero in his neighbourhood. It’s a step down from becoming a hero, but it’s a great feat nonetheless. The area around his apartment is one of the busiest areas in the entire city.

Instead of simply watching on the sidelines, Izuku trails quietly after heroes and gets accustomed to his neighbourhood. While other children his age are hanging out together at the mall or the park, Izuku explores every nook and cranny of the area around his home. He reinforces some knowledge - the shopping street, the library, the local park, the train station - and learns some new - the soup kitchen, a small hole-in-the-wall gem of a bakery, a group of stray cats that prowl around the alleys, searching for food.

During this time, Izuku talks to many people. He’s a nervous and awkward person by heart, but heroes are a common topic that everybody’s capable of keeping a conversation about. When he asks about Puppet Master in a quiet cafe called Ms. Luna, the barista’s more than happy to tell Izuku all about how Puppet Master is a very kind and quiet man who always takes his coffee with three milks and two sugars.

By the end of the month, he’s more or less figured out all the patrol patterns within a seven-block radius around his apartment and memorized Ms. Luna’s menu. It is, admittedly, kind of creepy and maybe a bit obsessive, but it’s more fun than anything else Izuku’s ever done. It’s also hard, hard work, keeping track of so much about so many people.

In fact, when Kacchan tries to take the notes he’s worked so hard on, Izuku decides that Kacchan probably isn’t the best friend he’s ever had. He thinks this as he snatches his notebook back, punches Kacchan in the jaw, and makes a wild sprint for home.

Surprisingly enough, Kacchan doesn’t chase him or tell the teacher, but the look he gives Izuku the next day surpasses acerbic on so many levels. Still, he doesn’t harass Izuku as much anymore, which is a welcome blessing. The rest of the class seems to have taken his jaw-punching to heart, because
they start to lay off as well.

Scuffles still happen, but when they do, Izuku doesn’t hesitate to fight back. He isn’t a fighter, but after years of being bullied, Izuku knows how to fall, how to crumple against blows, how to improvise weapons with what little he has. Most importantly, he knows everyone’s quirk and he knows exactly how to fight against each and every one of them.

He proves this when a group of bullies with minor ice quirks corners him. By the time five minutes is up, Izuku’s bruised and battered, but the bullies are bawling over their scorched fingers and burnt skin.

Izuku gets in trouble for throwing hot water on the bullies the next day. He doesn’t really understand why the teachers are being so serious about it; after all, it’s not like the water was boiling or anything.

Midoriya Inko scolds her son for his reckless behaviour, but is quietly thankful that her son is no longer the target of the horrible bullying he had experienced in the past. She approves of his newfound sense of adventure and buys him a used phone so she can always make sure he’s safe.

One Wednesday night, while Izuku’s just finished wrapping up his scrawl session at Ms. Luna, a villain walks into the shop and asks where the nearest police station is. The situation itself is terrifying, but it’s heightened by the villain’s warped features and multitudinous limbs jutting out in every direction. He’s dripping blood from a few of the many arms he has.

The barista is paralyzed with fear. Her eyes gleam bright blue, which Izuku’s noted to happen when she’s scared, and her voice shakes as she tries to deliver a coherent sentence.

“Sir,” Izuku says, his voice coming out barely louder than a whisper. “Sir,” he repeats, louder this time, holding his shaking hands behind him.

The villain turns to face him, and Izuku feels a shiver down the entire length of his spine.

“I know where the nearest station is,” Izuku states, trying to keep his voice calm. A slight hitch catches onto the end of the sentence, but he powers on anyway. “If you leave the shop and go right, you’ll be at an intersection. Take a right, continue straight for two blocks, and then turn left. Keep going down the street, and you can’t miss it.”

The villain gives him an awful smile, all sharp fangs and bloody gums. “You’re useful, kid,” is all he says before turning around and trudging out the door.

Izuku feels nauseous, but the barista doesn’t look much better than he does, so he tries to keep his anxiety under the wraps. After a minute’s passed, the barista spins to meet Izuku’s eyes.

“Why’d you tell him where the station is?” She sounds somewhat angry but mostly hysterical. “Who knows what’ll happen if a villain walks into a police station and starts tearing it apart? That’s - you can’t just -”

“It’s okay, miss,” Izuku replies. It really is okay, because Izuku’s thought one step ahead. “I didn’t give him directions to the station.”

The look the barista gives him is beyond hysterical.

Izuku moves quickly to an explanation before the barista throttles him or starts crying - he really can’t tell. “Puppet Master patrols the neighbourhood on Wednesdays between 4 and 7. He usually walks the entire length of Willow Drive, which is why I told the villain to keep walking down the street.” Nervously, Izuku fiddles with his mechanical pencil. “I’m sure a pro hero would be able to take
down a villain like him.”

The barista seems to look at him with a new sense of clarity, but demands that Izuku stays with her until she can call the police and tell them about the situation. With nothing else to do, Izuku sits quietly with a hot chocolate and a slice of banana bread. Across from him, the barista taps the counter nervously, though the near-fluorescent blue of her eyes has dimmed down to a paler hue.

The officers arrive soon after, questioning both Izuku and the barista individually. Izuku answers their questions to the best of their ability, ripping apart the banana bread anxiously. Surprisingly, the interrogation doesn’t take very long. The officers commend him for his bravery and tell him that he’d make a wonderful police officer. Izuku blushes all the way to his toes.

“You know, kid, you’re really something else,” the barista mumbles after the officers leave. There’s nothing he can say to that, so Izuku just nods quietly as he packs his notebooks away. It’s clear that he’s not welcome here any longer. That makes him sad, because Ms. Luna is the best cafe in the city to write in.

Before Izuku steps out the door, he apologizes for the trouble he’s caused and thanks the barista for the hot chocolate. The woman offers a small grin and a nod.

“Drop in sometime if you feel like it,” is the last thing the barista says before she turns around to close up shop. Her tone is less dismissive and more tired, which Izuku counts as a major win. Maybe he’ll even return one day, right after he changes his identity and never comes back as himself.

After the villain incident, Izuku realizes that although he’s quirkless, he’s far from useless. For a period of time, he seriously considers becoming a police officer, or maybe a detective. It’s appealing, but Izuku’s never worked well with such enormous limitations officers have to work under (like the law). It’s easier to do what he loves doing quietly.

The notebooks begin to pile up on his table at home, so Izuku dedicates a shelf exclusively to his notes. The majority of them are in-depth analyses of pro heroes, but some of them are about civilians with notable quirks. Kacchan’s is one of the most thorough profiles he has.

It’s only when Izuku walks into the same small stationary shop on Sunset Boulevard he’s been frequenting for the past three months for the third time in a week that he realizes something: he’s spent more money on pencils and notebooks than he has on anything else in the past year. As Izuku approaches the register, the cashier gives him a friendly smile and pushes a paper cup with tea toward him.

“You’re a very loyal customer,” the cashier comments, quirking an eyebrow.

Izuku freezes and tries to shrug nonchalantly. “I write a lot,” is his strained reply. He accepts the tea and waits for whatever conversational cue the cashier’s planning to give.

After he finishes bagging the mechanical pencils and notebooks Izuku has decided to purchase, the cashier says, “I’ve been seeing you around the neighbourhood a lot lately.”

Oh, boy. “I really like, um, mapping out places by hand. Also, um, I want to get more involved with my community.” It’s not the whole truth, but it’s certainly not a lie. Either way, anything’s better than admitting that he’s been stalking heroes for the past month and a half.

The cashier’s face brightens. “That’s great! In that case, I have an offer for you.”

Izuku hesitates. The cashier seems to catch this, because he continues on quickly.
“A few of my colleagues and I want to start up a weekly game night at the hospital,” he explains. “But a lot of the expected participants are going to be children, so we were hoping that someone could teach them how to play, have a good time in general.”

The idea sounds really, really fun. Despite that, Izuku fidgets. “But why ask me, of all people? I’m sure there are others who are a lot better than I am.”

At that, the cashier laughs and points to the corkboard across the room. Izuku blushes. Scraps of paper cover the entirety of the board. Most of them are pinned up haphazardly with thumbtacks and have little decoration, while others are colourful, with hand-drawn pictures and neat writing. Underneath the corkboard is a jar with a slit cut into the plastic lid. A sign next to the jar is labelled, _Write your answer and your name for a chance to win a free item of your choice!! (1000 yen or less)_

Izuku has won many items from the shop. He feels kind of bad.

“I’ve seen you crush every logic problem I’ve put up there for the past month,” the cashier says with a wide grin. He takes the empty paper cup from Izuku and throws it in a small garbage can. “Plus, I walked past you in the park a few days back. I gotta say, you’re really good at chess.”

Izuku’s face is probably very red. He didn’t expect anyone to be interested in the games the elderly folk at the park play, and he certainly didn’t expect a situation like this. Nonetheless, he nods. “I’ll have to talk to my mom,” he replies.

The answer seems to satisfy the cashier, who gives him a business card so they can keep in touch. Apparently Izuku has been recruited into some sort of hospital game night, which actually sounds pretty entertaining. At least the children at the hospital won’t try to beat him up.

Midoriya Inko is elated that her son has been given the opportunity to help out at the hospital and eagerly agrees to let Izuku stay out later than usual every Tuesday night. When Tuesday rolls around, Izuku jumps on a bus with Saboteurs and Exploding Kittens. They’re fun and an excellent way to ruin friendships. In other words, they’re perfect games.

When he arrives at the hospital, the cashier - Yuto, as Izuku’s learned over the last week - ushers him into what appears to be the recreational area and sits him down in a large bean bag chair. Due to his small figure, Izuku’s figure sinks into the chair and disappears. Yuto takes a moment to stifle his laughter before dropping off a box of games.

“The kids should be coming in a few minutes,” Yuto informs, dropping off another box. “We’ve got water, juice, and snacks in the kitchen, so feel free to take whatever you want.”

Izuku nods, though he’s still being smothered by the bean bag. Wisely, he extracts himself and finds a much more solid chair to sit on. Yuto helps him set up a few games around the room, preparing boards, pieces, and papers. Following his lead, Izuku prepares some snacks and waits anxiously for the children to arrive.

Yuto leaves before the children can arrive. “I have to go talk with the activity supervisor,” he explains. “If anything happens, just treat the kids like you’d treat any of your friends. They’ll all be around your age, anyway.”

It doesn’t take long for people to start streaming in. Before ten minutes have passed, Izuku’s already introduced himself to four different people, all around his age. Aki excitedly walks around the room, reading the instructions of every game she can. Following behind her is Riku, who gives a confused
look every so often as he listens to Aki ramble. Miu and Takumi join sooner after, both eager to play. Soon enough, the room is busy with children starting to play their games.

Izuku ends up in a group with the first four who came. They’ve all decided on Saboteurs, so Izuku pulls out the instructions and begins to explain the game.

The game starts innocently enough but soon spirals downward into chaos. By the time twenty minutes have passed, almost everybody knows each other’s roles and is out for blood. Izuku and Miu are the Good Gnomes while Aki and Takumi are very obviously the Bad Gnomes. Riku has been very quiet the entire game, so nobody trusts him fully.

Aki’s playing style is unapologetically vicious and headstrong. She slaps down blocking cards and landslides like nobody’s business, which would normally be a huge waste of reserves, but the damage she’s causing the Good Gnomes makes up for it. Takumi acts as Aki’s minion of sorts, keeping a safe hand of dead-ends and blocking cards just in case.

Miu is scarily intelligent, thinking ahead as far as possible. Cautious and calculating, she frowns whenever something gets in her way, but quickly manages to maneuver herself out of problematic situations. Izuku supports her as best as he possibly can, trying to follow whatever she’s planning.

The game reaches its climax when the path is one card away from the gold nugget. Tensions are high and nobody has any mercy to spare. All the landslides have been used and the only unblocked player is Riku, whose face is surprisingly blank.

Riku puts down a dead end in the empty space. Aki and Takumi shriek happily, excitedly nudging their friend. Though upset, Miu valiantly declares the game to have been a good one and good-naturedly pats Izuku’s back. She then goes on to mumble up a storm under her breath about the events of the game and what she could have done differently.

Izuku likes Miu. People who talk to themselves must band together in their solidarity.

To be completely honest, Izuku’s just surprised that nobody accidentally used their quirk, which happened very often when he used to play with Kacchan’s group of friends.

He likes the new atmosphere. Having children his age voluntarily approaching him and playing games together is something that Izuku would’ve never imagined happening. It’s really, really cool.

Eventually, some of the children start getting hungry. A small crowd separates from the games to venture off to the fridge, after which they return with juice boxes, fruit, and crackers. One of the kids manages to dig up three boxes of Pocky, thereby starting a war over who gets some and who doesn’t.

Because Izuku is a smart, logical boy, he does what every smart, logical person would do. He proposes that they all play one enormous game of Mafia to determine the Pocky Lords, as they’ve started calling it. Wisely, he places himself in the role of the storyteller and implied referee.

If there's one thing that Izuku’s learned from his time with Kacchan, it’s that children are vicious. This fact is apparently universally true, because the mafia is going on an unrelenting killing spree while the townspeople and detectives carefully pick out members of the mafia every round. The doctor, who coincidentally happens to be Miu, is so skilled in predicting the next townsperson to be killed that it terrifies Izuku.

Ultimately, the combined forces of the detectives and the doctor overpower the mafia, who reluctantly agree to bestow the title of Pocky Lord upon the winners. All is well until another
argument breaks out within the winners, who are shockingly greedy.

Izuku isn’t fond of confrontation, so he kindly suggests that the Pocky Lords play a game of Spoons to decide who the one true Pocky Lord is. Most of the winners agree happily, though some decide not to participate. The losing team seem very interested and act as the hovering audience around the circle of players that has formed, peeking at the cards that have been dealt. Among them are Miu and Aki, both of whom Izuku is rightly scared of.

The players agree on a simple set of elimination rounds, with the last round being a match between the three remaining players and one spoon. Just like the other games, the beginning is very tame, with the losers dropping out with a laugh or a huff of frustration. Miu and Aki are not among these people.

As the rounds pass, Izuku watches as everything descends into chaos. The spectators begin cheering for their respective favourites and spoons are snatched so violently off the table that Izuku worries that they’ll break or get thrown in someone’s eye. The noise brings Yuto back into the room, whose eyebrows shoot upward when he sees the impromptu gambling ring they’ve created.

“I can explain,” Izuku says.

Yuto smiles and crosses his arms, looking surprisingly amused for how terrible the situation is. “No need. It looks like everyone’s having fun.”

That’s one way to put it. “Pocky is a very good motivator. It brings out the best and the worst in people.” Izuku cringes as he watches Aki laugh maniacally. “...It’s usually the worst, though.”

Yuto’s eyebrows shoot up again. “Couldn’t they just have shared?”

“Yes, but they’re so scary,” Izuku replies firmly.

There’s nothing Yuto can say to that, so he watches as Miu takes the crown of ultimate Pocky Lord. Her first order is to split the Pocky evenly amongst all her subjects, which makes Izuku want to rip out all his hair.

Eventually, Yuto claps his hands and tells everyone to clean up their games. The children scatter around the room, chattering excitedly about Mafia and Spoons and how fun it was. Izuku feels very happy all of a sudden.

As the children filter out of the room, Izuku packs his belongings and prepares to catch the bus home. Aki catches his arm as he’s approaching the door.

“You’ll come back, right?” The question is phrased in a way that implies an expected answer.

Izuku nods. “Every Tuesday.”

Aki’s face splits into a wide grin. Riku and Takumi approach Izuku and tell him to bring Saboteurs again; it’s a great game and there are so many unresolved conflicts to end. Miu doesn’t say much, but she does fist-bump him and repeat Aki’s invitation.

Izuku leaves feeling lighter than he’s ever felt.

As the weeks pass, Izuku becomes more and more confident in his ability to navigate his neighbourhood. He knows every shortcut, every hidden alleyway shop, every stationary shop. Due to his constant excursions, the chefs and waiters in just about every restaurant down Sunset Boulevard recognize him. Some even know him by name.
“Hey, Midoriya,” Rin greets, pausing to wipe her hands on a towel before approaching Izuku. “What’re you looking for today?”

Izuku freezes. Oh, no. He should have figured out what he wanted before he came in. Luckily, the sign behind Rin boldly declares that the house special has a discount deal, which he accepts readily. Rin nods and moves to prepare the ramen.

Rin and Izuku make small talk in the meantime. Izuku recounts his experience with the children at the hospital while Rin complains about the unseasonably warm weather and her pet dog.

“Not only that, but we’ve been crazy busy lately,” the chef huffs, arranging the toppings on the noodles. “I haven’t had any time to look after Hiro, and I’m worried that he’ll get heatstroke.”

“I can look after him for you,” Izuku says immediately without having first processed the words that just left his mouth.

Instantly, Rin brightens. “Really? That’d be great. I don’t mind paying you to make sure Hiro gets fresh air and a cool bed.”

“Okay,” Izuku replies, then freezes. Wait, what? He has no idea how to take care of animals. He’s never even had a pet. Choosing not to share this detail, Izuku accepts the bowl of ramen and eats in silence. There’s no way he can go back on his word, especially not after Rin looks happier than she’s been all week.

After Izuku finishes his meal, Rin gives him her number and promises to call whenever she needs some help with her dog. Izuku nods, then runs home and reads up on taking care of dogs on the Internet for two hours. True to her word, Rin calls two days later, telling him that she’s hosting some sort of party at her restaurant. The heat wave that’s been passing by the city is miserable, and Hiro hasn’t been enjoying it.

Izuku meets Rin in front of her restaurant an hour before the usual opening time. A small Shiba sits next to Rin, a bright red collar around its neck. Upon seeing Izuku, Hiro perks up immediately.

“This is my baby, Hiro,” Rin declares, smiling widely. “Treat him nicely, okay?”

Five minutes later, Izuku leaves with Hiro’s leash in his hands and a bag of Hiro’s food and toys. He walks a block before stopping and questioning why he does the things that he choses to do.

The day goes surprisingly well. Hiro is friendly and active, which makes him a bit overwhelming at first, but he eventually tires himself out and curls up in a shady, cold corner of Izuku’s room. By the afternoon, the pavement is burning hot, so Izuku has to wait until the sun goes down before he can walk Hiro. He decides to take care of two birds with one stone, so he walks Hiro down Sunset Boulevard.

When he returns home, six people working in different shops have given him their contact information to look after their dogs. Izuku has not yet learned how to deny people. Maybe he should learn before he accidentally starts an impromptu dog-sitting service.

Apparently he doesn’t learn quickly enough, because the next time he’s out walking the bookstore owner’s dog, several people approach him and ask if he’s willing to take care of their dogs for a price. Izuku says yes without even thinking. After that, he quickly retreats home so nobody can approach him again.

Izuku’s not sure how, but he’s become the go-to person when someone on Sunset Boulevard needs a dog-sitter. It’s actually kind of nice. Not only is he getting paid, but he also gets to play with dogs
and get fresh air at the same time.

This is how the summer of Izuku’s tenth birthday passes by.

Tuesdays are game nights that get progressively more and more intense, peaking when Miu slams down Dungeons and Dragons with a straight face and says, “Let’s begin.” Izuku’s attempts to find new games brings him to a store called Tall Tower, where he can reliably purchase as many weird-sounding games as he wants. The owner, a middle-aged woman named Sasha, always gives good recommendations and suggests some games from overseas.

Dog-sitting is sporadic, with most calls coming in the day of the job, but Izuku takes advantage of it, walking around the lesser-known parts of his neighbourhood while walking the dogs. Other dog-walkers at the park are becoming familiar with his face, giving him waves and greetings as he passes by them. Some of the store owners give him discounts in exchange for taking care of their dogs, while others treat him to dinner.

By the end of the summer, Izuku’s done a pretty good job with his goal. Sunset Boulevard becomes a second home of sorts; he knows everyone there and everyone there knows him.

School starts again without much excitement. Izuku is forced to change is dog-sitting services to exclusively the weekend and after school, which his clients can live with. The heat wave’s passed and summer vacation’s over; the hot and busy season has passed.

Izuku’s classmates still tease him for his quirklessness, but Izuku realizes with a shocking revelation that he doesn’t really care. Kacchan glares whenever he passes by, snarling insults and stomping off angrily after every interaction. He doesn’t make any attempt to harm him. And so he goes on with his school days, walking around town when he has the chance.

One day, while Izuku’s walking in the park, he passes a boy practicing with a baton. He is instantly awestruck, head bobbing up and down with the baton’s motions. The boy notices after a moment, pausing to stare.

“...Can I help you?” He asks, an awkward lilt to his voice.

“I just, um,” Izuku stutters. “I thought what you were doing was super cool, and you’re really good at it.” He bows quickly before retreating backward. “Sorry for staring. I’ll leave.”

“Wait up,” the boy calls, walking toward Izuku. He seems curious, scanning Izuku up and down.

“...You wanna learn how to use a baton?”

“Yes,” Izuku replies. Oh, no. Why’d he say that? He does want to learn, but he doesn’t even know the guy, so now it just seems weird.

Surprisingly enough, the boy cracks a smile and hands Izuku a baton. “I’ve got nothing better to do. So, here’s how you start...”

They two spend a good hour messing around with the batons before they depart for home. Izuku now has a new contact in his phone - Satoshi - and a new interest in batons. They just look so cool.

The rest of the school year passes without anything out of the ordinary occurring.

As always, Izuku expands his contacts and writes down everything he possibly can about the city in his notebooks. The D&D game has officially gone to hell, though one could argue that it started there. Apparently a bard, a warrior, a rogue, and a magician are the worst party. Izuku thinks it’s more likely that the party’s personality is the root of the issue.
On the other hand, dog-sitting business goes well, with many loyal customers frequenting his services. Izuku’s pretty sure he knows every single dog on Sunset Boulevard. In fact, his business is going so well that he decides to buy a new cell phone with the money he’s saved up.

Satoshi’s been teaching Izuku progressively more difficult tricks, but what really makes Izuku cry is when Satoshi gifts him his own personal baton. Both parties are shocked for different reasons and hurry home where they can’t embarrass each other any longer.

For Izuku’s eleventh birthday, his mother gives him a fancy new set of headphones. They must have been so expensive. Resolutely, Izuku keeps his tears in, although his expression makes him look like he’s in constant pain. He is. His mother makes katsudon for breakfast, which is just as much absurd as it is wonderful.

Luckily enough, his birthday lands on a Saturday, so Izuku decides to go to Sunset Boulevard and spend some of the money he’s saved up over the past year.

His first stop, naturally, is the stationary shop. Yuto waits until Izuku’s brought his items over to the counter before casually saying that they’re free for the day. Izuku then proceeds to have his second almost-crying session of the day as Yuto watches, confused and worried. They both calm down over some tea, after which Yuto gives Izuku a small bag of handmade cookies.

“I can’t vouch for the taste, but I had my sister help me decorate them, so they look great,” he comments.

Sasha all but hoards Izuku when he walks into Tall Tower, wishing him a happy birthday. Izuku is very confused as to how so many people know when his birthday is. Did he really tell so many people?

Regardless, Sasha excitedly presents him with the heaviest board game he’s seen to date. When she sees Izuku’s confused expression, she explains that it’s a custom-made game centering around the pro hero industry that one of her friends just finished crowdfunding for. After a brief pause, Izuku’s face scrunches up as he valiantly makes an attempt not to cry. Sasha laughs good-naturedly and pats his back, then gives him a special discount code for some sort of subscription loot crate.

The rest of the day proceeds in more or less the same manner. Rin calls Izuku over when he pokes his head in the door to give him a free bowl of ramen and a small cake from a bakery a few shops down. Izuku thanks her profusely before kindly accepting the meal and making a quick trip back home to drop off his new luggage.

Said bakery happens to be home to one of the kindest people Izuku’s ever met in his life. The owner gives him a full-sized cake and two loaves of bread his mother loves. Another bakery across the street gives him a large fruit tart, spurring him to make another trip home.

His party all but forces him to go visit them at the hospital, which he does after grabbing one of several cakes he now has. As usual, Aki greets him wide a slap on the back, though today’s seems much firmer than usual. Miu gives him a fist bump, Takumi ruffles his hair, and Riku quietly wishes him happy birthday. The five of them share a cake while talking about the games they’ve played recently. Afterward, the four party members present him with a handmade scrapbook of all their best moments in their campaign. Izuku almost cries when he flips to the page with Aki killing the Big Baddie with a diss track.

After his visit to the hospital, Izuku visits the mall and looks around for anything that catches his interest. Ultimately, the only things he ends up purchasing are the newest edition of Heroes Monthly, a lint roller (for dog hair) and this really soft blanket he’s been eyeing for months.
On the way home, Izuku receives a text message from Satoshi, who happens to be in Spain for vacation. The message simply reads happy birthday!!! i bought a ton of souvenirs for u bc ur such a good person!! Izuku almost combusts then and there, but powers on and manages to keep his blush under control.

By the end of the day, Izuku has a small collection of books, a pile of stationary, a fridge full of takeout and baked goods, and more coupons and discount codes he knows what to do with.

He cries when his mother brings out the cake she made for him. Midoriya Inko, bless her soul, smiles and tells Izuku to make a wish.

Every year, Izuku wishes to become a hero. This year, he wishes for something else: to be able to help everyone he possibly can, whether it be in small gestures, like walking dogs, or big ones, like secretly directing villains toward their capture. He isn’t sure if his new wish is a step down or a step up, but he’s determined to make it come true regardless.

Another summer comes as goes as usual, with all its shenanigans and unexpected occurrences. The biggest change, however, happens on an otherwise normal day.

Satoshi and Izuku train in the park every other day, trying out new tricks with different objects. Over the past year, Izuku has become rather proficient with a baton. He’s also managed to pick up juggling, hacky sack, and simple card tricks as well. Sometimes he thinks Satoshi’s secretly training him to become a magician.

The two of them are sitting underneath a tree on a sunny Friday afternoon when Satoshi asks, “Hey, have you ever thought of trying gymnastics?”

Izuku spits out a mouthful of water. Satoshi smacks him on the back, hard.

“I’m serious,” Satoshi says when he sees Izuku’s disbelieving expression. “You’re crazy agile and you have great reflexes. I’m not saying you should compete or anything, but you should definitely give it a try. My aunt actually runs a gym in town. How about it?”

As always, Izuku says yes. This is how he meets Satoshi’s aunt, who he calls Zing.

Zing looks Izuku up and down, much like how Satoshi did a year back. With a scrutinizing gaze, she says, “I can work with this.”

Satoshi smiles. Izuku shakes in his shoes.

Unexpectedly, Midoriya Inko agrees to Izuku’s new venture easily, completely willing to pay for the gym membership.

The rest of the summer is normal for the most part, but now Izuku visits the gym three times a week to torture himself for three hours. Zing is an excellent but relentless teacher, bending Izuku into shape, sometimes literally. It’s exhausting, but it’s a challenge like nothing he’s seen before, and Izuku never backs down from a challenge.

When fall rolls around, the first thing Izuku does is sign up for a special ancient literature program the library has started. The program doesn’t take up much time, only hosting meetings once every two weeks, and is based around examining writings from the time of the Romans and even before them. Kacchan calls him a fucking nerd when he catches news of it but doesn’t do anything else.

“You’re the first person I’ve met who’s been able to figure out Latin this quickly,” Professor Miki comments as she spreads out the day’s translation onto the table. The program is difficult, but Izuku
appreciates a good challenge every now and then. Besides, Latin is a very structured language with easily decipherable patterns.

The program has no definite end, allowing participants to sign up and come and go as they wish. Izuku is one of the participants that chooses to come every meeting, which has made him quite familiar with Professor Miki, the program coordinator.

One day, Professor Miki waves him over to one of the library’s storage rooms. Izuku follows behind curiously.

The first thing Izuku does when he enters the room is sneeze. He can feel the dust lingering in the air. Professor Miki smiles, amused, and flicks on the lights.

“Welcome to the library’s restricted section!” The triumphant tone in Professor Miki’s voice is the complete opposite of the overwhelming shock that passes over Izuku. Since when did the library even have a restricted section?

Shelves line every wall of the room, which is much larger than Izuku first expected. One large, round table is placed in the centre of the room. Crates, boxes, and display cases take up all the space on the shelves. All in all, the room looks like it’s really important and highly confidential. Izuku tries not to faint.

Professor Miki explains that she believes Izuku is near prodigious in his ability to translate ancient scripts. After some deliberation, the head of research at the university that the library’s a part of has given special access to Izuku. Essentially, the head of research has allowed him to work with ancient scripts in hopes of being able to decipher them. He has also offered to pay Izuku what a co-op student would normally receive under one condition: that Izuku lends his brains to an active project twice a week.

“Oh my god,” is Izuku’s response.

“You’ll be great,” Professor Miki says confidently.

Izuku chooses to accept the offer mainly out of shock and an inability to say no.

Another birthday comes and goes, with just as many, if not more presents as last year. The big 12 that Aki draws on his arm with permanent marker washes off after a few days.

When summer rolls around, Izuku switches back to his dog-sitting schedule, though he does cut it in half to make time to do research at the library. He’s starting to think he might actually be sort of gifted in ancient texts, because a group of university students stared as he pieced together a rather complex hypothesis a week back over a Babylonian script. Izuku has never seen university students cry out of happiness. It’s sort of scary.

And so Izuku’s last year of elementary school passes without much fanfare. His hospital visits are still chaotic as always, dog-sitting is a fun and reliable way to get some pocket change, and ancient scripts wrack at his brain every week. He visits the gym twice a week rather than three times because he doesn’t hate himself.

Speaking of scary, Izuku’s started to realize that his body is starting to look fit. Instead of being a stick with limp noodles for arms and legs, Izuku’s starting to fill out, more lithe than muscular. It makes sense, given his constant dog-walking, exploring, and training. It’s a welcome yet terrifying change.

A new school year means a new school. Junior high is different from elementary in terms of
academic importance and homework load, but the people are pretty much the same. Kacchan ends up in the same class as him, which is sort of annoying, but not unbearable. Izuku’s quirklessness is a well-known fact, so the bullying that Izuku experiences is fully within his expectations.

When a group of Kacchan’s lackeys (not including Kacchan himself, odd) corners him at the back of the school, Izuku doesn’t hold back. If he wants people to stop targeting him, then he’s got to prove that he’s not someone who can easily be made into a target.

The lackeys’ quirks are much stronger than the quirks Izuku faced back in elementary school, but the people are all the same. They fall, bleed, and break the same.

Izuku sends the three lackeys home bruised and bleeding without having suffered many injuries himself. Apparently the baton Satoshi gave to him for his eleventh birthday is indestructible or something, because it isn’t even remotely scratched up even after being smashed over the bullies’ heads.

The bullies stay away from him after that. Word starts to spread around the school that he’s some sort of delinquent who beats people up with a baton. Normally, such a label would be insulting. Instead, Izuku finds himself taking advantage of the distance his classmates are giving him. He’s never been one to make conversation with his bullies anyway.

All in all, Izuku’s first year of junior high consists of a lot of extracurricular activities, a larger workload than he’d like, and the typical bullshit that life likes to throw at him. His friendship with Kacchan is more strained than ever, with both of them avoiding each other as much as possible.

After several years, Izuku’s gotten used to his increasingly busy schedule. He flip-flops between his school schedule, which he uses for most of the year, and his vacation schedule, which is a monster of a schedule. August, December, and March are by far the busiest months of the year, though August is particularly bad.

Izuku’s second year of junior high kicks off without anybody bothering or teasing him. In fact, people go out of their way to avoid him. It’s sort of nice. There’s always a nice, private corner of the library to take advantage of.

When summer vacation rolls around, something feels different.

It’s difficult to put a finger on it, so Izuku lives his life normally. There’s something about the air that hangs a bit differently than before, but the feeling is indescribable. Eventually, Izuku decides he’s probably overthinking it. Everything’s going well. His campaign is proceeding nicely, dog-sitting business is booming, translating scripts has been proceeding smoothly, and training is getting easier and easier. In fact, Izuku decides to put his knowledge of the city to use, volunteering everywhere he can. He gets a lot more smiles as he makes his way through the city from that point onward.

It happens like this:

One particularly heavy-feeling September night, Izuku makes his way to the university library to help the co-op students translate a passage found on a Roman tablet. The night begins normally; Izuku greets the students and Professor Miki, setting his belongings down on a chair. All he does is hover around and answer questions while doing his homework.

An hour into the session, the students tell him they’ll be going on break. Izuku nods, returning to his English homework. It’s hilariously easy compared to Latin.

A glint out of the corner of his eye catches his attention. Izuku pauses, looking up. What was that? A
moment passes before Izuku returns to his papers. Then, just as he looks down, the glint returns. This pattern repeats for a good five minutes before Izuku decides to investigate whatever piece of equipment has started malfunctioning.

Strangely enough, everything seems to be working just fine. As he walks past a crate of books, something bright flashes. That’s weird. Did someone put a camera in the crate?

Izuku digs through the crate to find the source of the flashing. When he reaches the bottom of the crate, all he sees is a thick pink book with gold bindings. The quality is really, really good. A gold star with wings is emblazoned onto pink leather alongside a large sun sigil. The clasp is shaped like a wing. It looks really expensive and new, which begs the question: what’s it doing in the restricted section?

After a moment of indecision, Izuku decides to take the book to the front desk. Actually, there’s a name on the book - Sakura. Maybe he can ask Professor Miki if anyone named Sakura forgot their very nice and expensive book.

Curiously, Izuku opens the clasp and flips the front over back. To his surprise, the book doesn’t actually have any pages - instead, it has a hollow compartment where a deck of cards lie in. The cards are longer than normal playing cards and seem to be decorated intricately with pictures and patterns.

Izuku picks up the top card, reading the name underneath the picture.

“Windy?”

An enormous gust of wind starts inexplicably and rips past Izuku. With a yelp of surprise, he drops the books and backs away, covering his face. The gale blows violently past him, almost bringing him to his knees. What the hell?

When he opens his eyes, the book lies on the floor in front of him, the compartment empty. The only card that remains is one in his hand - Windy.

Oh, no.

“Man, what a rude awakening!” A high-pitched voice laced with irritation breaks through Izuku’s shock-induced silence. The scene is reminiscent of a horror movie. Izuku turns around very slowly.

“Oh my god,” Izuku says.

The creature doesn’t seem to understand the severity of the situation, quirking up an eyebrow in response. Izuku has just lost a probably very expensive deck of cards that belonged to someone else. Oh, god. He can never return. He’ll have to fake his death and live out the rest of his life in a remote village in Nepal.

“Oh my god,” Izuku repeats, his face in his hands.

The plush creature seems to ignore him, giving him a little salute. “Hey, newbie! Good morning to you, too.”

Ah. So the thing can talk. That’s... great. Izuku has to take a few deep breaths before speaking. “What’s going on? Who are you? Why does this always happen to me?” Despite his best efforts to keep his hysteria under control, his voice lilts up an octave. Typical.
The creature huffs, dropping down onto the table. It crosses its arms, a slight frown on its hilariously toy-like features. “No need to get so riled up, newbie!” The creature then bounces up to Izuku. What’s your name?”

He’s talking to a toy. He’s gone insane. “I’m Midoriya Izuku,” he says, because why not.

The toy brightens after Izuku introduces himself. Pounding a tiny fist on its tiny chest, the toy puffs up with a triumphant expression. “Nice to meet you, Izuku. I’m Kerberos, the Beast of the Seal!”

*The Beast of the Seal.* Normally, Izuku would break into hysterical laughter (and by god, he’s *this* close), but the pieces then fall together in his head. So maybe the ‘beast’ part is a little dramatic, but the ‘seal’ part...

The cards definitely aren’t normal cards - maybe the result of a quirk? Nonetheless, they’re a madman’s creation, because apparently they can summon giant gusts of wind with a single verbal command. Oh. There had been a clamp on the book, right? But... it popped open so easily...

Izuku sucks in such a deep breath that it causes Kerberos to give him a strange look. “The Beast of the Seal. You were sealing away those cards.”

The plush thinks it over for a second before replying with a shrug. “Not really, but that’s not too far from it, so yeah!”

Oh, no.

“Uh,” Izuku wrings his hands together as best as he can with a card between his fingers. “Then you should probably know that they’re kind of all gone now.”

There’s an almost comical moment of silence that passes by as the two stare each other down. For a moment, the only noise in the room is the soft whirring of computers.

Then, bluntly: “What.”

That’s it. Izuku is dead. His soul has ascended to whatever otherworldly realm souls go to after death. He’s definitely not overreacting, because the blank look Kerberos is giving him somehow conveys so much surprise and so much disappointment at the same time.

Izuku opens his mouth to reply, but nothing comes out. He clears his throat violently before trying again. “I opened the book and a really strong breeze blew them all away,” he manages to stutter out, running his fingers over the edge of the card.

Now that Izuku gets a better look at the card, he realizes that the details are much more intricate than a normal collectible. A golden star, moon, and sun are lined up on the equator on top of some sort of spell circle. The entire card is a light shade of pink, which is a pretty nice colour. Yes, what a nice colour.

With a long-suffering sigh, Kerberos puts a palm to his face. “You called out Windy, didn’t you?”

“Um, yeah.” Izuku raises the card in his hands for emphasis.

Kerberos smacks himself on the forehead before angrily walking in small circles. He kicks a pencil out of his way as he paces. “Note to self: *stop putting Windy on top of all the other cards.*”

The panic, which had been held in place by a slowly collapsing dam, decides it’s a good time to attack Izuku all at once. Spreading his hands helplessly, Izuku looks imploringly at Kerberos. “Look,
I’m really sorry! I didn’t mean to lose them.” Without thinking, Izuku says, “I... I’ll get them back!”

Hang on, what?

Clearly three years haven’t taught Izuku anything about denying people. Then again, he did sort of lose every single one of somebody’s expensive-looking cards but one, so he has a good reason this time. Probably.

Kerberos laughs. “Oh, I know you will. You’re the new cardcaptor, and you’re starting off just like the old one.”

Intelligently, Izuku says, “Huh?”

Somehow, in the span of ten minutes, Izuku’s life has managed to flip itself on its head and march off in a completely different direction. A toy named Kerberos is calling him a cardcaptor and it sounds like he’s just unknowingly sold his soul away.

Later on, Izuku will look back on this encounter and laugh. Humble beginnings result in the greatest endings.

Kerberos sighs, shaking his head. He motions to the book the Izuku dropped and floats back into the air, tail swaying behind his small body. “Grab that book and that card, kid. We have a lot to talk about.”
small shadows dancing in the rain

Chapter Summary

Windy, Rain, and the world of magic.

Chapter Notes

uuhhhhh oh my god guys thank you so much for the positive feedback!! bnha and css bring me so much joy and so do your comments god i'm dying

as for where this fic is going - ccs gives a lot of content, but i really want to highlight izuku's involvement in the world of magic. he's got a lot to learn and a whole lot to see, so please look forward to it!

“So you’re telling me that you live in a world where superpowers are the norm,” Kerberos – who has repeatedly requested to be called Kero – hums, a thoughtful expression on his cartoonish features.

Why is Kero the one that’s confused? That’s not fair. Izuku has no idea what’s going on.

“And you’re telling me that magic is real,” Izuku laughs, a tone higher than he’d like. The card he apparently summoned – Windy – lies on top of the thick pink book.

It’s nothing short of a miracle that Izuku was able to clean up the room and smuggle out a giant book without being caught. Luckily, the students and Miki trust him to an incredible extent. Izuku just took advantage his peers’ trust in him to steal something extremely valuable off campus.

Now, both Kero and himself are safely conversing in his room, where Izuku can have an internal meltdown without anyone asking if he needs help.

The concept of quirks has stumped Kero, who mumbles something about a person called Clow and parallel dimensions. It makes Izuku’s head hurt, so he decides to flip to a new page in his notebook and write off the nerves.

As Izuku taps his mechanical pencil against his hand, Kero asks, “So these quirk things are biological?” With a small huff, the plush turns the page of one of Izuku’s many hero notebooks. “They sure look like magic to me.”

Now this is territory Izuku’s comfortable with. “There’s nothing magical about it,” he answers, trying to sketch out Windy as accurately as possible. “The quirk factor is what allows quirks to function. It’s basically all parts of the quirk, like bodily features, or special receptor cells, and things like that.”

Kero seems unimpressed, but decides to accept the new information anyway. Hopping over to Izuku’s desk, hero slaps a hand on Windy.

“Well, magic or not, you’re the new cardcaptor!” The plush flashes Izuku a bright smile, as if it’s something to celebrate.
Izuku is very, very close to tearing his hair out. “For the last time, what is a cardcaptor?”

The explanation Kero offers answers his questions while simultaneously spawning twice as many.

Apparently Izuku’s the chosen cardcaptor, master of the Sakura Cards, which are magical cards that contain spirits with an incredible range of abilities. Since Windy blew them all away, it’s now Izuku’s job to seal them away before they can cause too much damage.

After Kero’s speech, Izuku feels faint.

The pendant necklace that was in the book is apparently some sort of staff that Izuku’s supposed to wave around and seal the cards with. Feebly, he picks up the necklace and pokes at the pendant.

It’s shaped somewhat like a parrot head with wings on both sides. The sheer absurdity of the situation makes Izuku want to laugh hysterically and then curl up into a ball and cry.

At least the staff’s green.

Soon enough, Izuku decides that denying what’s right in front of his eyes is a fruitless task. Longsufferingly, he asks, “How do I use the cards?”

Kero grins. “It’s real easy. All you gotta do is chant the magic phrase, tap the card with the wand, and bam!” He makes an exploding effect with his tiny arms, flying up in the air a little. “It’s all good to go.”

Izuku jots down everything Kero’s saying in his notebook, regardless of how weird it sounds. “And what exactly is ‘the magic phrase’?”

There’s a slight hesitation before Kero speaks. “Hmm...” The toy puts a hand to his chin. “I dunno.”

Inhaling as deeply as possible, Izuku pauses. “Why,” is all he can manage to get out through gritted teeth.

“It’s been some time since the last cardcaptor was active, and besides, the chant changes with every cardcaptor,” Kero replies, yawning.

The nonchalant tone is like a hammer to Izuku’s head. How can Kero be so calm? Both of them are in situations they’re very uncomfortable with, so how?

Kero and Izuku sit in silence until the plush slams a fist into his other hand. “Oh, wait! I know something that might help.”

Izuku sits up immediately. “What is it?”

Looking around, Kero floats upward and starts circling around the room as if he’s looking for something. Eventually, he turns around and asks, “Hey, do you have some sort of crystal on hand?”

He does, actually. Izuku opens three drawers before finding a box full of random glass trinkets that people have gifted to him over the years. Choosing the plainest one possible, he lifts it up. “Is this okay?”

Kero’s brows furrow, but he nods. “It’ll have to do. Bring it here.”

Izuku places the glass diamond on the desk gently before pulling up a chair and waiting for whatever conversation is in store next.
It turns out that magic is really, really weird. The plush explains that there are three strands of magic, all astrology-based, for some reason: sun, moon, and star. Star magic is the neutral ground between sun and moon magic, with an even mastery over both of the other strands.

The previous cardcaptor, Sakura, had star magic, according to Kero. All the Sakura Cards are aligned under either moon or sun magic, so having star magic seems like the best all-rounder way to go.

“Let’s test what type of magic you have!” Kero gives Izuku’s hand a nudge toward the crystal. “Cup your hands around the crystal and focus. We’ll see what colour pops up and judge from there.”

It’s weird and sort of uncomfortable, but Izuku obeys nonetheless. Closing his eyes, he envisions the energy in his body flowing into the crystal like little tubes. It’s only when he hears something crack that he opens his eyes.

Surprisingly, Kero also seems a bit shocked. The crack came from the glass diamond, which unfortunately now has a large crevice running down the side. Inside the crystal, a silver cloud has formed.

“Moon magic,” Kero confirms, poking at the cracked crystal with a small limb.

Uh, okay. “What’s that mean for me?”

Kero sits down in front of the crystal, whose silver hue is fading. “Y’see, all the Sakura Cards are aligned under a certain magic type – either moon or sun. The last cardcaptor used star magic, so her magic was spread pretty evenly over all the cards.”

Oh... that makes sense. A deck that’s split in half between sun and moon, with star being the neutral ground over all of them.

Izuku quickly scribbles down some more notes. “Then I’ll have the advantage of having some stronger cards and some weaker cards because of my moon alignment,” he hypothesizes, peeking over at Kero.

“That’s right! You catch on real quick.” The plush nods happily, rolling the crystal out of the way.

Hold on. If Izuku’s alignment is moon magic, that means he has magic. It’s not a quirk, but it’s basically a substitute with very similar features. Should he treat his magic like a quirk, then? What if he accidentally uses it and injures someone? Children who just receive their quirks tend to hurt themselves or others frequently during the first year and a half.

If that’s the case, then Izuku can’t risk hurting anyone around him. Kero said that the Sakura Cards were created by mixing Eastern and Western magic, so there ought to be some books or articles online he can read. The half-half split probably means that half of the deck will respond to Izuku more strongly than the other deck, which he’s going to have to take into consideration. Also, does moon magic become stronger at night, or is it just a decorative name? Maybe –

“You’re mumbling, kid,” Kero says, an eyebrow quirked.

Reddening, Izuku wrings his hands. “Sorry,” he apologizes. “It’s a bad habit.”

There’s a moment of silence where Kero seems to look at Izuku with a new sense of clarity. Suddenly, the plush’s head jerks up sharply and toward the window. There’s a faint buzzing noise that sounds like a combination of static and wind chimes, which catches Izuku’s attention. It’s so faint that Izuku can barely hear it over the sound of traffic outside.
Kero says, “Let’s go capture a card.”

“What,” is Izuku’s intelligent response.

Pointing at the window, Kero grins. “You felt that, right? A sort of buzzing feeling?”

It was more of a sound than a feeling, but okay. “Yes,” Izuku replies hesitantly.

Kero nods his small head, as if confirming his own thoughts. “That’s the feeling you get when a Sakura Card’s nearby.” The plush then waves to the television. “How about you check, just to make sure?”

The television turns on with a small click. The news channel that Izuku always watches – Hero Report – is currently screaming something about breaking news and a sudden villain appearance downtown.

Some sort of giant bird creature is shown swooping down along the high rise buildings downtown, shattering windows and throwing cars around. Screaming wind rips into anything that isn’t firmly attached to the ground, creating a pseudo-tornado of sorts. Two pro heroes are on the scene – Riding Hood and Gale, both relatively new to the field.

It’s sort of horrifying, watching Riding Hood get tossed up against a building so hard that the wall around her body crumbles. She doesn’t get back up.

Gale, a hero whose Quirk is literally based on controlling wind currents, is knocked into an office building by an enormous blast of wind and doesn’t reappear. The police are on the scene, driving the civilians back and calling for reinforcements.

It’s not a good scene.

“Oh, ouch,” Kero winces as he watches the creature wreck havoc. “I don’t remember Fly being that aggressive. The heroes must have really done a number on it.”

“Oh my god,” Izuku says. He’s been saying that a lot in the past couple of hours.

Nudging Izuku’s hand eagerly, Kero points at the television. “That’s what I mean by ‘sealing them before they cause too much trouble’. We’re a bit late with this one, but we’ll have to work with it. Get moving!”

Izuku looks at the screen, then looks at Kero. He looks back at the screen, and back to Kero again. There’s a problem here.

“I don’t want to be a vigilante.”

The laugh Kero gives him is infuriating and panic-inducing at the same time. “Vigilante? No, you’re a cardcaptor. This is your job!”

“My job, as a civilian, is to leave it to the pro heroes,” Izuku insists, pressing down his pencil so hard that the graphite breaks.

The most he’s ever done is give small-time villains the wrong directions to walk them straight into a competent hero. There was that one time where Izuku taunted a villain and purposely ran straight into a hero, but he’s never had to – had to face something like this.

“Let me tell you something, newbie.” Floating down and onto the desk, Kero picks up the Windy
card and throws it into the air. The card stays suspended, twirling around in slow circles. “Magic isn’t anything to mess around with. Only one person every generation can use the Sakura Cards, and you’re that person.

“You said earlier that quirks weren’t magic, right? Quirks are effective on quirks. Magic is effective on magic. Just like how people can get hurt by quirks, they can also get hurt by magic.

“Here’s where things differ. The Sakura Cards are literal embodiments of magic. They’re made so that they can only be sealed by magic. If someone else in the world was a mage, they probably could’ve put up a good fight. But here we are, in a world with non-magical quirks, and you’re the only one who can use magic.

“So,” Kero concludes, staring Izuku in the eye with a fire that Izuku’s only noticing now. “What’s your choice?”

A choice? Does Izuku even have a choice?

All the points Kero brought up make sense. Riding Hood and Gale are both skilled heroes in combat, albeit lacking experience. Even Gale, a hero known for incredible battle potential, was brought down with a single strike from – what was it? – Fly.

There were a lot of cards in that book. This card certainly won’t be the last capture Izuku will have to perform.

It’s not fair. Izuku only learned to be a bit more confident in himself and his abilities recently, with his increased community involvement. He has people who he’s proud to call friends that he’d say yes to without a second thought.

He has friends who could be attacked by something like that.

Ultimately, it’s Izuku’s lack of self-preservation, boundless self-sacrifice, and sheer panic that makes the decision for him.

“I have to do this,” Izuku rasps out, his hands clenched firmly together. It feels like his tongue has swollen to twice the size and his heart is lodged in his throat.

Kero pats Izuku’s arm with a soft expression. “You’re a good kid,” he sooths. “We’ll make you into the best cardcaptor anyone’s ever seen.”

Izuku says, “Okay.”

After a few minutes pass and Izuku can feel his fingers again, Kero picks up the pendant (struggling to do so with his tiny stature) and hobbles over to Izuku.

“Now,” the plush says, clapping his hands together, “let’s go seal a card!”

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It takes Izuku a few minutes to come up with an excuse as to why he’s going out at such a late time of night. Eventually, he tells his mother that Miki wants to talk to him about an urgent matter regarding the university. Midoriya Inko, worried, sends her son on his way, but not without a promise to call if anything happens.

Izuku slings a small backpack over his shoulder, with Kero sitting safely in a side pocket. Windy and the pendant are both held in his hands, a testament to how nervous he really is.
The buses have been put on hold due to Fly storming through downtown, so Izuku grabs the only method of transportation he has on hand – a skateboard that Satoshi gave to him, mostly as a joke.

It became less of a joke after Izuku figured out how to whip down the streets with his impeccable balance.

Kero instructs him to follow the buzzing feeling. If Izuku focuses hard enough, he can sort of tone out all noise except for the ringing, which is something he had no idea he could do.

By the time Izuku and Kero make it to the scene, the damage has spread several blocks. A large blockade of police surrounds the area, making it difficult to get a good look on what’s going on.

Three more heroes have been called on the scene, but none of them appear to be making any progress. A column of water assaults the creature, but the effectiveness of the attack is about equal to a squirt gun. Subsequent attacks do little damage, although they do keep Fly back and away from the civilians.

It’s impossible to analyze the situation at ground level. Luckily, Izuku knows his way around the district, so he slips into an alleyway between a clinic and a boutique. Two minutes later, he’s on top of one of the taller buildings in the neighbourhood.

Oh. Fly is... much more intimidating up close.

Kero pops out of the bag, choosing to float at Izuku’s side. Even he seems shocked when he sees Fly. “Wow,” Kero whistles, hands on his hips. “Fly’s definitely more powerful than I remember it being!”

No kidding. The creature easily towers over every single one of the high-rise buildings. Despite its elegant, swan-like appearance, Fly is capable of swatting away any projectile attack like it’s nothing but a bother. Physical attacks do little on such a large creature.

It’s clear why the heroes are getting desperate.

Izuku only realizes he’s shaking all over when the card almost slips out of his hand. Kero, noticing Izuku’s reaction, lowers down to sit on his shoulder.

“Would a run-down make you feel better?” There’s a clear awkwardness in Kero’s voice as he asks the question. It’s the most considerate thing anyone’s ever asked Izuku.

Nodding, Izuku takes a deep breath. “Yes, please.”

Relief passes over Kero’s surprisingly expressive features. It looks like explaining things is something he’s comfortable with. “Then let’s do this before three more heroes get smushed.

“First up: that’s Fly, as I’ve already mentioned. Usually gentle, but gets real angry and vicious when you poke at it too hard!” Both Kero and Izuku wince as one of the heroes gets an energy ball ricocheted back into her face. “...As you can see.”

There’s nothing Izuku can really do except for wince and nod.

“You’re gonna stop Windy’s rampage,” Kero says, as if it’s the absolute truth. His confidence is both flattering and nerve-wracking.

Gripping the pendant with all his might, Izuku jerks his head upward to face the disaster before him. An entire street’s been swept into shambles by Fly’s temper tantrum. The potential for more damage
to be done is very, very high. “Okay. Let’s do this.”

The plush’s face splits into a wide grin. “Then hold out that pendant, and let’s see what you’ve got.”

Relaxing his grip, Izuku lets the pendant dangle from the chain. The moment the pendant falls, it detaches from the chain and floats in the air, surrounded by a thin veil of silver dust. A bright flash emanates from the pendant, blinding even when compared to the thousands of lights from screens and boards.

Something is knocked loose in Izuku’s head.

_The moon, the sun, the stars – all in harmony with one another -_

_What’s your wish? What will you pay for it?_

_A price – of course, you’ve paid your price – your very fate is your price -_

_Greatness for greatness. You’re lucky I’m even accepting this offer. They don’t call me the – for nothing –_

_Oh? You’re willing to sponsor the boy? Are you sure? It appears that this power will never remain in one world for long._

_Do you see yourself in him, or do just enjoy an underdog story? No, don’t – your price is paid, and the deal is made._

_This is it, child._

_This power is yours. Master of the Cards, should you ever seek to call upon your rightful power, remember these words:_

_As the bell-like voice resonates within the corridors of Izuku’s mind, his lips echo the words in sync._

_“Key that hides the power of the moon, show your true form before me. I, Deku, command you under our contract. Release!”_

_A brilliant light even brighter than the one preceding it blasts through the night sky. Even more luminous is the enormous spell circle that turns slowly beneath Izuku’s feet; a large star accompanied by a crescent moon and the glowing sun are planted firmly in the centre of the surrounding sigils._

_When Izuku’s eyes snap open, he sees a new world._

_The night sky, once decorated with faint glimmers of stars millions of light years away, dances with bursts of colour otherwise invisible to the naked eye. Galaxies and supernovas so unimaginably far away bloom in the dark emptiness, unfurling into glorious creations of aether and dust._

_Each and every source of light, artificial or natural, hums with a pulsating aura, creating a mosaic of electronic heartbeats as the countless billboards and signs hum with energy. Attached to each person are faint silver-and-gold strings that weave through the air and dance with every motion. Trees, water, air – nature sings in a way Izuku has never heard before, all chimes and calm echoes._

_This is magic, Izuku thinks to himself, eyes wide, taking in the new landscape around him. After a moment of quiet shock, he shakes himself out of his stupor._

_He has a job to do._
In front of Izuku, the pendant has transformed into a staff of sorts, retaining the same features, but now roughly the size of a baton.

Izuku isn’t sure what spurs him on to snatch the staff out of the air and spin in between his hands. It’s more to comfort himself than to look cool. Familiarity is good. Yes, familiarity is excellent.

Kero stares at him with the brightest smile Izuku’s ever seen. “Now that, kid, is what I’m talking about!” He then pauses. “What’s up with ‘Deku’, though?”

It takes a moment for Izuku to briefly explain the background of where his nickname came from, etc, etc. After he’s done, Kero bursts into laughter.

“You took the name your childhood bully gave you and made it into your official bestowing name,” Kero cackles, holding his stomach. “If you can do that, you can face anything!”

Speaking of facing anything, it doesn’t sound like the heroes are having a fun time dealing with Fly. Not only that, but the light show he just put on has probably attracted some attention. The circle, now much smaller (though still taking up the entirety of the rooftop), rotates around his feet.

The bell-like voice has somewhat faded from his mind, but when Izuku focuses, he can hear the faintest of whispers, guiding his hand.

Maybe he really has gone insane.

Izuku raises the card into the air between his fingers. “Windy, heed my call!”

Wind rips past Izuku’s hand as the card dissolves into the figure of a slender woman with long, trailing hair. Her body is the wind itself, corporeal in perception only. With Izuku’s new vision, he can see green, silk-like threads trailing off her fingertips only to disappear with the breeze.

Standing on the edge of the building to get a better look at the situation, Izuku spots two more heroes down. Only one remains standing, and she’s beginning to look very worn-down, her costume in tatters, gold-and-silver strings hanging limp.

Fly is at least two blocks down, though its incredible size means that it can easily travel several blocks in the span of a few seconds. Even the police appear to be on the verge of panic – understandable, given that the main residential area is only seven blocks away.

Izuku needs to move, and he needs to move fast. “Windy, bring me to safety across the buildings!”

Immediately after giving the command, Izuku takes a running start and leaps off the the roof. Kero yelps, barely managing to snatch onto the back of the bag as a gust of wind springboards them above and across the street and onto the roof of the opposite building.

Okay. So that’s a thing that Izuku can do now.

The pointing and yelling down below signals that Izuku has attracted quite a bit of attention now. By some miracle, Izuku is able to tune out the unwanted attention if he focuses enough.

Izuku isn’t sure when he became able to do that. It’s incredibly helpful.

Kero’s voice rings out through Izuku’s empty mindscape. “You’re really a natural, kid. Not only have you figured out Windy, you can see now, can’t you?” Floating up to eye level, the plush stares into Izuku’s pupils. Apparently he sees something that he likes, because he beams, puffing his chest out. “There it is – the tiny crescent moon in your eye. Congrats, kid! This is what the real world
“Well, the real world looks like it’s going to be very flat if we don’t stop Fly,” Izuku snarks, tightening his grip on the staff. Windy hovers next to him, patiently awaiting orders.

There’s no time to waste. With another running start, Izuku leaps across the next street, then the next, and the next. He stumbles halfway through a leap, but Windy catches him, supporting his next steps with bursts of wind to ensure he doesn’t end up as a splatter on the pavement.

Meanwhile, civilians point and call at him. Their voices are all surprise and anxiety, gold-and-silver strings tense, waiting to see what happens next.

So, it’s a hero they want?

Izuku’s the closest thing they’ve got.

As Izuku approaches the towering creature, the buzzing in his head grow louder and louder. Surrounding Fly is an incredible cloud of wind and silver dust, though when Izuku blinks hard, he sees only wind. Huh.

It’s clear that Fly senses Izuku as well, because it turns around and narrows its beady red eyes.

“Jump!” Kero’s shout startles Izuku into commanding Windy to throw him up high, high into the air. One of Fly’s wings swipes fiercely underneath him. The wind from the attack sends a few cars flying.

Oh my god, Izuku screams internally, vaulting over Fly’s gargantuan body to land on a particularly tall tower.

A high-pitched curse draws Izuku’s attention to Kero. “We can’t keep stalling like this,” the plush comments grimly.

He’s right. Even now, Izuku can feel his energy dwindling.

All creatures desire to be cradled, the bell-like voice in his head offers. Such is the nature of the moon.

“Cradle it...” Izuku voice comes out as little more than a whisper, but Kero’s ears perk up anyway. Whoever that voice is, they’re certainly very helpful.

“If you have an idea, do what you think is right,” Kero supplies, tail swishing anxiously as he watches Fly bat away the last hero into a truck.

It’s not about what’s right anymore – it’s about making sure no one else gets hurt.

Climbing onto the edge of the tower, Izuku faces Fly and stares it down. The creature screeches, preparing to bat its wings for another wind attack.

“Windy, heed my call,” Izuku commands, raising his staff into the air, where it releases a blinding pulse of silver light. The bells whisper in his ear, providing him with the words he seeks. “Under the name of your new master, Deku, become a binding chain!”

Windy shoots forward without a moment’s hesitation, splitting into ribbon-like strands of wind. Dancing around Fly’s body, the ribbons loop around its wings, torso, and deck. With a sudden snap, the ribbons pull taut, sealing Fly’s movements. The creature makes a few feeble attempts to wiggle
free, but is unable to escape Windy’s bindings.

“Now’s your chance!” Kero dances eagerly in his spot, motioning vigorously at the incapacitated Fly. “Go, go, go!”

Izuku nods and quickly makes his way down the building, leaping from window to window. The police, having spotted him, yell at him to stay back, but none of them make any attempts to approach Fly.

Fly makes a few small noises, only audible when Izuku focuses his senses. Instead of the harsh screeching Fly had been making just a few moments ago, Izuku hears sad trilling, followed by a keening noise.

It’s just confused and hurt, Izuku realizes. An otherwise gentle card, pushed to the brink by heroes who thought they were doing good.

Izuku takes a deep breath. That’s why he’s here, right? To put an end to this confusion and chaos.

“Fly, I command you return to your form confined.” Once again, bells speak in Izuku’s mind, providing him with what he needs. Twirling the staff between his hands, Izuku slams it down onto Fly. “Seal!”

The magic circle bursts forth beneath Izuku as Fly sends out pulsating beats of magic. With one last blast of light, Fly’s enormous form disappears, and a card floats into Izuku’s hands.

Silence reigns as civilians, police, and heroes stare. Then, noise overtakes everything.

The police begin to make their way toward Izuku, telling him to stay where he is. Civilians are beginning to edge their way past the blockade while reporters eagerly swarm forward, cameras at the ready.

“Let’s leave the congratulations for later,” Kero suggests. “For now, let’s get out of here with that new card of yours!”

Izuku’s all for getting out of this horrible, horrible situation. Holding up the newly obtained card, he shouts, “Fly, heed my call! Under the name of your new master, Deku, get me out of here!”

Wings sprout from the top of Izuku’s staff, tripping his feet out from underneath him. With a small yelp, Izuku snags the staff in both hands and pushes firmly off the ground, shooting straight up into the night sky.

A trail of silver follows Izuku as he soars atop his staff above the buildings, but he knows that no one else will be able to see them.

With the lights of the mess he’s left behind him, Izuku feels a grin rise to his features.

This is – this is his power, and his burden, but god, does it feel free.

***

“What do you think, Tsukauchi?”

Massaging his temples, Tsukauchi sighs as he tears his eyes away from the files in front of him.

“I think,” he begins slowly, “that last night was a disaster on levels unseen before.”
In front of him, an emaciated Toshinori Yagi frowns, pulling up a chair to sit across from Tsukauchi’s desk. The former offers the latter a cup of coffee, which Tsukauchi accepts gratefully. It’s been a very long day.

Just yesterday, an unknown villain with no discernible profile, motives, or connections destroyed four blocks of the central downtown district and somehow managed to take down five professional heroes without any trouble. Then, out of nowhere, an unnamed vigilante subdued the villain within five minutes.

It’s a very surreal situation.

Toshinori shakes his head, gripping his own coffee mug tightly. “I am partially to blame for the widespread damage,” he says, as if he’s gritting his teeth together. “If only I hadn’t used my time so liberally –”

“Your liberal use of time is the reason why we were able to defuse a major hostage situation,” Tsukauchi offers. It’s very like the pillar of peace, to take blame himself for things out of his control. Skimming through the files, he pulls out one very interesting piece of information and slides it across the desk. “Besides, the damage is a variable that we can control. This new vigilante, however...”

For some reason, nobody on the scene was able to obtain a clear picture or description of the vigilante. Even live broadcasts of the incident show some sort of cloud or static around the vigilante’s features, suggesting quirk usage. The best reference image the police were able to retrieve was of one of the vigilante’s mid-air tumbles, demonstrating their physical prowess and surprisingly small stature.

In that case, Tsukauchi thinks, brows furrowing, what on earth was with that wind and those wings?

Toshinori examines the files carefully, eyes passing over every word. After a brief moment of silence, he hands the files back with a frustrated expression.

It’s a reaction to be expected from the number one hero. While so many professional heroes failed to even scratch the villain, one lone vigilante took hold of the situation in the span of a few short minutes.

“What do we know about this vigilante?”

“Not much,” Tsukauchi admits. “We were unable to trace a name or a face, much less any potential motives. The only information we’ve got to work off of is his quirk, which we assume to be some sort of very specific wind manipulation.”

Placing his mug on the table, Toshinori leans forward with a glint in his eye. “That doesn’t explain the light show or the obscuration,” he comments, an underlying message in his voice.

Ah. It’s something Tsukauchi considered, but disregarded. “You think that the vigilante has more than one quirk.”

“It’s a possibility,” Toshinori insists.

Tsukauchi can’t tell if Toshinori’s automatic assumption that the vigilante is working with All for One is helpful or detrimental.

Organizing the files back into a neat pile, Tsukauchi sighs. “It’s a possibility, but it’s more likely that the vigilante was working with a group.” Lifting the mug to his lips, Tsukauchi spends a good five seconds chugging down the coffee. “Don’t worry about it too much. We’re keeping a close eye on
any activity that resembles the vigilante’s, and I’ll brief you whenever something new happens.”

Stretching his limbs, Tsukauchi stands and yawns. All-nighters are a frequent occurrence in his line of work, which is a very irritating but a necessary evil. Last night had been a flurry of panic and activity, split between relocating civilians, closing off an entire block for investigation, and collecting as much intel as possible.

“Don’t overthink it too much,” Tsukauchi offers in response to Toshinori’s silence, packing his belongings. “We’ll handle it. As far as we know, this is an isolated event with no connections to any major underground groups. If we need pro heroes on the case, we’ll call it in. In the meantime, take it easy.”

Toshinori snorts. “I could say the same to you. You look like death.”

“Excuse you, I happen to be the very image of immaculacy.” Tsukauchi turns to look at himself in the mirror. Hmm. Those eyebags are much more prominent than he expected. All-nighters truly are miserable. “...Most of the time.”

Laughing lightly, Toshinori slaps a hand on Tsukauchi’s back. “If you need any help, call me in,” he says, before heading off to do his duties as the pillar of peace.

Villains are tough enough to deal with, but now vigilantes have been thrown into the equation. It’s going to be an interesting ride.

***

“Oh my god,” is the first thing Izuku says when he wakes up the next morning.

Why is everything so sore? What did he do, sprint a marathon up the tallest tower in the city and trip all the way down? He’s sore in places that he didn’t even know someone could be sore in.

Luckily, it happens to be a Saturday, so Izuku gets to sleep in a little later than usual before going to train with Zing.

Izuku’s train of thought chugs casually off a cliff.

Oh, no. He’s going to die.

A loud yawn from Izuku’s bedside table alerts him to the fact that there is, in fact, someone else in his room. Turning to get a better view, Izuku watches as a small, winged, yellow stuffed animal crawls out of a drawer and sleepily floats onto the table.

There’s a moment of silence before Izuku speaks. “I was banking on the fact that everything that happened last night was a very vivid dream.”

Kero snorts, closing the drawer with his tail. “That’s what the last cardcaptor said, too. It’s a lot to take in at once, huh?”

That doesn’t even begin to summarize things, but okay.

Very slowly and painfully, Izuku drags himself out of his covers and over to his closet, where he takes about five minutes to put a shirt on due to the fact that he can’t quite lift his arms right. Kero helps out in what ways he can, lifting small things into Izuku’s bag as they prepare for the day.

After Izuku gets dressed, he swings his backpack over his shoulder and hobbles into the kitchen. His
mother probably won’t react very well to a sentient toy, so Kero sits quietly inside the bag.

Midoriya Inko smiles brightly when Izuku sits down at the kitchen table. “Good morning, Izuku!” She places breakfast on the table, untying her apron. “How did your meeting with Professor Miki go? I was so worried, thinking you’d get caught up in that mess downtown...”

The irony is depressing and hilarious at the same time. “It was fine, Mom,” Izuku replies, focusing intently on his food. God, why is he so bad at lying? “She just wanted to talk about a breakthrough one of the university students made.”

The look Inko gives Izuku is easily identifiable as the I am your mother and I can read you like a book so I know there are things you aren’t telling me, but I can tell you’re not comfortable so I’m not going to pry look. Instead, Midoriya Inko makes light conversation about the latest heroes, Izuku’s activities, and school.

Izuku loves his mother.

After finishing breakfast, Izuku snatches his bag and his skateboard to head off into town.

“How was your meeting with Professor Miki?” His mother waves him off as Izuku makes his way down the stairs. Oh, this was a bad idea. Oh, this was such a bad idea.

Kero floats out after a minute or so, hovering next to Izuku’s shoulder. The look on his face clearly shows that he has no idea why Izuku’s putting himself through the torture of walking down nine flights of stairs when he can barely walk normally. Izuku explains that Zing said it was good casual training and suggested (ordered) that he take the stairs whenever possible.

“But I don’t get why everything hurts so much,” Izuku whines, grasping onto the railing for dear life. Every time he takes a step, his legs do this weird thing where they straighten out and try to collapse backward as if he’s a newborn giraffe.

It’s been some time since Izuku’s been so sore. The last time was when he first started training with Satoshi and Zing a few years back, but after training so frequently for three years, his body has gotten used to the physical exertion. It makes no sense that some skateboarding and jumping would make him sore when Zing throws him onto the bars and snaps orders.

“Magical backlash isn’t fun, huh?” Kero shakes his head, crossing his arms. “This happens a lot with newbie magicians who unlock all their potential at one time.”

Izuku lets out a breath he’s been holding. “So... last night...”

The plush grins cheekily. “That amazing display of light? That’s what happens when you let out a bunch of magic at the same time. The reason you’re sore all over is because your body couldn’t handle it.”

Great. So now magic can make Izuku feel like he fell out of a very tall tree and hit every branch on the way down. “How do I control it, then?”

“Oh, don’t worry about it,” Kero says nonchalantly, waving a hand dismissively. “Last night was an exception since it was your first time using magic. Usually, when you use too much magic, you’ll pass out before your body starts breaking down.”

That’s an interesting thought. Maybe magic is linked to endurance. In that case, if Izuku continues to overuse his magic – safely – will he be able to train his body to have a higher upper limit for magic usage? Even if last night was an exception, if he isn’t dead, that means that sort of insane output is
physically possible. It’s like an intense workout.

As a civilian, Izuku really shouldn’t be thinking about how he should increase his power as a pseudo-magician.

But, you know, Plus Ultra, right?

Izuku sighs in relief as he reaches the bottom of the stairs. Maybe he should leave the possibility of a magical workout to after he doesn’t feel like his limbs are useless noodles.

Kero crawls back into Izuku’s bag as the two exit the building. The buses have been detoured again, so Izuku makes his way downtown by skateboard. It’s a pretty short trip, only fifteen minutes, but Izuku gets held up by people greeting him and making conversation as he passes them.

Unsurprisingly, the hot topic of the day is the “villain attack” from last night.

Everybody’s curious about how the villain was more or less invulnerable against attempts to bring it down. Izuku hears many different theories: a super-powered villain who’s just made their debut, a large group of villains working together, a government experiment gone wrong, and even aliens.

Even more interesting is the unnamed vigilante that saved the day and put all the heroes on the scene to shame. Apparently Izuku’s gained some sort of fan following overnight, which is a very uncomfortable situation.

It takes a few minutes for the reality of the situation to sink in.

Izuku trips on his skateboard, narrowly avoiding falling straight into traffic. He gets a few strange looks, so he quickly ducks into a nearby bookstore. The cashier merely flicks her eyes up at him and returns to her phone.

“Oh my god,” Izuku breathes when he’s holed himself up in the quietest corner of the shop.

Kero pops his head out of the bag. “You good?” Is all he asks, keeping his voice low.

Of course Izuku would be labelled as a vigilante – that’s literally what he was doing, trying to protect people by acting outside of the law. Nobody except for himself and Kero know about magic, about Sakura Cards, about Izuku’s duty as a cardcaptor.

“This is bad,” Izuku manages to say, wringing his hands. The pendant around his neck feels much heavier than before.

Kero shakes his head, jumping onto Izuku’s shoulder. “You’re doing the right thing,” the plush insists. “You’re the only one who can seal the cards. The cards won’t obey anybody but you. Don’t listen to what people say about you. You’re the Master of Cards. This is your right!”

There are so many things that Izuku could say in response, but he chooses to keep quiet. In terms of magical knowledge, it’s indisputable that Kero knows more than Izuku. It’s clear from Kero’s actions that he played some role in helping the previous cardcaptor, so the only thing Izuku can really do is put his trust in someone with the right kind of experience.

“The police will never understand,” Izuku whispers to Kero, picking up a book to make it look like he’s talking to himself and not some unseen entity.

Slipping back into the bag, Kero sighs. “There’s nothing we can do about that,” the plush says. “All we can do is get the Sakura Cards back safe and sound, where they belong.”
Izuku’s mind slips back to Fly’s rampage from last night. All that damage and destruction due to confusion from both parties - Fly, confused and scared, and the pro heroes, working to protect the peace. Then there’s Izuku, the one stuck in between all this. His goal is to protect the people by protecting the cards.

What a mess.

Eventually, Izuku calms down enough to put the book down and exit the shop. The cashier nods at him with a blank expression, barely lifting her eyes from her phone. Izuku doesn’t blame her. This isn’t the first time he’s had to make an emergency breakdown stop.

As Izuku makes his way downtown, he hears Kero chirp out occasional comments about their surroundings and how interesting a quirk-based society is. Eventually, Izuku makes it to the gym, where Zing and Satoshi greet him.

Zing raises an eyebrow when she appraises him. “You look pretty stiff.”

“I feel pretty stiff,” is all Izuku can say.

In typical fashion, Zing decides that Izuku is perfectly fine for training and all but chases him onto the bars. Satoshi stands to the side, tossing his baton into the air. A few others busy themselves with the mats, going about their routine training.

Halfway into the session, Satoshi walks over as Izuku’s flipping himself over the bars.

“Hey,” Satoshi begins casually. “You hear about Deku?”

Izuku loses his grip and falls face-first into the mats below. Zing doesn’t look surprised, but spares a glance before returning to help one of the younger girls.

Sputtering, Izuku wipes his face with his arm. “W-what?”

Satoshi adopts a confused expression, twirling his baton with one hand. “You know, the vigilante that everyone’s been freaking out about.”

No. No, that is very, very, very bad news. Nobody else Izuku spoke to put a name to a face. It was all “the unnamed vigilante” or “that weird vigilante”.

It takes Izuku a few deep breaths before he can answer properly. “Oh. Yes. I didn’t know h – them by name. Deku. Is that what they’re calling them?”

Satoshi gives him a scrutinizing look, but continues on nonetheless. “Yeah. It was revealed just this morning – apparently a ton of people at the fight heard the vigilante say something along the lines of ‘I, Deku, command you’ or something.” With a flip of his wrist, Satoshi catches the baton and snorts. “Pretty condescending, right?”

Well, shit.

Izuku laughs awkwardly, trying to keep his hysteria under the wraps. A full-body shiver assaults him all of a sudden, like something pinching at the base of his neck, which probably looks very strange from an outsider’s point of view. Luckily, Zing calls Satoshi just in time to miss Izuku’s spontaneous convulsion.

For the rest of the session, Izuku tries his hardest to talk about literally anything but the new vigilante, Deku. He’s mostly successful since Satoshi can’t talk about a subject for more than five minutes, and
Zing’s too busy snapping out orders to chat.

After changing out of his gym clothes, Izuku snatches his bag as quickly as possible, giving Satoshi and Zing a hasty farewell, and proceeds to put as much distance between himself and them as possible. A few minutes later, Izuku finds himself sitting on a park bench.

Kero peeks his head out of the bag. “So... I heard what your friend – Satoshi, right? I heard what he told you.” Despite everything, the plush grins. “Who would’ve known one night would make you into such a phenomenon?”

It should come as no surprise that people heard him yelling – after all, it’s not Izuku was trying to be subtle or anything. Regardless, it’s still upsetting, having a name that could be potentially used to trace back to him.

Oh, Kacchan. Kacchan’s going to be so pissed.

Izuku decides to leave that disastrous situation for later. Instead, he collects his thoughts with Kero blinking up at him. After ten minutes have passed, Izuku feels better and decides to head home. Normally, he’d stay out to hang around the neighbourhood, but things have changed.

Izuku knows the city inside out. He knows almost nothing about magic.

***

The two of them are sitting comfortably in Izuku’s room when Izuku asks how much magic a person can use before passing out.

“It depends,” Kero answers, a worried expression on his face. “A stronger magician will have a higher upper limit, and vice versa.” He trails off, staring suspiciously at Izuku. “...Why?”

There’s a pause. Kero’s brows furrow.

Well. Plus Ultra.

“I’m going to use magic until I’m about to pass out,” Izuku replies.

“Oh my god,” is all Izuku hears before he closes his eyes and focuses every ounce of energy on his surroundings.

Nothing happens.

Izuku can hear Kero huff deeply and mumble something about irresponsible newbies and actually super dangerous. There’s a moment of silence, with Kero staring and Izuku holding his breath.

Relenting, Kero slaps a hand on his forehead. “Fine,” he eventually grumbles. “Let’s, I don’t know, make you potentially go catatonic from magic overuse.”

Well, that certainly wasn’t on the warning label.

Then again, this still isn’t the dumbest thing Izuku’s chosen to do. There was that one time a few months ago that he volunteered to help out at the city stadium after the usual technician had a family emergency. Oh, god, that was miserable.

“You’re doing it wrong,” Kero explains, returning Izuku’s train of thought to the present. “You’re just trying to block out everything. There’s no way you’re gonna get anywhere doing that!”
Izuku flinches when he feels two plush hands tap his face.

“There’s a sort of hum that you have to hear. It’s – it’s sort of like a song, but...” Trailing off, Kero attempts to find the right words. “It’s like an underlying beat of the universe. If you want to hear it, you have to be aware of it.”

That’s... not the worst analogy. From what Izuku can remember, the sounds he heard were pretty much beats, pulsating through the air, some cancelling each other out, others enhancing one another.

*Compared to the universe, we are all so small,* something bell-like whispers in Izuku’s ear, causing him to straighten up. *If you’d like to try and comprehend even the tiniest speck of your world, lend me your ears.*

*Okay,* Izuku thinks back.

Static begins to rise from the back of Izuku’s mind, swarming around his ears. Then, wind chimes and bells and a lady’s voice, followed by what sounds like trumpets, waves, and howling wind. Each sound sings its own melody, its own verse, until the noise increases in volume to become one flat, awful ringing, then snaps out of existence.

Confused, Izuku opens his eyes. He looks up at Kero, who returns a confused expression. The plush mouths words, but no sound comes out. Izuku realizes after a moment that Kero’s speaking, but he can’t hear it.

Izuku hears nothing. Then he hears everything.

Noise blinks into existence, one moment absent, the next, all-encompassing. Kero’s voice is audible again, but it comes out much deeper, almost like a snarl or a roar. The digital clock on Izuku’s bedside table pulses faint beats and static, giving a little tick as the minute moves forward. Past the door, Izuku can hear his mother cutting – parsley, it has to be parsley, what else would make that crisp snap? He can hear water boiling in a kettle, every hiss of steam that escapes, every faint bubble of foam that rises to the surface.

*So superficial,* the bells chide, almost sighing. *There’s more. Listen deeper.*

And Izuku complies – how can he not? There’s so much to hear, so much to feel, so much to understand.

A wave of noise crashes into Izuku, lapping at his ears. He sits under a patch of moonlight, lulling him into its gentle embrace of songs of water and wind, of elegant victory, of *proud to be yours.*

Underneath all the noise that feeble human ears can hear, magic croons a song, so ancient and delicate and mysterious that human ears couldn’t possibly ever comprehend it. Every note is a brilliant star, every phrase is a galaxy, every rise and fall is light and darkness. Between pauses, supernovas burst into existence, all moonbeams and sunshine, brilliant in their births and in their deaths.

The walls of the room fall away, so insignificant compared to the music of the universe around him. Silver-and-gold strings hum their unique songs, some screaming, some crying, others laughing. In each voice is a story of struggles, of victories, of life.

Past every boundary that Izuku can’t hear – can’t understand – is a vast sea of darkness, singing a song so low and so indescribably old that Izuku can feel the cold growing on his bones. Twinkles jump out from the darkness, the faint strains of music that Izuku latches onto, hungry for more.
That’s enough, the bells declare, a command that Izuku knows to be absolute.

But Izuku pushes forward. In the darkness, something – somebody – laughs, beckoning with strings taut and black, of inky darkness and empty echoes. There’s so much Izuku could learn if he just – took one more step off the edge –

No, the bells demand, all but snatching Izuku away from the darkness and back under the quiet lull of moonlight.

Snapping back into reality, Izuku startles so suddenly that he smacks the back of his head on the wall behind him. The stinging pain chases away the last remaining strands of silver-and-gold.

It’s only then that Izuku notices Kero’s little arms beating down on his head. And by god, was he this tired before?

Moaning, Izuku lifts a hand up to his face. A splitting headache crashes down onto him, sending up fresh waves of nausea.

At Izuku’s reaction, Kero stops his assault. “You’re okay!” The plush cries, relief evident in his voice. Kero pauses. After a moment, Kero renews his pounding. “You idiot!” He screeches, apparently determined to hammer through Izuku’s skull.

Izuku manages to keep Kero away with one hand while using the other to rub his temples. Where did that god-awful headache come from?

“You were completely catatonic for half an hour!” Kero yells, pushing himself away from Izuku’s hand. “I told you this was a bad idea!”

“But it worked, right?” Izuku replies, trying out a grim smile.

Kero, calmer now that Izuku’s alive and well, huffs and crosses his arms. “You tell me. What happened? Usually you’d pass out after something that intense, but you just kept going!” The plush throws his hands into the air with a frustrated shout. “I thought you’d gone insane!”

Insane doesn’t even begin to explain what Izuku... heard? Saw? Felt? It’s complicated.

Trying his best to explain his experience in words, Izuku recounts what he heard-saw-felt. Hesitantly, Izuku decides to leave out the the bells and the laughing, choosing instead to emphasize the silver-and-gold strings.

Thankfully, seeing silver-and-gold strings are apparently normal.

“We don’t really have one specific term for them,” Kero explains, making himself comfortable on Izuku’s digital clock. “Every magician sees them, but since everyone uses different names for them, they sort of just became background knowledge.”

“Lifestrings,” Izuku suggests.

Kero shrugs. “Sure. That’s sort of a poor man’s analogy, but you can’t go wrong with it.” Then, narrowing his eyes, the plush lowers his voice. “...What else did you hear?”

Oh, no. That’s not an area Izuku’s comfortable with.

Trying his best not to wring his hands, Izuku shakes his head. “I can’t – I didn’t really hear anything else. It was like – I saw stuff, and I felt stuff, but I wasn’t even trying to.”
To that, Kero lets out a relieved sigh and nods. “That overlapping is normal. It’s sort of like when you smell a really familiar food, you can sort of taste it. Take that, and stockpile it super high. That’s what you get with magically-enhanced senses.”

Spotting an opening, Izuku snatches the opportunity and runs away with it.

“Speaking of which, what’s your favourite food?” It’s out of place and incredibly random, but Kero perks immediately up at the mention of food.

The next fifteen minutes are composed of Izuku mentally jotting down notes as Kero rants on about how beautiful sweets and candy are and about how he’ll eat anything if it tastes good, he’s not picky, but he really does like deserts, especially strawberry shortcake, because strawberries are the best fruit because they’re crispy and sweet and tingly all at once, whoever put them in cake was a genius, and did you hear that?

Frowning, Izuku looks where Kero’s line of sight has suddenly snapped over to. “Hear what?”

“You just sat there for half an hour listening to the song of the universe,” Kero replies blandly. “You don’t need to astral-project yourself out there. Remember that buzzing feeling from last night?”

Buzzing sound, Izuku corrects internally, only to freeze immediately after. “Oh, wait, what?”

Kero’s face splits into a wide grin. Geez, that toy really flip-flops emotionally. “It’s a Sakura Card. You ready take make another trip?”

Izuku’s face is already in his hands when Kero turns to face him. It takes a minute of breathing deeply and another minute of internal screaming to get his thoughts to form coherently, but sitting there isn’t going to get him out of his job to seal away the cards.

“Fine,” Izuku agrees through gritted teeth.

It’s literally been less than 24 hours since Izuku first became a cardcaptor, and he’s on his second card.

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The capture is very anticlimactic. Izuku appreciates that greatly.

As Izuku makes his way to the buzzing feeling, which turns out to be in the park, he prepares himself for anything. Dragons, aliens, more giant birds – they’re magic cards, for god’s sake.

Unfortunately, at two in the afternoon, many people are out enjoying the nice fall weather. A few dog-walkers and children greet him as he makes his way past them on his skateboard. What one particular child says catches his attention.

“Me ‘n Yuki wanted to play by the pond and catch some frogs, but there’s someone using their quirk and it’s scaring all the frogs away!” The child cries, stomping her foot angrily.

But... using quirks in public with no good reason is illegal. Izuku promises that he’ll go chase away whoever it is that’s scaring the frogs and makes his way down to the pond.

Um. Well, that is one way to scare frogs.

A cloud floats over the edge of the pond, pouring heavy rain onto the water. It does look like the result of a quirk, except for the fact that there’s a small girl sitting atop the cloud.
She’s dressed very strangely, clothes reminiscent of a jester’s, complete with puffy pants and a large jester’s hat. A large raindrop sits in the center of her forehead while smaller raindrops hang off her pointy collar and hat. She laughs as the rain fall onto the water, eyes tracing the path of the ripples.

Kero suddenly pops his head out of Izuku’s bag with a quiet hiss. “That’s Rain! Sakura Card, confirmed; now let’s seal it!”

Izuku tries to walk casually toward a very large bush. When no one’s looking, he ducks into it, pulls the pendant out from underneath his shirt, and begins to chant quietly.

“Key that hides the power of the moon, show your true form before me. I, Deku, command you under our contract. Release!”

Thankfully, the magic circle is much smaller than last night and only flashes for a moment before disappearing. Izuku grabs the staff and bolts toward the pond when the coast is clear.

Though Izuku approaches slowly, Rain notices him and turns around. Izuku freezes, his hand on Windy.

Rain laughs and beckons for Izuku to come closer. Hesitating, he slowly approaches the water, prepared for any sudden movements.

Kero pokes his head out again. “Calm down. Rain’s a friendly card. The only thing she can do is make it rain. C’mon, go, go!”

The tension seeps away from Izuku’s posture. He kneels next to the water, sticking a hand out underneath Rain’s area of effect. Rain chirps gleefully, bouncing up and down on her cloud.

“Sorry to rain on your parade, but I think I have to seal you,” Izuku says, after a minute or so’s passed. He flicks his hand awkwardly above the water surface. “And – and if you want to make it rain, I could always use your help at the community garden. You know. To water plants.”

Rain nods cheerfully, slapping her hands on the cloud as if to say, *Hurry up.*

Izuku nods back, twirling his staff in his hands.

“Rain, I command you return to your form confined,” Izuku declares as the magic circle blossoms into existence underneath his feet. “Seal!”

With a small flash of light, Rain’s small form and cloud disappears, and a card floats into Izuku’s hand.

Izuku stands there for a moment, shocked. That was significantly less stressful than last night.

Kero somehow manages to punch him through the bag. The sharp poke through the fabric startles Izuku, and he swings the bag around in front of him.

“Let’s leave the scene before someone sees us,” the plush whispers, swiveling his head around to check if they were spotted. Suddenly, Kero’s eyes widen and he ducks back into the bag with a small yelp.

Fumbling with the baton, Izuku wills it to transform back into a pendant just in time for the same little girl to pop up from behind the trees.

“Did you take care of the bully?” She asks, looking around. Apparently she answers her own
question, because she grins, runs up to Izuku, and throws her arms around his legs. It’s flattering and terrifying at the same time.

Izuku’s just happy he didn’t blow his cover.

After a good fifteen seconds of vigorous hugging, the girl bounces away and thanks Izuku for his hard work. “You’re just like a hero!” She declares, throwing a fist up and mimicking All Might.

That... for some reason, that really touches Izuku.

“I’m sure the real heroes are a lot tougher than me,” Izuku replies, laughing lightly, though his grip on the pendant tightens.

With an angry expression on her face, the girl stomps up to Izuku and punches him in the arm. Izuku yelps, kind of offended but mostly shocked at how quickly the girl went through different emotions.

“Dummy!” She shouts, sticking her tongue out. “Real heroes help anyone and everyone, whether or not they’re in trouble!”

That one sentence strikes Izuku to the very core.

That’s right – isn’t that why he started getting involved with the community in the first place? It’s not just for fun, for hours, for favours – it’s because being a hero doesn’t mean you have to have a fancy costume, a shiny licence, or a famous name. Being a hero is about being selfless, kind, and accepting. Being a hero isn’t about having a powerful quirk. It’s about having the will to make things better.

“Thanks anyway, Dumb Bush Boy!” The girl shouts as she runs back to her friends.

Kero pops his head out as soon as the girl’s out of sight. “Dumb Bush Boy,” he snickers, his entire frame shaking with laughter.

“Dumb Bush Boy,” Izuku repeats, still in shock. Did a six-year old just give him the best advice he’s ever heard?

Yes. Yes, that’s exactly what happened.

“Well, good job with Rain!” Kero says happily. “Just so you know, a lot of the cards are actually really peaceful. Just, uh, don’t get caught when you seal them.”

Izuku nods numbly and slowly makes his way out of the park. Oh, that’s right – he has to help out a group of students with their research at the library tonight.

“Let’s go get lunch,” is all Izuku manages to say.

All in all, his life is more or less the same. He’s always busy and on the move, but now he’s really busy and on the move. Sakura Cards can pop out of nowhere and detour his entire day, the public thinks he’s a vigilante, and he’s the only one with the power to seal magical beings.

In general, it’s more or less as shocking as starting gymnastics was.

Izuku breathes out, watching the scenery pass on his skateboard.

He’ll live.
the only ones that see

Chapter Summary

Watery, Sweet, and Sword. A familiar figure, and a childhood friend.

Chapter Notes

15k words. i have no self control.

ft. izuku, slamming his head into a wall 24/7

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We’ve got a situation,” is how Kero greets Izuku first thing in the morning.

That’s just great, because Izuku’s currently nursing a headache from the pits of hell. All Izuku did was sit there for half an hour and – astral project? What did he even do? And now it feels like he just took a jackhammer to the face.

“What,” Izuku manages to grit out, gripping his bedside table firmly as he slides out of bed. The time reads 5:43.

Izuku gets up at six, but that’s a whole seventeen minutes of sleep that he just lost. Besides, it’s Sunday. He’s got things to do, places to be...

Kero swings a squirt bottle in front of Izuku’s face and proceeds to squeeze the trigger. Izuku lets out an undignified yelp at the unexpected assault, falling backward onto his bed.

“Up you get!” Kero yells, dropping the squirt bottle onto the desk, proceeding to step on the power button of the television remote with one violent stomp. There’s something in his tone of voice that sets Izuku on edge. “This is bad!”

Wiping his face with his sleeve, Izuku turns to watch as the live broadcast shouts something about a villain using a water quirk to terrorize civilians near the beach.

In the background, the water along the beach has risen into some sort of figure resembling a human, surrounded by tendrils of water and looming over the scattering civilians. The water-thing screeches as it dives down into the crowd, grabbing beach-goers and dragging them into the water. They don’t reappear.

Apparently there haven’t been any confirmed fatalities, but injuries are widespread, and officials are quickly making their way onto the scene. None of the civilians that have been pulled under have reappeared.

The reporter on the scene shakes as she explains the situation. Izuku doesn’t blame her.

Izuku’s face is in his hands by the time Kero turns the television off. “A card.”
Kero nods grimly. “That’s Watery. It really sucks that you have to face such a violent card so early, but there’s nothing we can do about it.” The plush kicks Izuku’s bag open and begins throwing items in. “Now, let’s get going before something really bad happens!”

If Fly – a usually gentle and passive card – could cause so much damage just by being confused, then Izuku doesn’t even want to think of what a typically violent card could do.

Izuku throws on some of his typical clothes before pausing. He’s a vigilante in the public eye, so maybe he should be wearing something a bit more inconspicuous.

Fifteen minutes later, Izuku bolts out of his apartment in grey sweatpants, a blue hoodie, and a very generic notebag. It takes him a few minutes to locate an empty alleyway with no risk of being spotted.

Izuku takes a deep breath, pulling out his pendant and Fly. It’s pretty shocking how quickly he adapted to – to whatever this situation can be called.

Hanging the pendant loose from his hand, Izuku closes his eyes and focuses on the faint buzz of magic that enveloped him entirely before. “Key that hides the power of the moon, show your true form before me. I, Deku, command you under our contract. Release!”

If the bright light from the magic circle was spotted by anyone, they don’t make any attempts to find the source. Still, Izuku carefully peeks his head out of both ends of the alleyway just in case. Kero’s small head also pops out from the bag, comically in sync with Izuku’s movements.

After a minute of surveillance, Izuku lets out a deep breath and holds up Fly above his head. “Fly, heed my call! Under the name of your master, Deku, grant me safe flight to the beach!”

Izuku bursts out of the alleyway atop his staff in a flurry of feathers and silver dust with Kero clinging tightly to the straps of the bag.

“You know the drill,” Kero shouts over the wind. “Follow the buzzing to get to Watery, then stay back, play it safe, and don’t die or get arrested!”

It’s good advice. No particularly spirit-lifting, but good nonetheless.

Unsurprisingly, it takes much longer for Izuku to find the still-foreign hum of magic due to his pounding headache. For a few minutes, all Izuku can feel is the faint aching. There’s a very faint feeling of something... tingl y under his skin, but every time he tries to focus on it, it disappears.

*You’re exceptional, and yet so sad,* the bells scoff, catching Izuku off guard. Perhaps you need a little push.

A little hum of energy rises from the back of Izuku’s mind. He latches onto it immediately, steadily peeling back the layers of exhaustion that cloud his mind to crack into his suppressed magic.

As Izuku focuses deeper and deeper into the buzzing sensation underneath his skin, silver-and-gold strings – Lifestrings – begin to weave into existence around him, glimmering and waving gently. The landscape below him is of a city just waking up for the morning, with the faint smell of coffee and tea brushing past his nose. Over most of the city, a song of calm plays, all gentle bursts of energy and lethargic wakefulness.

Izuku flies into the beachside district, and the song abruptly shifts to panic and confusion. The change is so sudden that Izuku visibly jolts, unbalancing himself and nearly falling off his staff. Kero shrieks something unintelligible, scrambling to grab onto Izuku’s sleeve. Taking quick action, Fly
quickly leans in the opposite direction to prevent his untimely death by falling off a flying stick.

The wailing tones and ringing pain that wedges itself into a corner of Izuku’s head is almost as painful as the headache itself. Heavy drum-like beats clash with a symphony high-pitched squealing, creating a truly awful combination of the worst noises in existence.

Izuku holds his head with his free hand, trying to shake the ringing out of his ears. “Do – do you hear that? The drums and the screeching and...”

“If you mean the panic in the air, yeah,” Kero replies shakily, slowly edging his way back into the notebag from where he’s wrapped around Izuku’s arm. “Magic sounds different to everyone, so I don’t really know what you’re hearing.” The plush quirks an eyebrow, an amused tone to his voice. “But wow, you really have some incredible ears if you can hear something that specific. Nice on you, kid!”

Personally, Izuku thinks he could do without the jumble of noises running rampant in his already aching head, but he pushes on anyway.

Within the pounding beats, there’s a light chime that breaks through the otherwise ear-piercing sounds. It hums verses of clear water and moonlight reflecting off glass, of ancient rivers yet to be discovered by man, of streaming ribbons of magic, flowing throughout the universe, bringing life and death, acting as the sculptor of all land, the eternal overseer of all life.

And yet the song is so angry, screaming of crashing waves and stormy seas, smashing ships into oblivion, drowning out all that it can trap within its deadly embrace.

It’s Watery. There’s no doubt about it.

*Good*, the bells say. *Now go and do your duty.*

Izuku directs Fly toward the shore, landing on the roof of an apartment building facing the beach to survey the scene.

It’s... rough.

Once again, the police are warding civilians off and away from the sand, yelling over the chaos of the crowd. Only a few pro heroes stand on the scene, most of them incapable of dealing any proper damage to the vicious mass of water that snarls at them.

One hero attempts to use the water itself to overpower Watery, but is overpowered herself and sent barrelling into the sand, where she slides a long way before coming to stop. The other heroes try their best to ward off the bombardment of water whips that threatens to drag in more innocent bystanders.

Having pulled himself onto Izuku’s shoulder, Kero surveys the situation grimly. “There’s no way Watery’s happy with all the heroes trying to confront her. We’ve got to do something before somebody actually dies.”

Right – there are people underneath the water. What if they’re hurt? What if they’re dead? Maybe – maybe Watery’s just keeping them hostage, not actually drowning them. There’s no guarantee that the civilians are dead, but at the same time, there’s no telling if they’re alive. The best plan of action – Izuku needs a plan of action, and he needs one fast, but he just can’t think, he’s always too slow, too useless, too quirkless –

Izuku slaps his hands violently on his cheeks. Kero stares at him as if he’s crazy.
No, no, no. Panic won’t get him anywhere. He needs to look at the hand he’s been dealt...

What cards does he have? Windy, Fly, and Rain – only three, but already very versatile. Since he can only use one card at a time, there’s now way he’ll be able to fly around if he also wants to use Windy. Windy is a powerful card, but it’s unlikely that wind will be able to bind watery. And Rain... maybe not.

There must be a way – something simple, something straightforward –

Izuku’s eyes freeze as he spots a pro hero in a blue cloak with snowflake patterns. There it is. 

_Occam’s razor_. Echoing in the ravines of Izuku’s mind, the bells laugh.

Holding up Windy’s card, Izuku shouts, “Windy, heed my call! Under the name of your master, Deku, bring me safely to the beach!”

Streaming wind blows past Izuku’s hand as Windy materializes in front of him, humming a gentle song of guidance and courage, of quiet determination and undying will. She looks back expectantly, fairy-like wings resting at her sides, ready to help in whatever way she can.

It takes Izuku a moment to steel himself before he sprints off the roof, using Windy’s gusts of wind to hop over the street, the crowd, and the blockade. He lands on the sand, rolling into a run. The crowd’s already begun making a commotion about his sudden appearance, which isn’t too surprising, given that it was only yesterday that he made headlines.

Izuku blocks out the noise from the crowd. The attention’s only going to distract him and make him anxious when what he needs is to focus on the crisis in front of him.

Windy trails after Izuku as he makes his way toward the hero in the blue cloak. “Excuse me! Absolute Zero, miss!”

Both Absolute Zero and Izuku duck as a water whip swipes over their heads. With one gentle touch, Absolute Zero freezes the entirety of the whip. It shatters into sparkling shards under the early morning sun.

Absolute Zero turns, eyes widening when she lays her eyes on Izuku. “A civilian? Wait – you’re that vigilante!”

“You please hear me out,” Izuku begs. “I’m here to help. I – I don’t mean any harm, I just saw the news, and it looks really bad right now, so I wanted to offer my services.”

Izuku really needs this to work. This is the only way.

Absolute Zero narrows her eyes underneath her hood.

“Vigilante or not, you’re a civilian. It’s too dangerous for someone like you!”

With an ear-piercing roar, Watery fires a blast of water in the form of a dragon out of its massive form. Cries of alarm ring out as the force of the attack blasts one hero into the water, while another is thrown off of the beach and into a building.

Time seems to slow down as Izuku watches the water serpent turns toward them. It releases a bellowing roar, launching itself toward Absolute Zero. The pro hero moves to block the attack, but – her Lifestrings – no, they’re all tangled, all wrong, too many foreign colours in what’s supposed to be a beautiful tapestry of silver and gold, there’s no way she’ll be able to take that head-on without serious injury, and that can’t happen, because Izuku needs her help to save everyone –
The bells ringing in Izuku’s ears yell, *Danger!* A sudden shock of burning flames and freezing frost dances up his spine, jolting him into action.

“Windy!” Izuku commands, throwing a hand forward.

A blast of green-hued wind smashes into the blast of water, creating an impact so powerful that it knocks both Izuku and Absolute Zero back. The water serpent explodes backward into a shower of water against the barrier that Windy’s put up, reflecting a very out-of-place rainbow from the sunlight and the water droplets.

Izuku wipes off the water on his face, stumbling back onto his feet. For a supposedly gentle card, Windy can be very, very scary when it wants to.

“Windy can’t hold her own against Watery,” Kero warns, his head just sticking out of the bag. “Windy’s powerful, but Watery’s way too strong here!”

Kero brings up an excellent point. It’s very likely that Watery has its own body and, therefore, its own limitations, but the environment is doing nothing but acting as an infinite source of energy for Watery.

Wait.

Watery’s just a Sakura Card, not the entire seaside or anything. The form it’s taking now must be the result of absorbing the surrounding water on the beach. If that’s the case, then it’s logical to assume that the only way to stop Watery is to return it to its original form.

Izuku has a plan.

“Holy shit,” Absolute Zero gasps, lowering her arms. Frost flakes off her cloak and her breath comes out in icy pants. Not good – Izuku has to act quickly, before she exhausts herself.

“I have a plan,” Izuku says to Absolute Zero, throwing up another hand as a water whip swings their way. He winces as Windy pulls up another barrier to stop the attack. “Please, just listen to me!”

Absolute Zero pauses, looking between Watery and the civilians. Her brows furrow and she clenches her fists, but eventually relents. “There’s no other choice. The safety of the civilians is our top priority.” Her ice-cold gaze chills Izuku down to his very core. “Tell me what you have, Deku.”

The use of his nickname startles Izuku, despite the fact that he knows there’s no way the hero knows anything about that name. Taking a deep breath, Izuku explains what he has planned. He makes it concise and simple, knowing that Windy won’t be able to stall forever.

After he’s done, Absolute Zero nods. She looks better and significantly less frosted over after a minute of rest.

“It’s the best we’ve got,” the hero says, her cloak billowing behind her as cold air begins to circle around her body. “Don’t mess up, Deku!”

And isn’t that a high order.

Izuku dispels Windy, then jumps narrowly out of the way of a particularly vicious tendril of water that smashes down beside him. Absolute Zero takes off in the opposite direction, drawing as much attention to herself as possible. She does this by summoning round after round of ice shards, firing them off at Watery’s form with a sharp sweep of the hand.
Watery takes the taunting for what it is, turning to roar something incomprehensible. The verse it screams is nothing but whirlpools and tsunamis, raining devastation and destruction upon land, drowning all who oppose its mighty power within dark waves, sealing everything below a watery grave.

The sheer hatred and call for destruction, *drown it all, it's all meaningless* – it’s such a change from Fly’s panicked confusion and the general harmony of the universe that Izuku nearly trips over his own feet.

Kero pokes his head out of the bag, a worried expression on his face. “You good?”

Isn’t that a question.

“I’m fine,” Izuku says back, running to where Watery has turned its back. “Just caught off guard.”

It’s natural that Watery’s song would be more violent than Fly’s. It’s to be expected, but it’s shocking nonetheless.

After Izuku has made his way directly behind Watery’s giant body, he comes to a stop and holds the Sealing Staff horizontally in front of him. There’s no guarantee that what he’s planning will work, but if Absolute Zero is giving it her all, then Izuku has to try, too.

If he doesn’t, then all the civilians in the water, all the civilians watching anxiously – what if one of Izuku’s friends is underneath the water, or in the crowd? Watery needs to be sealed, and it doesn’t matter if Izuku can’t muster up the ability to do it. He’ll change the whole goddamn world, if it only means everyone can be safe.

*Your intuition and determination surpasses that of many others,* the bells hum, impressed. *For that, allow me to guide your hand.*

Something slots into place in Izuku’s mind, clicking gears that Izuku never knew existed into position, wiring together different parts, sculpting something entirely new out of something entirely old –

– And then Izuku understands.

The landscape before him transforms from sand and water to a plane of endless desert overlapping with a stretch of unending sea.

Hazy heat folds into cold air, intertwining above a boundary of golden sands and deep blue waters. While the sands croon a song of survival and endurance, of eternal heat and illusions, the waters bellow out deep chords of life and darkness, echoing with ancient mystery. Both songs blend into a medley of life and death, archaic and impossible to appreciate fully.

But Izuku understands. He sees, he hears, he *knows* all.

The bells in his head are no longer just whispers. He and them are one, resonating clear chimes that pierce through all that is placed before them.

For some reason, the staff in Izuku’s hands feels... foreign. Why are his powers limited by such a feeble conduit? Why not a more powerful vessel, or even his bare hands? The body is the soul’s most direct path, a container for all magic, and a passageway for the universe.

The Guardian looks up at Izuku with concern, asking some meaningless question. Izuku smiles serenely in response, and the Guardian falls silent. All questions will be answered with time.
In front of him, the blue-cloaked girl yells something about acting quickly because she can’t hold on for much longer. It’s to be expected; those who cannot feel the thrum of magic are limited to whatever constraints they choose to put themselves in, be it physical or mental.

Watery is certainly a ferocious beast. Its creator was an unparalleled magician, and his eccentric nature birthed some very interesting creations. Their temper tantrums are rather irritating, though.

Izuku twirls the staff with one hand. It’s time to put rebellious children in their place.

With a gentle exhale, Izuku stretches one hand in front of him. His magic circle flashes to life underneath his feet, overlapped by a layer of borrowed magic, not rightfully his yet. The silver wisps and stars that dance up from his own magic intertwine with the butterflies that the foreign magic births.

Watery attempts to turn, but finds itself held in place by the not-magician’s ice. Izuku must take the opportunity he’s been given.

“Crescent moon of the night, obey me. I call upon that which I control and that which I do not; the magic which I cannot currently offer in trade will be supplemented by this which has been gifted to me.” Izuku lifts Windy to his lips for a brief moment, then allows the card to drop from his hand.

Before him, Windy explodes outward in a magnificent storm of green blades. The wind reorganizes itself into the shape of a crossbow, covered entirely by familiar-yet-unfamiliar runes that flicker in blazes of silver. An enormous arrow swirling with violent wind notches itself onto the crossbow, pulsating with magic.

Izuku allows a smile to rise to his lips as he raises the staff. “Windy, act out my will. Scatter the foe before me to the nine winds!”

A blast of wind – no, a blast of concentrated magic – pierces through Watery’s body in a beam of green light. The attack blows Watery apart into droplets of water, floating in the early morning breeze.

Something unhinges itself from Izuku’s mind, dragging what borrowed power he had been loaned with it. Immediately, Izuku feels faint, using his staff as a crutch to support his suddenly limp body.

That’s all the help I’ll give, the bells chuckle. You’ll have to work it out on your own.

That’s right. Izuku has a plan. He has a duty to this world, not whatever was calling to him before.

Despite the powerful attack it’s been dealt, Watery begins reforming almost instantly, dragging the water droplets into a smaller, more compact form. Just underneath it, Izuku can see a dome in which the seawater has parted. There are people down there.

“Now!” Izuku yells.

Absolute Zero grins viciously. “Good job. Now, then...” The hero throws both arms out, frost running up her limbs like spiderwebs. “Freeze!”

The temperature in the vicinity drops to a near-unbearable degree. Fortunately, Absolute Zero seems more or less alright, if not tired.

“D-do what you have to do,” she tries to shout, though it comes out through chattering teeth. Her next sentence cuts of prematurely due to her passing out onto the sand. Well.
Izuku nods, mostly to himself. Turning to face the frozen Watery, he raises his hand. “Windy, retrieve all those who’ve been held captive by Watery!”

The wind spirit complies, diving past Watery’s frozen figure and wrapping itself around the unconscious civilians. Windy lifts them up and onto the beach, where Izuku quickly runs over and checks each and every pulse.

They’re alive. Thank god.

A sudden roar jolts Izuku into action. Spinning around, he turns to face an enraged Watery, who has somehow broken free from the ice. Its form is clearer than ever – an adolescent figure with long hair and a mermaid-like tail, fins on the side of the head and a crown of scales.


There’s no time to ask questions. Izuku needs to deal with this sudden change in plans, and he needs to do it quickly. How does he protect the rescued civilians while preventing any more potential casualties?

The answer is the same as before: he needs to freeze Watery to immobilize and then capture it. But with Absolute Zero out of the game, there’s nothing he can do. Is this it? Is this the extent of his ability? No, no, there must be something else, something he’s not seeing –

The Lifestrings hanging limp above Absolute Zero’s unconscious form hum louder than anything else Izuku can hear.

It’s the only choice he has.

Izuku envisions grabbing onto the silver-and-gold strings sprouting from the hero’s back, and pulls.

Absolute Zero rises from her slumber, frost reforming on her cloak. Though... her glazed eyes signify that while she might be up, she’s not there.

Izuku’s not sure what he just did, but now’s not the time to ponder the moral implications of his actions. “Absolute Zero, please freeze Watery with all the power you’ve got!”

There’s no hesitation in the hero’s movements as she swings her hands up in front of her. The temperature drops once more, this time to a seriously dangerous degree.

Watery snarls, but can’t do anything in response to Absolute Zero’s overwhelming quirk. After releasing the attack, the hero’s strings go limp once more, and she drops to the sand.

It’s more than enough.

Izuku raises his staff and points it at Watery’s frozen figure. “Watery, I command you return to your form confined.” Slamming the staff down onto the ice, Izuku forces himself through the exhaustion running rampant through his body. “Seal!”

Watery’s form disappears, leaving behind calm beach waters. A card floats gently into Izuku’s palm.

There’s a scary moment where Izuku feels himself go weightless and collapse into the sand. Kero yells at him to get up quickly because he needs to leave before he gets arrested. Right – he just pulled another vigilante move. It’s in his best interest to leave the scene as quickly as possible.

And yet Izuku can’t bring himself to move. He’s just so tired. The songs of the universe have faded
away, leaving only an empty ringing that echoes off the corridors of Izuku’s mind.

“There’s no helping it,” Kero says, crawling out of the bag and placing both his hands on Izuku’s forehead. “I’m gonna give you a jump-start with some of my own magic. It’ll feel weird, but it’s a lot better than getting arrested!”

A flash of burning-hot fire flares into life at the base of Izuku’s mind, dragging new energy into his body. The heat of the sun only feeds the flame, acting as a makeshift battery for Izuku to draw one last command from.

Izuku raises Fly above his head, praying that he has enough magic to get him safely home. “Fly, get me out of here!”

As wings sprout from his staff, Izuku grips on with what remaining energy he has left.

Not the best way the day could’ve started.

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“I’m going to miss so much,” Izuku moans from where he’s lying on the bed.

Kero mumbles something unintelligible into the shirt he’s made into a nest of sorts, though it sounds like a series of sighs and grumbles.

The weekend is Izuku’s most productive part of the week. He goes to the gym, the library, the local garden, or whatever volunteering slot he’s inadvertently signed himself up for.

At the moment, Izuku’s confined to his room, his head planted firmly in his pillow. If the headache earlier was bad, the pounding in his head now is a whole new layer of hell. Luckily, it seems that his unique brand of magical exhaustion glosses over the passing-out part and jumps straight to the oh-my-god-everything-hurts part.

He’s not sure how to feel about that.

Four cards sit innocently on his bedside table, humming faintly with magical energy. Izuku should really wait longer before draining his reserves, especially if he wants to avoid eternal mental fatigue.

“How is this pain psychosomatic?” Izuku demands, flipping his pillow over.

Kero replies something along the lines of “That’s just how it works” before rolling himself into even more of a shirt burrito than before.

Izuku has so many questions. It’s only his second full day on the job, and he’s almost gotten himself killed twice. Why can’t every card be nice and friendly like Rain?

A few minutes of silence pass. Kero pops his head out of his makeshift shelter. “I gotta ask you something.”

Great. “What?”

“You’re not actually some closet mage, are you?”

Izuku blinks, then pushes himself up, turning to face Kero with the blankest expression he can muster. “What.”

The plush fights against the sleeves of the shirt, crawling his way out of his nest. “You have great
intuition – that’s a given. The fact that you came up with a plan so quickly really says something about how good you are at thinking on the spot.”

That’s flattering, but the original question is concerning. “Um, thank you?”

“But,” Kero emphasizes, narrowing his eyes. “That magic you used definitely wasn’t your own. No magician has two magic circles!”

Izuku would love to say that he doesn’t know anything, but the bells in his head say otherwise. Busted, they snicker, as if his predicament is something entertaining.

This is why Izuku tries not to keep too many secrets. They end up backfiring against him in the long run – or, in this case, barely a day later.

There’s no helping it.

“I hear voices,” he blurts out, wringing his hands.

Kero’s eyebrows shoot up. There’s a horrible silence and Izuku sort of feels like jumping out the window.

Surprisingly enough, Kero says, “Okay.”

That... wasn’t the reaction Izuku was expecting

“Okay?” Izuku repeats slowly, testing the word on his tongue. He can’t tell if Kero’s lack of surprise is a good or bad thing.

The plush nods, dragging the entire shirt nest with him as he scooches closer to the edge of the desk. “You inherited magic, so the voice you’re hearing is probably the previous cardcaptor. Sakura loved helping people, and I guess you’re no exception!”

What Kero’s saying makes sense, but for some reason, Izuku can’t help but to feel that it’s wrong. If the bells really are from the previous cardcaptor, why would he have two magic circles? Wouldn’t the same type of magic result in the same circle? Then again, Izuku was thrust into a world of magic just two days ago, so his hypotheses are more than likely to be off.

The bells stay strangely silent. How very helpful.

Thankfully, Kero decides that the sudden burst of energy he gained has drained away, choosing to shuffle back into the folds of the shirt. Apparently the foreign magic circle will have to wait for another time.

For the rest of the day, Izuku lies in bed, getting up every so often to attempt to do some homework. Unfortunately, he can’t find the energy to stay upright for more than ten minutes at a time, and eventually decides to set up camp in his bed under a stack of pillows. Most of them are handcrafted gifts from the old ladies whose dogs he walks frequently.

Midoriya Inko walks into Izuku’s room at lunch with a plate of hot food and some comforting words. “Make sure you get lots of rest and sleep!” His mother moves her hands around quickly, not quite sure what she should do. “Oh, should I phone the school?”

“It’s okay,” Izuku mumbles, scribbling his answers to the math questions he’s been assigned. The response comes out slurred due to his resting his face on the very notebook he’s writing in. “I just feeling a bit dizzy. Probably just a bit of heat stroke or something.”
After a bit of fussing and doting over her son, Midoriya Inko makes her leave, shutting the door gently behind her.

Kero’s head pokes out from the crumpled shirt. “Your mom is really nice.”

Despite everything, Izuku smiles. That’s a fact if he’s ever heard one. “She is.”

The rest of the day passes rather drearily. Confined to his bed, Izuku somehow manages to finish his homework. Every so often, his phone will blink with a new message from one of the many people he knows, asking where he is, if he’s okay, if he needs anything. Kero reads out the messages as they appear.

The plush frowns as he reads the contact name. “Who’s u spin me right round baby?”

“That’s Satoshi,” Izuku replies. “You know, the baton boy.”

“Oh, Baton Boy!” Kero perks up, a wide smile on his features. “Was he the one who taught you how to use a baton?”

That, among other things. Izuku hums a positive response, leaning over to grab the notebook labelled MAGIC THINGS off his shelf. If he can’t do anything productive, he might as well figure out what’s going on with the magic that’s been thrown into his life.

So far, Izuku has come to the conclusion that magic is some sort of dying art. He can’t possibly be the only person who can use magic in the whole world, right? There’s no way he’s that unique.

Quirks make matters more complicated. It’s possible that there are people who can use magic, but they mistake them for quirks instead. Who can blame them? Nobody in their right mind would jump the shark and assume that they’re some sort of magician.

On a new page, Izuku scribbles down his thoughts. If there really is someone out there who can use magic… well, he’d appreciate a confidante. Or at least some sort of tutor, because he has no idea what he’s doing.

Eventually, Izuku begins dozing off on his notebooks, thoroughly drained from magical exhaustion. On his desk, Kero snores lightly, the shirt rising and falling with his breaths. Outside, the streets are just becoming alive with energy as people make their way out for dinner. The early evening light passes through Izuku’s window, reflecting off the cracked glass diamond from two nights prior.

The refracted light almost seems unnatural in a way that Izuku can’t quite explain. Here, on the thin boundary between wakefulness and sleep, he floats, eyelids falling heavier as the seconds pass.

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Izuku’s eyes snap open when he feels himself plummeting downward.

Colours and lights spiral past him as he falls, all kaleidoscopic fragments of thousands of different pictures. Giant television screens that seem to be stills from videos flicker on the instant Izuku drops past them while pages from thick tomes billow upward as Izuku continues to fall downward.

Wait, what? When did – how did he get here, why is he falling, and where did the ground go?

There’s nothing he can do except flail his limbs and try to control his fall. With some difficulty, Izuku manages to flip himself over.
He can’t even tell what he’s falling toward. Screens and pages turn into giant wooden doors that slam open to allow Izuku passage through them. Chains of gold and silver streak around him, creating sparkling helixes of light that trail behind him.

For a short moment, Izuku is lost in the surreal surroundings. Every time he processes what he’s falling past, the scenery changes, creating a beautiful, chaotic, and ephemeral fall that just doesn’t seem to end.

Just when Izuku starts to believe that he’ll never stop falling, a voice echos from within the corridors of the neverending chamber he’s flying past.

*Hey, there! Let me give you a hand.*

An unseen force propels Izuku forward. There’s a split second where Izuku can feel his stomach drop out of his body.

The stream of words that fly out of his mouth are obscene on every level, but frankly, Izuku doesn’t care. He’s sure that anyone who overhears him will forgive him once they realize that he’s sort of, you know, plummeting into god knows what through what looks like a very, very vivid hallucination.

And then Izuku stops falling.

When he blinks, he finds himself seated in a white garden chair. In front of him is a small table on top of which a pastry stand lies, decorated with small cakes and cookies. Two cups of floral-scented tea rest on flower-patterned saucers.

All around Izuku are sakura trees in full bloom, painting a bright pink landscape with curtains of falling petals raining down from above. A light spring breeze gently blows by, bringing with it the fresh smell of nature and life.

The change is jarring to hell and back, but it’s certainly not unwelcome.

“Hello, Izuku.”

Izuku starts when he hears his name. Turning to the voice, he prepares himself for the worst.

A young girl with short brown hair and bright green eyes stands to his side, smiling. Her pink dress moves gently with the wind, ruffles bouncing back and forth. A large red bow sits on her chest while an equally as ridiculously large pink hat sits on her head.

Izuku’s no fool. He can connect the dots when they’re laid out in front of him. “Are you... Sakura?”

The girl’s smile widens as she makes her way over to the table where Izuku’s seated. “That’s right! I’m Kinomoto Sakura, the previous Master of Cards.”

It takes a few deep breaths for Izuku to speak a coherent response. “Ah. That’s... good.”

“I’m sorry for that plunge you took,” Sakura apologizes, seating herself and moving a cup of tea toward herself. “Normally, you’d be able to meet me without all that falling. But, um, due to complications, we’ll have to make do.”

And isn’t that a wonderful bundle of information to unpack. Sakura’s words imply that a) Izuku can meet Sakura, the previous owner of the cards, through whatever the hell he’s doing right now, and b) if he wants to speak with Sakura, he’s going to have to plummet downward through the products of
every fever dream he’s had in his life.

Because of course – what else could he expect from life?

“I...” Izuku hesitates. What is he so supposed to say? He has so many questions.

Sakura smiles kindly. “You must be confused. But I have to say, you’ve been doing spectacularly! You’re a naturally gifted magician.”

A blush rises to Izuku’s cheeks, and he busies himself with his tea to avoid eye contact. “I – I’ve just been doing what I can. You know. To help.”

The look on Sakura’s face is one that Izuku’s become more familiar with over his years of community involvement. He recognizes the expression – it’s the same look people give him when he explains that the reason he’s willing to give so much of his life to the community is because it’s the right thing to do. It’s strange, seeing an emotion that’s both sad and happy at the same time.

He recognizes the expression, but he doesn’t understand it.

“It’s your kindness and selflessness that makes you my successor,” Sakura explains, a wistful tone rising to her voice. “When I first became a cardcaptor, I didn’t know what to do with myself. My world wasn’t filled with strife and conflict like yours. I was just a normal girl with extraordinary powers, but I had no destination in mind.”

Waving her hand in the air, Sakura reaches out to grab a pink staff somewhat resembling Izuku’s. A gold star encompassed by a pink ring with small white wings sits at the top of a baton-length rod, radiating magic in the fitting form of sakura petals.

Sakura holds the staff horizontally in her palms, sighing. “My only role was to capture the cards. Sure, they caused trouble and endangered people close to me, but outside of that, I played no role in the greater world.” Gripping the staff, she smiles sadly. “That’s the worst thing about being a cardcaptor. Not the danger that comes with getting caught or getting injured, but how your role can make you feel so powerful and so small at the same time.”

Despite everything, Izuku sort of understands.

When he first started helping people, there would be moments where Izuku would question if he was really helping people or not. So maybe walking dogs earned some money, translating scripts was fun, and volunteering at the hospital was a nice break, but were there any results to see from his efforts?

At first, not really.

But weeks passed, then months, and then years.

Dog-sitting evolved from just another fun activity to visiting the animal shelter, rescuing dogs off the streets, and assisting service dog trainers every so often. Watching the scared, lonely animals that had once struggled to stay alive transform into loving companions was a reward like none other.

Scripts research started off as a personal interest but soon became a school-wide effort involving dozens of students in all sorts of programs. Classics students he helped would tell him about the amazing opportunities they received, citing him as the reason they were able to make it so far.

Volunteering at the hospital and becoming friends with the patients and visitors is one thing that Izuku will never regret. What began as a weekly game night evolved into a deeper understanding of
the lives of every person with connections to the hospital, be it due to personal affliction, family, or any other reason.

Izuku throws himself into his community in every way possible, but he’s never once come to the conclusion that his efforts are meaningless. To be a hero is to make one small action ripple outward and touch as many as possible.

It doesn’t seem like Sakura was able to find her place during her time as the Master of Cards.

“But you’re different,” Sakura says, jolting Izuku out of his thoughts. A cloud of pink dust dances around Sakura as she speaks. “You have the will and the potential to do great things. Your world needs someone like you.”

That’s – that’s something that Izuku never expected to hear.

“I’m just doing what I have to do,” he replies, wringing his hands. “Nobody – there’s no one but me who can seal the cards. If the cards are hurting people, I’ll seal them. If people are hurting the cards, I’ll stop them. I just – I just want to help people.” Taking a deep breath, Izuku continues. “Isn’t it normal for people to want to help others?”

A bright smile rises to Sakura’s features. Raising her staff in the air, she twirls it in a small circle. Wind begins to gather around the tip, sakura petals riding on the draft.

“Your kindness is a blessing to all,” Sakura says, eyes glowing with a soft, old happiness that Izuku has only ever seen from his mother and the elderly he’s helped. “Though you’ve been ostracized by society, your will burns bright. That kind of determination and desire to be a hero to all is what I want to see in the next Master of Cards.”

With a bright flash, a pink glass flower floats from Sakura’s staff down onto the table. If Izuku looks closely enough, he can faintly see a swirling mass of blues, greens, and purples that mesh together to create a tiny universe encapsulated in glass. It’s stunning, the sort of tiny yet amazing things magic can create.

“Take this,” Sakura offers, gesturing toward the flower. “The burden of a cardcaptor is great, but the world in which you live will make it much greater. If you ever need help, crush that flower, and I’ll do whatever’s within my power.”

It’s a thoughtful gift, but it leaves Izuku with a pool of foreboding in his gut. There will ultimately be a day where he’ll crush that flower.

He can only hope that it ends well.

As Izuku goes to receive the flower, a resounding crack breaks the quiet of the surrounding scenery. Jerking violently, Izuku’s fingers brush the flower, which disintegrates into pink dust and seeps into Izuku’s skin. That’s worrying, but there are more pressing concerns to give attention to.

An enormous crack splits the beautiful scenery in half, cutting through the forest of sakura trees like a rusted knife, jagged and misshapen. Inky darkness fragmented with colour bleeds in from the gash, reaching out with tendrils of shadow, crushing everything it touches into coarse sand.

“What’s going on?” Edging away from the tendrils, Izuku swallows down a wave of nausea. That darkness – it feels wrong, not in a malicious or evil manner, but more in a sense that he can’t understand any of it. The sheer amount of information pouring in from the crack flows over Izuku in waves, a symphony of whispers tickling his ear, trying to tell him more about the universe, nature, magic, the unknown –
Sakura lifts her staff in the air and slams it into the ground. Springing up from the ground, a gold sphere envelops Izuku, lifting him up and into the air. He slips, letting out a yelp, and finds himself staring at Sakura on his hands and knees from inside the floating bubble.

“Oh,” Izuku whispers before his mind can properly catch up with his mouth. “Oh.”

“Don’t worry about me!” Grinning brightly, Sakura calmly pats down her dress and readjusts her bow. “I’m not in any sort of danger here. I’ve been long dead, so nothing can harm me anymore.”

Sakura bats a tendril away from her face, looking up at Izuku with an expression that’s almost impossible to decipher. The weight of her expectations and the calming reassurance press down on Izuku’s heart, gripping it firmly, filling him with both dread and hope.

“Dead or not, connecting dreams across dimensions if hard. It’s to be expected that a rift would break it apart.” The tendrils have almost completely swallowed the trees, reaching out toward Sakura next. In response to the dilemma, Sakura sighs, shrugs, then smiles again. “But I’ll reach out to you again when I can, Izuku! You must remember that you’re never alone in your fight.”

There’s nothing Izuku can do except nod in response, watching Sakura’s figure become smaller and smaller as he rises upward.

As the shadows grab onto Sakura’s ankles, she blinks, as if remembering something. “Oh, and another thing: keep our meeting a secret from Kero, okay?” She winks cheekily. “I’m not someone he should be hung up about. You deserve his full guidance and attention, so don’t hesitate to get that into that thick skull of his!”

Just when Sakura’s about to fade from view completely, a thought rises to Izuku’s mind.

“Thank you for guiding me with my magic!” Izuku yells downward, hoping his voice will reach Sakura. “It’s... it’s good to put a name to the bells!”

To that, Sakura tilts her head in confusion. “Bells?” After a moment of contemplation, she laughs brightly. “Oh, I see! I’m sorry to say that your thanks is misplaced. You must be talking about Ms. Yuko!”

Wait, what?

“Who the hell is Ms. Yuko?” Izuku shrieks as he flies upward and away from the encroaching darkness.

“It’s okay!” Sakura’s voice rings, her voice firm and unwavering. “Everything will surely be alright!”

A bright light envelopes Izuku, and he knows no more.

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The alarm jolts Izuku awake. In a flurry of limbs, he rolls off the bed, pulling the blankets off as he falls to the ground. Across the room, Kero yelps and rolls straight off the table.

Is this real? He’s – he’s no longer falling, or speaking with Sakura, or –

“I’m so sore,” Kero cuts in, struggling to wrestle his way out of the cloth prison he’s managed to get himself trapped within. “I know it’s been some time since I used magic, but geez...”
Izuku holds his hands out in front of him. That dream was real, wasn’t it? He really did speak with Sakura.

He spoke with Sakura, the previous Master of Cards.

It takes all of Izuku’s energy not to burst into tears of hysterical laughter. Instead, he shakily pushes himself off the ground. Looking down at Kero, who has finally disentangled himself from heap of cloth, Izuku swallows.

Sakura had told Izuku not to say a word to Kero, hadn’t she? There’s no way he can betray her trust like that.

But Izuku’s always been terrible at keeping secrets. He strives to be honest, mostly out of fear that if lies, he’ll be found out and crush someone’s trust. If he can’t keep a secret from Kero for more than two days, how is he supposed to keep something so major under the wraps for an indefinite period of time?

Izuku decides to take that bundle of anxiety and shove it deep, deep down where he’ll hopefully never have to deal with it. Ever.

Besides, he has a full day ahead of him. Starting the day off with a breakdown isn’t promising.

A few minutes after Izuku has changed, his phone alerts him to a new text from the owner of nearby bakery, and, oh wow, that’s a lot of exclamation marks. Looks like he’ll be making an emergency trip this morning.

Packing his bag, Izuku makes sure to slip in his four Sakura Cards. The pendant hangs around his neck, sitting underneath the fabric of his school uniform. Kero shimmies his way into the bag after Izuku has finished packing, shifting objects around to make it more comfortable to sit in.

It sort of feels like Izuku’s bringing a pet to school.

During breakfast, Izuku makes sure to pass bits of food to Kero while his mother isn’t looking. When Midoriya Inko spins around and asks if Izuku’s alright, he flails a little before clearing his throat and telling his mother that he’s perfectly fit to go to school. He is, really. His headache is completely gone, though he is physically fatigued from yesterday’s capture.

And so, Izuku grabs his bag and his baton, running down nine flights of stairs.

It takes no longer than ten minutes to walk to Jugemu Sweets. When he enters, the owner looks like she’s about to cry out of relief.

“Thank you so much for coming, Izuku,” the owner thanks profusely, motioning him in vigorously. “Some strange things have been happening, and you know so much about the neighbourhood, so I was wondering if you could help me figure out this mess!”

“I’ll try my best,” Izuku promises, following the owner into the back of the shop.

It’s easy to tell what the issue is just by the smell of the kitchen.

Jugemu Sweets is a neighbourhood favourite, selling some of the best macarons Izuku has every had the pleasure of eating. The hot chocolate and tea blends that the shop offers is among the best all of Musutafu. Izuku visits Jugemu Sweets on occasion, and he can vouch for the quality of the food and drink there.
He can’t say he remembers the assault of pure sweetness that assaults his nose when he enters the kitchen.

The owner clearly sees Izuku’s reaction, because she sighs and shakes her head. “I know, right? I don’t know what happened. I haven’t so much as altered my recipes even the tiniest bit, but now everything tastes like a hunk of sugar!”

Out of curiosity, Izuku grabs a macaron of a nearby plate and bites into it.

Okay, yep, there’s definitely way too much sugar in that.

The owner offers Izuku a glass of water to wash down the acrid sweetness of the macaron. “Do you think this is a prank? Who would do something like this?”

It’s not often that Izuku’s the calm one in a situation. After a few minutes pass, he manages to convince the owner to leave the kitchen and focus on setting up shop. Promising to get to the bottom of whatever’s going on, Izuku herds the owner out and shuts the door behind him. Kero pops out a few moments later, utterly exhausted.

“How are the cards popping up so quickly?” He moans, dragging a palm down his face. “I swear, you’re some sort of trouble magnet!”

That’s a fact if Izuku’s ever heard one.

Apparently Kero disapproves of the ultra-sweet pastries as well, because he cringes violently after taking a bite out of a macaron. “Ugh! Man, Sweet’s always like this! Ruining perfectly good food, I swear…”

Oh, what?

“...Sweet?” Izuku repeats hesitantly, not quite sure if he’s mentally prepared to deal with more cards at the moment.

The plush huffs. “A harmless card for the most part, but seriously irritating if you’re, y’know, running a bakery or something.” Kero gestures around for emphasis. “It’s a hassle to deal with, but it’s our hassle.”

Izuku sort of wants to die this very instant.

He quickly checks the time – a bit past seven. At the very least, he won’t be late for class.

Cracking the door open to check on the owner, Izuku pulls the pendant out from his shirt. Quietly, Izuku whispers, “Key that hides the power of the moon, show your true form before me. I, Deku, command you under our contract. Release!”

Thankfully, the burst of light is much more contained compared to before, briefly illuminating the nearby pastries with a silver glow. Colours begin to flicker to life as Izuku’s senses open up to the flow of magic in the room, trailing across his vision in smooth lines of pink. A faint sweetness dances on Izuku’s tongue.

“Is everything alright back there?” The owner calls from the front.

“O-oh, yes!” Stuttering, Izuku clamps his mouth shut before he can say anything he’s not supposed to. “Don’t worry about me; you can prepare for the day. I’ll have things fixed as quickly as possible.”
Humming, the owner pours coffee beans into the machine. “Okay, but don’t hurt yourself!”

Well. He’ll try not to.

When Izuku looks back, he finds Kero glaring at a shockingly large cake. It’s five layers tall and looks like a wedding cake that a preschooler designed, with random splotches of colour and gaudy decorations.

“Well?” Kero demands, tapping his foot impatiently. “Are you gonna come out?”

A high-pitched laugh echoes through the room, reminiscent of wind chimes. With a soft poof, a yellow... *thing* pops out of the cake.

It looks like a tiny pink girl that’s been used as a skewer for a giant, yellow, cotton ball. Everything about the fairy-thing is poofy – its dress, its sleeves, even its hair. As it floats around the room, it waves a small blue staff topped with another cotton ball.

Izuku’s just happy it’s small.

Though, he has to say, seeing a wooden spoon turn into a small cake isn’t something that he expected.

“What the fuck,” Izuku says, staring at the small spoon-turned-charlotte cake.

Hopping over, Kero watches in irritation as Sweet circles the room. “Other than making things sweet, it can also turn objects into sweets,” he states, as if that’s a normal thing. Turning inanimate objects into cake *is not a normal thing.*

It takes a few deep breaths before Izuku gets his thoughts in order. “Is Sweet cooperative? Like Rain?”

The expression Kero makes is a clear enough answer on its own. “Oh, geez, no. It’s a demon of a card. Sure, it won't blow anything up, but it’s slippery.”

Wonderful. Izuku loves starting his days off by chasing a tiny fairy around a kitchen.

Thankfully, the owner apparently trusts Izuku to an incredible extent, because she doesn’t come check even when Kero knocks over a very large bowl onto the ground while chasing Sweet. The entire spectacle reminds Izuku of the time a fly got stuck in his room for five days. That elusive bastard.

“What did you do last time?” Swinging his staff and narrowly avoiding smacking a new hole in the wall, Izuku grits his teeth.

Kero doesn’t look much happier. “Sakura ran around throwing salt,” he replies, which is just great, because Izuku sure as hell doesn’t want to waste any of the bakery’s ingredients.

But if magic works the way Izuku thinks it works – by shaping miracles out of simple logic – then Izuku might have a plan.

Lifting Water above his head, Izuku calls, “Watery, heed my call. Under the name of your new master, Deku, enclose Sweet within a bubble of water!”

Izuku breathes out an audible sigh of relief when whips of water appear from the card instead of Watery’s entire figure. He’d like to avoid flooding the kitchen.
Tendrils of water snap outward and spring into a tight sphere of water around Sweet, who looks like it’s been caught in the headlights.

“So... do I just...” Izuku doesn’t really know what to do from this point. All other captures he’s performed have had some sort of closure, whereas Sweet just looks upset.

Shaking his head, Kero floats beside Izuku’s shoulder. “You have to return Sweet to its original form. It doesn’t look like it’s given up yet.”

At Kero’s statement, Sweet puffs its chest up and blows a raspberry. That’s just immature.

“Let’s make it easy for both of us,” Izuku offers, spreading his hands as a gesture of goodwill. “If you come peacefully, I’ll let you help my friends bake next time I visit them.”

Sweet appears to ponder over the offer for a moment, but ends up shaking her head and crossing her arms. She blows another raspberry.

Sighing, Izuku drags a palm across his face. If there’s anything he’s learned from the past few days, it’s that life enjoys screwing him over whenever the opportunity arises.

“If you insist,” Izuku say as he points the Sealing Staff at the trapped Sakura Card. “Watery, give Sweet a good whirl. Like, a really good whirl. Washing machine style.”

A mischievous giggle resonates through the calm lapping of waves that is Watery’s magic. The sphere of water begins to spin and pick up speed at a shockingly fast rate, becoming a very respectable impression of a washing machine or a whirlpool; it’s unclear.

The rest of the capture goes smoothly. After a good minute or so, Watery releases its hold on Sweet. A small yellow puffball drops to the ground, twitching weakly.

There’s a silence where both Izuku and Kero stare at the tiny fairy. It’s kind of pitiful.

“Sweet, I command you return to your form confined.” Izuku declares, stifling a yawn as he taps his staff gently on Sweet. It’s way too early for this kind of BS. “Seal.”

With a small flash of light, Sweet’s small figure dissolves into a card, floating onto Izuku’s palm. The magic is all bubbly cheer and childhood innocence, leaving the tickling sweetness of maple syrup on his tongue.

Picking up a macaron, Kero takes a bite, chewing slowly. A wide smile rises to his face and he gives Izuku a thumbs-up. “We’re clear,” the plush states cheerfully, inhaling the macaron unnaturally quickly for his body size.

It appears that all of Sweet’s magic disappears upon its capture, which is a relief, because it means there’s no cleanup. That’s the only good thing to come out of this.

When Izuku goes to tell the owner that everything’s fixed, she smothers him in a tight hug, thanking him profusely for all his help and leaving him with a large case of (now normal) macarons and a cup of the shop’s homemade juice.

“Come back anytime!” Watching Izuku head off to school, the owner waves happily. “I’ll give you great discounts!”

That’s excellent, because the juice is something Izuku can most definitely live with. Kero nods vigorously from his hiding spot in the bag, gnawing on the macarons.
With a new card on its pocket, Izuku heads off to school, praying that the rest of the day goes normally.

***

Ah.

That’s right. Kacchan.

Over the years, Izuku has gotten used to being cornered and yelled at. It’s something that comes with being the class scapegoat-slash-school delinquent. While most students make sure to give him a wide berth, others grab him by the collar and spit in his face.

Both groups are easy to handle. The former doesn’t need any attention at all, whereas the latter might take a few good whacks with a baton to set straight. It doesn’t really matter in the end, because everyone leaves him alone eventually.

Kacchan is an anomaly.

“What the fuck kind of shit do you think you’re pulling, fuckin’ Deku?”

Slamming Izuku into a wall, Kacchan growls, his palms releasing ominous sparks. There’s a sort of fury in his eyes that Izuku doesn’t like. He only sees it when he beats Kacchan as best in the class, which happens frequently enough that Izuku no longer feels like a gnat under that burning gaze. It’s still unnerving and upsetting, though.

Hefting Izuku’s collar up higher, Kacchan snarls and slams a palm into the wall, close enough to Izuku’s ear that he can feel the stinging heat of the explosions. For any other student, being in Izuku’s place would be terrifying.

But Izuku’s taken the brunt of Kacchan’s unbridled rage for many years now. Sure, Kacchan’s intense, but compared to what Izuku’s seen – especially in the past few days – it’s nothing but an attempted show of dominance.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Izuku offers, keeping his face as straight as possible. He doesn’t want to add any fuel to the fire, so it’s best to try to avoid adding anything at all. He raises a hand to where Kacchan’s holding his collar hostage. “Could you let me go?”

Apparently that’s the wrong thing to say (but then again, it’s Kacchan, is there ever a right thing to say), because he throws Izuku violently to the side.

“You’re a vigilante now, huh?” The blonde demands, explosions popping like fireworks above his palms. “You little shit. Who the fuck do you think you are?”

It’s good that everyone’s used to hearing Kacchan yell out things that don’t necessarily make sense, because otherwise Izuku would be thoroughly screwed.

Picking himself off the ground, Izuku grips his baton tightly. If there’s something he’s learned over the years, it’s that the only way to defend himself from people like Kacchan is to fight back.

“Just because you know two Dekus doesn’t mean they’re the same person,” Izuku answers.

Kacchan lunges.

Izuku’s mind automatically turns to overdrive.
One of Kacchan’s bad habits is lunging too violently into his attacks, making them easy to predict. And – oh, those are Lifestrings, aren’t they? The silver-and-gold strings move a fraction of a second before Kacchan’s actual movements, which really helps.

Izuku ducks into a sidestep, grabs Kacchan’s extended arm, swipes his feet out from underneath him, and plants a knee roughly on Kacchan’s back. Grasping with both hands, Izuku slips his baton underneath Kacchan’s chin, pulling up sharply.

Wow. Izuku’s sort of impressed. He’s never been able to pull off something this impressive.

“You of all people should know that I’m not fit for vigilantism,” Izuku says. “I’m just a useless Deku, right?”

So maybe he’s feeling a little vindictive today. It’s been a very long morning.

And... things have changed. What threat does Kacchan pose when there are much more powerful entities that exist within the universe? What’s one angry boy in the face of a murderous water spirit, or the burden of being the last known magician in the world?

Pointing his baton at Kacchan, Izuku sets his mouth into a firm line.

“Don’t bother me anymore with your stupid accusations,” he says, voice monotone. “I have better things to be doing. If you want someone to submit to you, you’ll have to look somewhere else, because I’m not dealing with you anymore.”

Deciding that his point has been made clear, Izuku slides open the nearest window and jumps out, making his way down by maneuvering off the ledges he can get a grip on.

Izuku finds himself standing in front of the school a minute later, staring at his baton.

Oh. He just very flatly ended his volatile relationship with Kacchan, didn’t he?

It’s obvious to anyone that Izuku and Kacchan have never been good friends. But... over the years, they’ve cultivated a sort of messed up, silent, mutual agreement not to bother each other as long as the other keeps their distance. Besides, Kacchan stopped targeting Izuku. A trade goes both ways, so Izuku paid back the favour by choosing not to challenge Kacchan.

There’s no reason Izuku should feel bad. By calling out Izuku in front of the school, Kacchan broke the agreement.

But now what? Will Kacchan begin to attack him again, or pretend he doesn’t exist? It doesn’t matter, right? Because either way, nothing will really have changed – but, no, wait, it’ll have to change, because they had an agreement, Kacchan’s little temper tantrums didn’t count as assaults. They were just exceptions, because Izuku definitely challenged Kacchan before – hang on, no he didn’t, because he only stood up to Kacchan when he felt threatened, and –

“Kid!”

Izuku blinks out of his reverie, the familiar buzz of panic dimming ever so slightly. To his surprise, he feels tears trickle down his cheeks, dropping onto the back of his hand.

Kero stares up at Izuku from the bag, an unfamiliarly grim expression on his features. “Let’s get out of here,” the plush says. “I think a walk and a good meal would do you real good right now.”

Oh. Yes, that does sound good.
In half an hour, Izuku finds himself at the entrance of Oodles Noodles. That’s worrying, given that he can’t recall anything that happened in the last thirty minutes.

When Rin meets his eyes, she frowns deeply and gestures him in. Dazedly, Izuku shuffles into the shop, sliding into a seat in front of the counter.

All the exhaustion and confusion sinks down at once on his body, pulling him downward into a very dangerous spiral.

“Eat,” Rin orders, sliding a bowl of tonkotsu ramen onto the counter. Before Izuku can open his mouth to object, Rin catches his gaze and locks him in place with the most no-nonsense look Izuku’s ever seen in his life, and that’s saying something, because Izuku knows a lot of no-nonsense people.

Slowly, he reaches for the bowl, placing it gingerly in front of him. It looks good, really, it does, and Izuku knows he should really eat, given that he skipped breakfast, but he can’t find the motivation to get any sustenance into his body.

After a minute of staring at the bowl, Izuku jolts upward when Rin moves around the counter. She walks over to the door and flips the Open sign to Closed, then drags a chair over, keeping a respectable distance between herself and Izuku.

“What happened?” Rin asks, her voice firm but soft. An underlying tone of worry coats her words. Izuku really feels like crying.

And then he starts crying.

Izuku feels pathetic, hiccuping in front of someone who’s known him as a reliable neighbourhood handyman for years. Digging the heels of his palms into his eyes, Izuku grits his teeth and takes several deep breaths. It takes a few minutes, but he manages to get his thoughts into something coherent enough to communicate.

Through it all, Rin sits patiently, averting her eyes to the table. She tries to inconspicuously push a box of tissues toward Izuku with the back of her hand. It’s so considerate that Izuku almost bursts into a wave of fresh tears.

Grabbing a tissue, Izuku wipes his eyes and nose furiously. He trusts Rin. He’s known her for three years now, and he can confidently say that they know each well.

“I think I just destroyed one of my friendships today,” Izuku says, his voice hoarse.

“Did they deserve it?” Rin replies.

And that’s it. No shock, no hesitation, no invasive curiosity.

Izuku clenches his fists. “I... I don’t know. We had a deal – and then Kacchan broke it, but I think he’s broken it before and it’s just that I noticed this time.”

Izuku really can’t lie in front of people he trusts.

Exhaling deeply, Rin shuffles a bit closer. “What was your agreement?”

It’s uncomfortable. It’s awkward. It makes Izuku want to die, but he recounts his friendship with Kacchan, starting from when they were children up until the current day. Izuku tells Rin about how they used to play with each other in the nearby forest, catching insects with nets and hopping over small rivers. Living in the past offers a sense of safety, creating a haven where Izuku can remember a
time when things weren’t so complicated, when Kacchan used to be – well, not kind, but kinder.

When Izuku finally explains the details of their agreement, Rin’s eyes narrow. “And this was a verbal agreement,” she says.

“U-um, no,” Izuku replies, a bit surprised. Kacchan’s impossible to talk with. It’s much easier to read his body language and act accordingly.

“Then why did you assume that it was mutual?”

There’s nothing Izuku can say to that.

It’s said that trust is a silent, mutual agreement. Izuku strongly believes that he and Kacchan did have something resembling trust, though it degraded over the years as Izuku became more confident in himself.

(Somewhere, deep inside, Izuku knows that it isn’t his fault. Kacchan wanted to keep him under his thumb, to treat him as another stepping stone for whatever grand ambition he has. Kacchan never trusted him. The only thing Kacchan has ever given him are scars.)

“I’m going to be very blunt about this,” Rin says, her eyes flat. Her hands are clenched together. “This Kacchan is an asshole and he will die alone if he can’t see the people around him as anything other than disposable.”

The statement is so monotone yet so cruel at the same time. A part of Izuku wants to argue – after all, Kacchan wants to enter UA, he has incredible talent and people respect him – while another part nods silently (someone as cruel as him doesn’t deserve anything until he learns to repent for all he’s done).

There are many things Izuku could say. He chooses to say nothing.

“Let me tell you something.” Standing from her seat, Rin makes her way to the door, where she flips the sign to Open before returning to her station behind the counter. “Listen up, okay?

“We all have friends. Some are closer than others; some are just situational friends. Some are friends because you feel obligated to be their friend. Whatever, it doesn’t matter. Here’s what matters:

“I’m going to call someone my friend if I trust them. I’m going to call someone my friend if I know they’ve got my back. I’m going to call someone my friend if I know that they won’t ever purposely bring me harm. And I’m sure as hell not going to call someone my friend if they ignore me, look at me like I’m below them, or only want me around to boost their self-esteem. I don’t give a shit about your reasons why you did the things you did – if you start treating me like trash, then we’re through. End of story.”

Rin’s eyes are cold and firm. “It took me a long time to learn that. So here’s my advice: learn it quickly, and save yourself the hurt and pain in the future.”

It’s blunt. It’s bitter. It’s borderline arrogant. But... it’s the truth.

Yes, Izuku and Kacchan’s relationship is complicated. But it’s not complicated in the fact that Kacchan has abused his power over Izuku for too long.

Izuku doesn’t want to be associated with Kacchan anymore. Maybe... maybe the best way to do that is to cut him off entirely.
“I’ll try,” is Izuku’s quiet reply.

A small grin makes its way onto Rin’s features. Reaching out, she holds her hand over Izuku’s now-cold ramen. It a few seconds, the bowl is steaming hot once more.

“You might be quirkless, but you’ve helped a lot of people,” the chef says. “And me? I got a dumb quirk that lets me reheat stuff, but I’m not going to let it bring me down.” Rin holds her fist out, a crooked grin on her face. “So let’s make a real, mutual agreement: if I try my best, you have to try your best too, alright?”

Sniffling hideously, Izuku slowly bumps his fist against Rin’s. “Okay.”

After finishing his meal, Izuku doesn’t even think about returning to school. After waving his thanks to Rin, he goes straight home, sprawling on top of his bed.

The five cards in Izuku’s pocket float out and circle above his head for a moment before collecting in a neat pile on the table.

Kero pops out of the bag, which has been abandoned next to Izuku’s desk. He looks unsure, his eyebrows furrowed. “You okay, kid?”

Boy, isn’t that a question.

There are many things Izuku could say. He chooses to say, “I will be.”

Kero lets out a small sigh, lifting himself out of the bag and floating over to Izuku’s bedside table. “That’s good,” the plush hums, arms crossed as he sits on top of the clock. “Don’t overthink it too much. What’s done is done, but you did the right thing.”

There’s a pause in which Kero looks as if he’s waiting to see if Izuku wants to reply. Izuku stays resolutely silent. He’s said enough; his doubts are his own and nobody else’s.

“Let’s take it easy for a while,” Kero suggests. “As long as we don’t sense any Sakura Cards, you’re free to go about your normal life.”

That’s right. Sakura let herself become too invested in what she was doing, and after everything had been said and done, there was nothing left for her.

Izuku won’t let that happen to himself. There are too many people counting on him.

And so Izuku steel’s himself, shoves his internal conflict as far into the back of his mind as possible, and pulls out his homework. The least he can do is try to stay on top of his grades.

With a grin, Kero hefts the half-empty box of macarons out of the bag and tosses it on the table.

“That’s right,” the plush says, an expression of approval on his features. “Now, let’s see what stupid homework you have today.”

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There are are two things that surprise Izuku about the following week:

First, no Sakura Cards make themselves known, which is an enormous change from the card-after-card hunting that took up the first few days of Izuku’s new job as cardcaptor.

Second, Kacchan is strangely calm.
“Calm” wouldn’t be the word to describe his behaviour in comparison to everyone else, but Kacchan doesn’t actively hunt Izuku down or throw down any challenges. In comparison, most of the student body is giving Izuku a larger berth than usual, so it’s clear that word of their most recent scuffle has travelled quickly.

Even so, it’s obvious that Kacchan’s behaviour toward him has changed. He’s moodier but less violent, which is almost uncomfortable in its strangeness.

Izuku decides not to think about it too much. It’s... not his problem anymore.

And, because life loves screwing him over, the teacher assigns Izuku and Kacchan to clean up the classroom after school.

There’s a storm of mumbling when the teacher announces this. Among the whispers, Izuku can hear, “they’ll destroy the school” and “who’s gonna come out alive?”

When Izuku looks up meekly at Kacchan’s seat, the blond hasn’t moved. Instead, he just looks tense. Very tense.

From his bag, Kero whispers, “Oh, yikes.”

Surprisingly, Izuku manages to make it through the day without collapsing in an anxious puddle of tears. Instead, he works blankly throughout the day, robotically scribbling down notes. He must look pretty catatonic, because even the students that don’t follow Kacchan avoid him like the plague.

Kero has apparently picked up on the fact that Izuku hates confrontation more than anything that exists in this world, because he stays silent for most of the day, playing on the DS that Izuku keeps in his bag. Izuku doesn’t blame him. Pokemon makes everything better.

And so Izuku finds himself staring at the door to his classroom at the end of the day, and wow, did the door always look like the gates to hell?

“You’re more than capable of defending yourself against that bully,” Kero says encouragingly. “How about we get this over with and go get some hot food once we’re done?”

Right. Izuku just has to think about the nice katsudon he’ll treat himself to once he’s finished.

Inhaling deeply, he pulls the door open, steps in –

– And narrowly steps out of the way of an incoming blade.

With a surprised yelp, Izuku raises his baton just in time to swat away another attack. What – who has a sword?

Oh.

Kacchan has a sword.

In front of him, Kacchan brandishes a rather elegant blade, his eyes worryingly blank. His stance is all wrong – he’s never that proper, that composed. His fighting style is all explosions and brute force, with quick but flashy maneuvers. There’s a foreign stillness in his posture that sets Izuku on edge almost immediately, making it obvious that whatever’s in front of him isn’t Kacchan.

The next thrust barely scrapes past Izuku’s cheek, leaving a faint trail of blood in its wake. Swinging his baton forcefully to meet a slash, Izuku flinches as a loud ringing explodes to life in his head.
It’s unlike anything he’s heard before, which is seriously saying something. The ringing scrapes along, like metal against metal, gritting harshly as sparks burst in quick snaps. The harsh, metallic scent wafts upward, but disappears a moment later, replaced by the smell of... flowers?

Kero lets out small yelps with every vigorous movement Izuku makes, his head peeking out the flap of the bag. “Oh, no.”

“What’s going on?” Izuku demands, backing up slowly. Kacchan’s advance is surprisingly slow and steady, which makes things very unnerving. Watching as Kacchan drags the tip of the blade against the floor, advancing ever so carefully, is a sight that Izuku never thought he’d see.

“Sakura Card,” Kero replies shortly, his voice tense. “That’s Sword. Super useful, super cool, but capturing it is never fun.”

So, essentially, a card has possessed Kacchan.

That’s great, because Izuku loves having his day screwed over by bullshit like this.

Izuku squeaks as Kacchan advances his pace, raising his baton. There’s no time to panic. If he doesn’t want to lose an eye, he needs to take Kacchan down quickly. “How do I – what do I do?”

“Separate Sword from Kacchan,” Kero says quickly, then suddenly shrieks, “Oh no, duck!”

Stumbling backward, Izuku trips over and falls, just in time for the blade to come swinging over his head, leaving an arc of pink dust.

And then the assault gets noticeably faster.

Rolling out of the way of a downward jab, Izuku swipes a leg out. Instead of jumping out of the way, Kacchan pulls something Izuku’s never seen from him – elegant footwork. With a couple of well-timed steps, the blond steps neatly away from Izuku’s attack, striking back with an angled stab.

Deflecting the blade with his baton, Izuku runs through the situation. It’s pretty late after school, but there are bound to be students and teachers roaming around. That means that if Izuku tries to bring the fight to the courtyard, he’ll definitely be spotted.

With that in mind, Izuku turns on his heel and darts down the hall. “Catch me if you can!”

The light, quick footsteps trailing behind him signal that Kacchan’s decided to take the bait. Possessed by Sword or not, his personality seems mostly intact. That’s good, because Izuku knows how to deal with things (or people) that want to kill him.

Bolting up two flights of stairs, Izuku glances at the locked door another flight of stairs above him, crosses his fingers, and prays that god have mercy on his soul.

“Unlock,” Izuku calls, snapping his fingers.

And lo and behold, the lock clicks open and the door swings outward.

Izuku decides not to look a gift horse in the mouth, instead choosing to sprint up the last flight of stairs and onto the roof of the school. The teachers would’ve cleared out all the students out at the end of the day and locked the door, but apparently magic doesn’t care about locked doors.

“Lock the door behind you,” Kero shouts. “Make sure nobody else can get up!”

Oh, that’s smart.
The instant Kacchan steps out of the door, Izuku snaps his fingers again, and with a call of “Lock!” the door slams shut and locks itself with another soft click.

Jumping out of the bag, Kero floats cautiously by Izuku’s shoulder, watching as Kacchan surveys the roof. The blank expression in the blond’s typically furious eyes is somehow more terrifying.

But there’s a way to stop Kacchan, and that’s to get him away from Sword. And the only way to do that is with magic.

“Key that hides the hidden power of the moon, show your true form before me! I, Deku, command you under our contract! Release!”

Taking advantage of the flash of light, Izuku dashes forward, keeping his body low, and swings the Sealing Staff with as much force as he can muster. Lifestrings weave into existence, acting out Kacchan’s movements before he himself actually goes about doing them. Izuku’s thankful that he at least has some sort of leverage in this fight.

As expected, Kacchan blocks the attack with an easy parry. The clash of staff and sword brings about sparks of pink and silver magic, throwing up sakura petals and shining dust into the air. That’s okay: Izuku wants to see if he can knock an opening loose without going the route of a broken wrist.

“Kacchan, come on,” Izuku goads. “Is that all you’ve got?”

There’s a short moment where Izuku can swear he sees Kacchan tense and twitch. Unfortunately, his eyes stay blank, and he renews his assault shortly after.

So he can get through to Kacchan, despite Sword’s influence. All he has to do is make Kacchan angry enough to hopefully break through Sword’s possession. If that doesn’t work, then he needs to disarm Kacchan, hopefully in a peaceful way, because it’s unfair to use magic on someone who can’t even fight back.

Well – someone who can’t fight back consciously, that is.

Kero hangs back, his eyes narrowed. “Let’s get him with Windy or Watery,” he suggests. “Then we can get Sword off him and seal it!”

It’s a good plan. It’s a simple, short plan of attack.

But Izuku’s hand quivers as he reaches for his cards, and with a shaky exhalation, he slips them back into his pocket.

It’s not right to use magic on Kacchan. It’s just – it’s not fair. It’s wrong.

“What are you doing?” Kero demands as Izuku darts forward, staff clenched like a bat.

Gritting his teeth, Izuku slams the staff down onto the blade with all his might. The force of the impact jolts up his arms, shaking him all the way to his shoulders.

As Kacchan swipes the blade out from under the staff, Izuku steps back, grips the staff firmly with one hand, and brings it down viciously on Kacchan’s open leg with a crescent sweep.

From behind him, Kero whistles. “Nice shot, kid!”

Kacchan grimaces and falls to one knee, Sword still clenched firmly in his grasp. His eyes flicker between rage and pain and emptiness all at once, but his silence is still very unnerving.
The Kacchan Izuku knows would’ve easily dodged that attack. By Kacchan’s behaviour under Sword’s influence, it’s clear that Sword grants the user the skills of a swordsman. Footwork, swordplay, a professional’s fighting experience – that’s what Sword offers.

Izuku can use Sword’s prim-and-proper fighting style to his advantage. After all, elegance and practice are composed of patterns, whereas street fighting is all about winning at all costs. And luckily enough, Izuku grew up having to defend himself from Kacchan. He’s learned every dirty trick in the book.

Unfortunately, the injury seems to have made Kacchan angrier. After pulling himself up, the blond renews his assault, despite his obvious limp. Having thrown caution to the wind, Kacchan attacks and attacks and attacks, leaving Izuku little time to even breathe.

“Wait – Kacchan –” Izuku attempts to get through to Kacchan earn him a punch in the jaw, which sends him reeling back.

“Kid!” Kero shrieks, flying over in a blur of yellow.

Holding up a hand to keep Kero back, Izuku swings his staff with both hands and whacks it into Kacchan’s hand with as much force as possible. Taking advantage of Kacchan’s stumbling, Izuku drops his staff, lunges in with his bare hands, and somehow manages to twist Kacchan so he’s lying face-first on the ground.

With the Sword-grasped hand twisted behind his back, Kacchan (in his current state) can’t do anything but struggle.

At this rate, Izuku’s going to have to knock him out. He can think of one very obvious way to do it: hitting Kacchan really, really hard over the head. But that’s not very ethical, and above all, Izuku really doesn’t want to inflict any permanent damage.

And so Izuku lowers his head, focusing on the faint hum of Kacchan’s furious energy that sings in his ears. Below him, fire and anger and power scream a verse of blistering heat and endurance, however dampened it may be by Sword’s scraping shrieks.

There it is – Kacchan’s strings.

Intertwining his fingers within the silver-and-gold strings that dance out from Kacchan’s back, Izuku tugs firmly, and Kacchan falls limp underneath him. Sword clatters out of his hand.

With a shaky exhale, Izuku taps the Sealing Staff onto Sword.

“Sword, I command you return to your form confined. Seal!”

A flash of light erupts from Sword’s figure, transforming the blade into its card form. Circling up into the air, the card lands gently on Izuku’s open palm.

It takes a lot of willpower not to start crying or screaming right then and there. Thankfully, with a few minutes of staring at the sky and breathing deeply, Izuku’s hysteria gradually fades.

With a laugh, Kero smacks Izuku’s shoulder, an enormous grin on his features. “That was amazing! You took out Sword with your bare hands!”

The laugh Izuku gives is still borderline hysterical, so he stops. “You learn a lot from growing up with Kacchan,” is all Izuku can say.
A slight frown makes its way onto the plush’s face. Before Kero can say anything, Izuku bends down and hefts Kacchan over one shoulder. Hopefully, Kacchan will forget everything about his brawl with Izuku and go home thinking that he tripped down the stairs or something, because that’s what Izuku’s going to tell the nurse.

After recounting Kacchan’s awful fall, really, he tripped and fell down, like, two flights of stairs to the exasperated nurse, Izuku power-walks out of the school and to the bus stop. There, he encounters some bus-goers who know him well from his strange antics. They ask him if he’s alright, which means that he must have a very strange expression on his face.

“Are you hungry?” Ms. Kino, a kind neighbourhood lady who makes trips to the grocery store on Mondays, asks worriedly.

“I’m alright,” Izuku replies, mostly on instinct.

Two minutes later, Izuku’s chewing slowly on a pork bun as Ms. Kino coddles him, recounting her junior high days of old with a nostalgic cheer. After a while, Izuku finds himself much calmer than before as he listens to Ms. Kino’s tales of young heartbreak and friendship.

When Izuku’s bus arrives, he waves goodbye to Ms. Kino, who happily reminds Izuku to visit her at her house more often.

The elderly are truly the most powerful people on Earth.

The bus ride is quiet. Kero stays silent in the bag, tapping away on the DS. Izuku’s thankful for the silent contract of silence that they’ve forged in the face of adversity.

It’s only when Izuku looks at himself in the reflection of the window does he realize he has a split lip. That’s not surprising, given that Kacchan socked him pretty good in the face. Other than that, he has a few cuts on his arms and a very obvious gash on his cheek. Considering the fact that he’s very obviously been in a scuffle, the bus-goers must be more familiar with his antics than Izuku expected.

That’s good, because any more attention would probably be detrimental to his health. In fact, Izuku feels sort of light-headed. He can’t tell if it’s because of physical exhaustion or mental fatigue. Either way, the one thing he wants most is some hot katsudon.

Firing off a quick text to tell his mother that he’ll be eating out, Izuku wanders off the bus somewhere between downtown and his apartment, eventually trudging into a small but well-liked restaurant in an alleyway.

When he walks in, the owner takes a look at him, frowns, and waves Izuku to the most secluded corner of the restaurant. The owner then turns around and heads into the kitchen, where Izuku knows he’ll be preparing a katsudon.

God bless his city. Izuku loves everyone.

“You can come out,” Izuku tells Kero, who’s been fidgeting in the bag vigorously for the past half hour.

The plush’s head pops out, his eyes narrowed. “You sure? There are people here, you know.”

“It’s fine. They’ve seen a lot of weird stuff, so a talking doll isn’t even going to faze them.”

The customers have seen many instances of Izuku sprinting into the restaurant to hide from gangsters he’s pissed off. One time, he walked through the door without realizing that he was on fire.
After a moment of contemplation, Kero shuffles out of the bag and plops himself onto the table. “Congrats on your epic capture of Sword. Now, are you okay?”

Kero’s been asking that question a lot recently. Izuku can’t blame him.

With a shaky sigh, Izuku drops his face in his hands. “It’s been a long day,” he replies.

Kero huffs, crossing his arms. “Talk about it,” he snorts. “First you cut someone out of your life, then they came back brandishing a magic sword!”

Izuku laughs weakly. “That’s Kacchan for you.”

The food comes shortly afterward. The owner raises an eyebrow when he sees Kero snatch up a spoon and dive in eagerly, but says nothing.

For the first few minutes, they eat in silence, enjoying the meal. However, after Kero’s eaten his fill, he drops the spoon and fixes Izuku with an unwavering stare.

“Still want to give Kacchan a chance,” the plush says.

“I do,” Izuku replies.

Surprisingly, Kero doesn’t argue. Instead, he says, “If you really want to give Kacchan another chance, don’t stick your neck out there and expect a change of heart. If he really sees the error in his ways, he’ll come to you on his own volition.” Kero’s eyes burn with a short of wisdom that only comes with age and experience. “What is Kacchan to you, right now?”

What is Kacchan, really? A friend? No, of course not. That’s been established. An enemy? Not quite; Kacchan doesn’t go out of his way to make Izuku miserable.

And so Izuku goes with his gut feeling and replies, “An anomaly.”

Surprisingly, Kero nods. “A person who doesn’t fit in any category,” he confirms, as if he expected Izuku to say that in the first place (did he?). “Hopefully, with time, you’ll be able to put him into one category or another. Friend or foe, it doesn’t really matter. Because by then, you won’t be confused about Kacchan anymore, because you’ll either be fighting beside him or against him.”

Those words shake Izuku to the very core.

It’s true, isn’t it? If Kacchan really does become Izuku’s friend, then maybe they can achieve something close enough to a friendship, with mutual trust. On the other hand, if Kacchan becomes Izuku’s enemy (and at this rate, the likelihood is very high), Izuku will spend the rest of his days protecting himself from someone who doesn’t know when to quit.

Both prospects are are terrifying in different ways.

Clapping his hands, Kero snaps Izuku out of his thoughts.

“Either way, we’ll be waiting for some time!” The plush chirps, finishing off the last of Izuku’s juice. “There’s no point getting hung up about it. There’s nothing we can do, so let’s focus our energy on capturing the cards!”

*I’m not someone he should be hung up about.* That’s what Sakura had said, right?
Suddenly, Kero’s wise words seem sadder than ever. How long did he wait for a new cardcaptor? When was the last time he saw Sakura?

Did he ever get a chance to say goodbye?

Pinching in his guilt-fueled tears, Izuku wipes his eyes. Between Sakura’s trust in him, the situation with Kacchan, and cardcaptor duties, it’s easy to say that he’s overwhelmed.

But he’s always overwhelmed. His days are spent running around the city, throwing himself into making life better for everyone he can.

So maybe three yikes-worthy situations have been thrust upon him. It doesn’t change the fact that he has responsibilities, and he plans to uphold them.

“Let’s go home,” Izuku says.

With a grin, Kero replies, “Yeah. Let’s.”

Chapter End Notes

lots of stuff happening in this chapter! i really want bakugou to get some focus. izuku's relationship with him is something incredibly complex and difficult to unravel, and i'm going to try to examine it in my own way.

about sakura - i think it's interesting to consider what being a cardcaptor in a world that's otherwise normal would do to a person. sakura's situation is sort of like izuku's in that they're both abnormal in their respective worlds. i wanted to introduce a little more depth and conflict to sakura's character, partially out of interest, mostly because i want izuku to look and sakura and go, "i can learn from that."

also. Yuko. if you don't know who she is, it's all good. she's connected to the ccs universe (or at least one of them) in a complex way according to CLAMP canon, but i'm not going to focus on that. Izuku just happens to attract some very interesting people into his life.

thanks for reading!
run, jump, dance

Chapter Summary

Lock, Shadow, and plenty of chaos.

Chapter Notes

izuku just can’t catch a break. also, he’s not great at keeping secrets.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku doesn’t know why life has decided to spare him this once, and he’s not going to question it.

Returning to school and facing Kacchan has been an incredible source of anxiety, but by some miracle, Kacchan... ignores him?

It’s weird. It’s unnerving. It’s uncomfortable to hell and back, watching Kacchan’s typically furious eyes burn at him with a cold fury that screams of hatred on a whole new level.

Izuku isn’t sure how much Kacchan remembers of their scuffle. He isn’t sure why Kacchan isn’t approaching him like before. There are too many unknown variables in the already impossibly complex formula that is his life, and Izuku doesn’t want any of it.

But it’s not his problem – it’s Kacchan’s.

(Izuku will wait. He’s been waiting for Kacchan to change his entire life. Waiting a bit longer won’t do any harm.)

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“I didn’t know you started learning swordplay, Izuku!”

It takes Izuku an incredible amount of effort not to leap out the window right then and there.

Izuku laughs awkwardly, trying to hold Sword behind him inconspicuously as he turns to face his mother. “It looked cool, so I decided to give it a try.”

His mother beams. “Well, give it your all! Oh, do be careful not to break anything, though.”

“Yes, Mom.”

After his mother leaves, Kero peeks out from where he’s hidden under the covers of the bed. “Maybe you should practice using Sword somewhere else.”

Over the past few days, Izuku has been testing Sword out in the confines of his room. So far, he hasn’t broken anything, but using a sword is very different from swinging around a baton.
“Maybe,” Izuku replies, his mind flashing to a very convenient seaside park that’s been turned into an unofficial dumpsite. Nobody will care if he hacks up some old cars and fridges, right?

***

Strangely enough, the first person to catch Izuku during his hack-and-slash sessions is Sasha, the game shop owner.

“I didn’t take you for a swordsman,” Sasha laughs good-naturedly, tracing the slashes that Izuku has just put into an old fridge. “You never cease to surprise me!”

“What can I say,” Izuku replies vacantly. “I’m a surprising person.”

Normally, Izuku wouldn’t dare respond so forwardly, even to his friends. But with his heightened magical senses, it’s hard not to stare at Sasha.

Over the years, Izuku has learned that Sasha plows through life with the energy of five people. She gives everything she does her all, whether it be working out, running her shop, or catching young magicians practicing with magical swords on a trash beach.

It seems that energy has gathered around her and become an aura of some sort, because Sasha glows with a gold hue that reminds Izuku of his own magic, just a different colour. However, unlike the soft crooning of Izuku’s moon magic, Sasha’s glow is utterly silent.

Huh. That’s a thought for later.

“So, what are you doing here?” Izuku tries to make normal conversation, hanging the tip of his blade just above the sand.

Sasha gestures to the heaps of scrap around them, an enormous grin on her features. Behind her is an old red wagon with stacks of metal heaped into haphazard piles. “I’m grabbing scrap metal! I’ve been working on a project recently, and this place is a gold mine!”

At that, Izuku perks up. “A project?”

Nonchalantly, Sasha nods, walking toward an old car. “Occasionally, pro heroes will commission me for equipment. It’s hard, but it’s fun!”

Oh, that makes sense because Sasha’s quirk is changing the property of metals to her will and wait, what?

Sputtering, Izuku almost trips over his own feet and impales himself on Sword as he makes his way over to Sasha. “You do what?”

As if that wasn’t enough, Sasha shrugs, hefting old tires over her head with surprising strength. “I graduated from UA’s Support Department a while ago. Never really liked the hero industry, so I decided to go my own way!” The blue-haired woman tugs on the door with such force that it pops right off.

Okay. So Sasha, whom Izuku has always thought to be an energetic but meek storekeeper, is a UA alumnus and also a freelance equipment designer for pro heroes. That, and she can tear doors off cars.

“Oh my god,” Izuku says.
“I know, right?” Sasha smiles, all teeth.

For a moment, Izuku just stares as Sasha tears apart the car with her bare hands. Then, because he’s a good citizen and a friend, he says, “I can cut up the pieces for you, if you want.”

Looking over, Sasha wipes the sweat off her forehead, a hand on her hip. “Sure! That would be great!”

And thus, Izuku finds himself occasionally helping Sasha by slicing up scrap metal into neat squares with Sword.

To be honest, it’s good practice. Compared to before, Izuku’s control of Sword has grown exponentially. He’s still not sure if it’s actually legal to go and smash up the trash, but nobody else seems to care, so they continue making their way through the mountains of trash that line the beachside.

Besides, it’s nice, watching the sunset over the ocean while camping out on top of a pile of old scraps. After a while, they manage to carve out a little grotto in the centre of a collection of old cars and trucks. On the days where their scrap-hauling sessions drag on for longer than expected, Sasha pulls out sandwiches and Izuku meekly offers treats of Sweet’s creation. They exchange stories as they eat, Sasha recounting her days at UA while Izuku narrates some interesting things that have happened to him during his years of running around the city.

One day, when Izuku’s visiting Sasha at her shop, he’s waved over to the back of the store. There, Sasha stretches out measuring tape around Izuku’s waist and legs.

When Izuku asks what Sasha’s doing, the woman replies, “I want to make you a utility belt or two. You always lug around this huge bag, right? Might as well stop killing your back and try out one of my gadgets!”

It takes a good two minutes for Izuku to stop sniffling. Sasha, already used to Izuku’s feeble emotions, pats his shoulder supportively.

“Think of it as thanks for helping so often,” Sasha offers. “With your help, I’ve cut my work time in half! Even my niece thinks you’re awesome, and that’s really saying something!”

Eventually, Izuku leaves with a new pair of 16-sided dice to play with and a promise to return once the belts are finished.

***

The next encounter with a Sakura Card comes a few days later.

“I’m not sure what to say,” Miki admits, a deep frown on her features. “This isn’t something we’ve seen before.”

“Sakura Card,” Kero whispers from where he’s hidden in Izuku’s hoodie.

“I guessed,” Izuku whispers back, trying to disguise it by following with a cough.

Before them, an antique chest that Professor Miki’s been waiting on for months lies on a table, its wood faded and dry. Apparently, the Professor gets credit because of complications that Izuku doesn’t care too much for, and the only thing she really wanted was to be the first one to open it.

That would be great and all, if there wasn’t a giant winged lock on the stupid thing.
By now, Izuku’s gotten pretty good at guessing the names of Sakura Cards, mainly because it’s pretty obvious just by looking at them.

If Izuku had to guess, this card would be called Lock.

“Nothing we’ve tried has been able to crack the lock,” Professor Miki explains, crossing her arms. She’s clearly irritated, and Izuku doesn’t blame her.

“I’ll try to read up on it,” Izuku offers to Professor Miki, who nods and walks away, mumbling up a storm about magic locks. It’s so spot-on that Izuku freezes for a second, worried that he’s been found out. But then the Professor sighs and starts talking to herself about what she should have for dinner.

Immediately, Izuku locks the door behind him with a flick of his hand. Silver dust forms into the shape of a key, which then slots into the lock, clicking it shut.

With a deep sigh, Izuku drops his bag on the ground and frees Kero from the confines of his hoodie. The plush pops out, dropping onto the table to tap at the chest.

“Cool chest,” he comments contemplatively. “I wonder what’s in it.”

It’s nice to see that Kero’s beginning to adopt Izuku’s habit of avoiding the elephant in the room by awkwardly shimmying by it. At the same time, it’s kind of dismaying, since Kero’s supposed to be the expert in this sorts of things.

With a mumble of his chant, Izuku’s staff bursts into its full form, accompanied by a burst of silver dust. Spinning the staff between his fingers, Izuku stares at the chest. There’s no way he’s using Watery or Windy for the job – the chest looks very old and is probably very precious. He’s not risking even putting a scratch on it.

Prodding gently at the lock with his staff, Izuku frowns. “So... do I seal it like this, or...?”

Kero takes it up a notch and kicks the lock as hard as he can. It doesn’t budge. “Nah. You have to either unlock or break Lock before you seal it. Since we don’t have any way of unlocking it - don’t look at me like that, your locking trick won't work - we’ll have to break it.”

Wincing, Izuku begins tapping on Lock with the head of his staff. That’s what he was afraid of.

He’s not stupid. He knows very well that Sword could slice through Lock like a hot knife through butter. The issue is that Lock is currently stuck on an antique, and Izuku doesn’t know how to slash through things using Sword without swinging his entire arm and possibly cleaving through the entire chest, thereby destroying Professor Miki’s trust in him forever.

No, no, no. It’s okay. He’s been practicing with Sword recently, so he can probably do this. As long as he focuses on what he wants to cut and not on what he doesn’t want to cut, Sword will obey him.

Hesitantly, Izuku pulls the card out of his pocket and raises it in the air. “Sword, lend me your power, please!”

Silver dust envelopes the Sealing Staff, transforming it into Sword’s sleek form in a flash of light.

“What exactly can Lock do?” Running a thumb along the edge of the blade, Izuku eyes Lock.

Kero huffs. “It’s pretty simple. Lock – well, it locks stuff. Other than that, it can seal off areas by plugging up the exits with barriers as long as it can find something to lock. Once you capture it, it’s crazy useful. Right now, it’s just annoying.”
With a hum of confirmation, Izuku tries tapping the blade onto Lock’s main body. As expected, it doesn’t budge, though the contact does draw out wisps of pink, flower-scented magic. Unlike the other Sakura Cards, Lock is very silent, droning out deep, bellowing vibrations that make the tips of Izuku’s fingers tingle. It’s not a violent card not a gentle card – it’s just a card that obeys orders to the best of its ability.

It’s strange, meeting a card that’s so void of personality.

“Let’s just hack at it with Sword,” Kero suggests, brushing some dirt off the chest with his tail. “This should be pretty straightforward.”

“Yeah,” Izuku agrees, despite the fact that he’s terrified of dicing up a perfectly good artifact. But the more he waits, the more anxious he’ll get, and the more likely it’ll be that he loses control of Sword.

And so, with a very loud and very audible inhalation of breath, Izuku lifts Sword into the air and slashes downward onto Lock.

It falls apart with a gentle clink, dropping onto the table in two clean halves.

Izuku stares at the lock. “That was... easier than I expected.”

Kero grins, something akin to familial pride in his eyes. “You’re steadily growing as a magician and cardcaptor. You’ve been using Sword like crazy for the past two weeks, so it’s no wonder that it’s obeying you completely.”

Looking down at the winged blade, Izuku smiles a little. It’s nice to know that his effort is paying off in more than one way – he can help Sasha and train at the same time.

With a simple dismissal, Sword’s form shatters like glass, leaving behind the glossy green glow of the Sealing Staff. Once Sword’s card is tucked safely in Izuku’s back pocket, he taps the head of the staff onto what’s left of Lock.

“Lock, I command you return to your form confined. Seal!”

In a burst of silver light, Lock’s card form floats gently into Izuku’s grasp. Tucking it into his back pocket, Izuku looks at the chest and pauses.

There’s something... off with it, but Izuku can’t tell what.

“Hey, Kero,” Izuku starts, only to be interrupted by knocking at the door. He flinches so hard that he almost drops the staff.

“Hey?” Professor Miki’s voice calls out from the other door as she knocks. “I think the door locked by itself. Can you let me in?”

Hastily dismissing the staff back into its pendant form, Izuku snatches Kero out of the air and shoves him in the front pocket of his hoodie, ignoring Kero’s yelp of surprise.

“Sorry,” Izuku says, though it comes out as more of a squeak. Oh, that was close. That was very close.

Professor Miki blinks when she lays eyes on the chest. “The lock’s gone.”

“Yes,” Izuku replies.

“How?” The Professor asks, turning her head curiously.
“Just had to pick it the right way,” Izuku lies.

After a moment of contemplation, Professor Miki shrugs and tugs on gloves. “Well, thank you for your help. Now, let’s see what’s inside this bad boy!”

As the Professor goes to grab some papers, the chest shakes. Violently.

Izuku takes a very, very deep breath.

That was buzzing he heard just now, wasn’t it?

Watching the Professor walk back casually and examine the chest is very similar to watching someone attempt to defuse a bomb.

“Up we go,” Professor Miki says, lifting the lid up gently and peering inside.

A roaring blackness erupts from the chest, throwing the lid back. Tendrils of shadow sink into the ground, painting a web of darkness onto the marble floor. Without his magically-enhanced senses, Izuku can’t tell what’s going on, but one thing is abundantly clear: Sakura Cards are unpredictable and absolutely evil. Evil.

As quickly as it appeared, the shadows slither under the gap of the door, disappearing.

Both Izuku and Professor Miki stand there in silence for a solid minute and a half.

Then, Professor Miki: “I’m not sure what just happened.”

“Me neither,” Izuku answers, feeling a rush of guilt for lying for the second time in two minutes.

“I think I should... tell someone about this?”

Oh, hold on. Nope, no, definitely not. Time for damage control.

“Maybe just tell the higher-ups,” Izuku suggests quickly, trying not to sound like he’s pleading. He’s mostly successful. “Because other – other people could get worried, and it would affect the work environment!”

Shockingly enough, Professor Miki nods in agreement, gathering her materials. She’s incredibly composed for someone who just had a spectral mass of magic shadows rammed straight up her face. With a sigh, she closes the chest and brushes a few loose strands of hair out of her face. “You’re right. I’ll go tell the Headmaster and see what he says.”

And there it is – the elusive headmaster who somehow agreed to allow a ten year-old Izuku (also see: disaster) to work at a university research centre. Even after three years of running around the university’s library and research facilities, Izuku has never once heard anyone mention the Headmaster’s name. Maybe he’s just a private guy.

“Go on home,” Professor Miki says. “Thank you for your work today. I’ll call you in when we need you again, okay?”

Nodding numbly, Izuku grabs his bag and shuffles out the door as quickly as possible. He... there’s a lot to discuss.

Kero wrestles his way out of the pocket, spitting out a good deal of lint. “Do you ever use a lint roller?”
Slowing down to allow the plush to settle himself in the hood, Izuku blinks. “That was a card.”

“Yeah,” Kero confirms.

“One of my friends had a first-hand experience with a card,” Izuku says.

“She did,” Kero replies.

“My life is in shambles,” Izuku says, bordering hysteria.

Kero pats Izuku’s back, a sympathetic tone in his voice. “For all it’s worth, she took it really well. I guess things like this happen, especially when you live in a superpowered society.”

Maybe Kero’s right. Maybe the Professor’s used to random things exploding in her face, or shadows popping out of locked chests and running off to who knows where.

Shoving all his hysteria into the back of his mind, Izuku takes a deep breath. “What was that?”

“Shadow,” Kero answers immediately, adjusting his seating in Izuku’s hood. “A very versatile card, especially at night. I’d say we should go catch it, but I can’t feel anything. You?”

Kero’s right. No matter how hard Izuku tries to listen, he can’t hear anything. There’s the constant, faint buzzing of the magic of the universe around him, but for every capture, Izuku has always been able to hear and track a card down solely by the unique hum of magic each individual card has.

It’s worrying, but also a relief. The fact that Shadow isn’t immediately causing trouble is nice, and it also gives Izuku a heads-up in case Shadow does try anything. On the other hand, the faint feeling of anxiety in his throat will only grow with time, and Izuku really doesn’t like that.

“I think we should look for Shadow,” he eventually decides.

“We really should,” Kero responds as they leave the library. “So, how do you want to do this? Fly around the city, or run around?”

If there’s one thing Izuku knows he’s good at, it’s running around the city. “I’ll get my skateboard.”

“Might as well change while you’re doing in,” the plush suggests, keeping his voice to a murmur as pedestrians walk past. “Let’s stay as inconspicuous as possible.”

After making a quick trip home, Izuku sets out wearing a plain blue jacket and sweatpants. His baton sticks out of his bag a little while Kero sits comfortably in his backpack, keeping a bit of the zipper open to poke his head out every so often.

There’s really no easy way to go about tracking Shadow down. Aside from asking, “Hello, have you seen a large shadow-creature crawling up the side of a building”, Izuku’s not sure how to proceed.

And so he makes his way to Stationary Stop, where Yuto perks up immediately upon seeing him.

“Izuku!” The owner laughs, standing from where he’s lounging behind the counter. “Nice to see you. How can I help?”

“This is going to sound very weird,” Izuku says. “But have you seen a large shadow-creature crawling up the side of a building?”

Even without looking, Izuku knows that Kero’s face-palming inside the bag.
Thankfully, all of the people within his closer circles of friends are used to Izuku barging into their shops with strange questions and requests.

Yuto raises an eyebrow. “Can’t say I have, but I gotta say, I’m pretty curious as to why you’re asking.”

Izuku that he’s a horrible liar, so he chooses to say, “There was an incident at the university and I’m trying to fix it.”

Apparently Yuto accepts that as an answer, because he laughs and hands a slip of paper to Izuku.

“I won’t ask about your shadow-creature problem, but I might be able to help you find people who can get you where you need to go,” Yuto says, as if that’s not vague and creepy. “Go to this address, and you should find someone there who can help.”

Welp. It’s not quite the lead Izuku was looking for, but it’s the best he’s got.

The location happens to be in an old part of Musutafu, where the streets are narrow and alleyways connect from every place to everywhere. There are some great restaurants and shops within the dark streets, so Izuku knows the area fairly well.

It turns out the designated location is an abandoned warehouse on the very edge of the city.

Izuku’s not sure why the warehouse hasn’t been torn down, but he doesn’t really care. He just really doesn’t want to get murdered by a serial killer. Yuto wouldn’t trick him, right? Yuto’s a fun, respectable guy.

“This looks real sketchy,” Kero murmurs, head poking out. He looks worried and scared at the same time, which Izuku fully understands.

The walls of the warehouse are undeniably old, worn out and flaking in some parts. The entrance seems like it’s been boarded up several times, with different planks of wood hanging from rusty bolts. It looks straight out of The Last of Us, which really doesn’t bode too well.

As Izuku steps through the door, he holds his baton at the ready, prepared to it down onto someone’s head if need be.

And wow, that’s a lot of graffiti.

Izuku’s no stranger to graffiti. In big cities like Musutafu, graffiti is an underappreciated art that often decorates the barren grey walls of older districts. Here, in the amazing emptiness of the warehouse, bright colours are sprayed across every wall, creating a chaotic yet uniform gallery of art like nothing Izuku’s ever seen before.

Even Kero seems shocked. The two of them gape as the sunlight trickles in through patches of missing roof, taking in the urban artwork around them.

When Izuku hears a snap behind him, he spins around and swings his baton as hard as he can.

The figure is small and hooded, suspicious-looking, but unarmed.

It’s only after the baton makes contact that he realizes that he may have just attacked a civilian.

“Oh my god,” Izuku panics, dropping his baton and kneeling down to help whoever he just attacked. “I’m so sorry, I got scared, are you alright?”
“You’re a jumpy one,” the strange man grumbles, batting away Izuku’s hand. Pulling down his hood with one hand, he fixes Izuku with an irritated glare.

That’s bad enough, but the blood that trickles down the man’s head makes Izuku want to throw himself into traffic.

“Bleeding,” Izuku manages to wheeze out, not quite sure what to do with his hands. “Sorry, I’m so sorry. Let me help –”

The man bats his hands away again. “Don’t bother.”

Izuku’s about to say something along the lines of *blood loss sucks and you will die very quickly if I just broke your head*, but that train of thought chugs to a slow stop as the blood on the man’s head... trickles back into his body?

A quirk. Of course. That’s great, because Izuku’s not sure if he can handle the thought of having accidentally murdered someone.

“Yuto wasn’t kidding,” the man sighs, rubbing the fading bruise that Izuku so generously gave him. “You really do hit hard.”

Wait, what? How does Yuto know about Izuku’s baton-swinging habits?

Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Izuku picks up his dropped baton. “I’m... sorry?”

“Yuto sent you, right?” The man pulls himself off the ground, patting the dust off of his pants. “If he trusts you enough to send you to us, then he must trust you a lot.”

“Wait a moment,” Izuku interrupts, thoroughly confused. “Who’s ‘us’?”

The man blinks. Huh. He has red eyes, like Aki from the hospital. “He didn’t tell you?”

“No. He just sent me here and said that I could get some answers from... whoever I’m supposed to get answers from.” Next time, he’ll ask more questions before blindly taking off.

With a sigh, the red-eyed man beckons Izuku into a side room. When he turns, Izuku notices that he has several feather plume chains hanging off a belt. There’s some sort of logo emblazoned on the back of his hoodie, but Izuku doesn’t recognize it.

“Think of us as your neighbourhood information brokers,” the man says, breaking the echoing silence of the warehouse. “We’ll give you the information you seek, and we’ll get it if we don’t already have it.”

That... sounds slightly illegal, but it’s not really vigilantism, right?

Izuku decides to power on. He needs to find Shadow before Shadow finds trouble. Besides, he’s already made himself into a vigilante, as accidental as it was. It can’t get much worse. “What’s your price?”

Snorting, the man pushes open the door to another enormous area. Like the rest of the warehouse, the walls are splattered with explosive colours. Around the room, boxes, shelves, crates, and other abandoned pieces of equipment are strewn around haphazardly, creating a sort of hazardous jungle gym.

“Don’t think so little of us,” the man says, his voice flat. “As if money could pay back all the time
Izuku knows he’s not the most socially receptive person, but he has no idea if there’s anything to say that won’t offend the man. “Um – then how should I repay you?”

Coming to a stop in front of the daredevil’s jungle gym, the man turns around. “Favours. We’re doing you one, so you’ll pay us back likewise.” With a raised eyebrow, he puts on a sardonic smile. “Call me Plume, and I’ll call you Deku.”

Okay. That’s great. That’s great, except for the fact that oh hold on did he just say Deku?

Keeping his breathing as even as possible, Izuku responds, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“We saw your fight with the green monster and the water thing first-hand,” Plume says, a bored tone to his voice. “The way you wield that baton is exactly identical to how Deku handles his staff. We’re very observant, you know. We know everything that goes on in this city.”

At this point, Izuku’s trying very hard not to implode or cry. What should he do?

“What do you want,” he manages to grit out, grip tight against his baton. This is bad. This is really bad.

Plume spreads his arms in a mocking display of goodwill. “We’ll help you find this shadow-monster, and later on, you’ll help us out if we ever need you.”

There’s definitely an ulterior motive in Plume’s words, but Izuku can’t discern what it is. What if these people are affiliated with villains? Does that mean Yuto’s part of this group, since he sent Izuku here to begin with? What if – what if Izuku can’t pay them back correctly, and they expose his identity? Do they even know who he is? What should he do?

Calm down, the bells say, faintly echoing in the ravines of Izuku’s mind. You hold more power over him in this situation.

Izuku clamps down on his jaw to keep down a bubble of hysterical laughter. How?

There’s silence for a moment. Then: You’re still inexperienced in the art of negotiation. Let me take control, and watch closely.

For what seems like both an eternity and no time at all, Izuku floats upon nothingness. His body is not his own; rather, he’s a spectator, watching, learning.

Pulling the pendant out of his shirt, Izuku tries on a calm smile. It feels foreign yet familiar, a motion that is both muscle memory and completely new. Regardless, one thing is clear:

He’s the one in charge here.

Silver dust and purple butterflies dance around the pendant as it extends into its full length. The magic that does not belong to him yet is rightfully his ripples through the very fabric of spacetime, hugging his bones in a song both ancient and new, crooning silver, whispering notes all while bellowing deep, echoing beats.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” he says, an eternal calm in his voice. “To demand so much with such little information is foolish.” Twirling the staff lazily with one hand, Izuku smiles at the boy. “You know this.”
The surprise on Plume’s features is a sight that Izuku finds amusing. Nobody understands the art of the trade more than he does, and the naive boy before him is no exception.

Crossing his arms, the boy’s confident play wavers. “You’re the one who came to us.”

“Of course,” Izuku smiles, tilting his head. “But you want this deal very much, don’t you?”

The boy’s wince is a clear answer in and of itself. No sane information broker would actively put themselves in danger and meet with a new client on such short notice. The boy must be desperate for Izuku’s assistance. Locating Shadow is necessary, yes, but the card will show itself eventually.

“What about Yuto?” Plume asks, a new hesitance in his voice. How cute. The boy’s trying to cover up his weaknesses by drawing on Izuku’s.

Displays of might are crude, but effective. Raising Sword’s card to his lips, Izuku commands, “Sword, heed my call.”

Silver-and-purple wisps of magic curl around the Sealing Staff, transforming the staff into a sleek blade, decorated with glowing sigils and curling patterns resembling butterflies’ wings. He’s certainly not a swordsman, but he’ll make do with whatever he has.

Casually leaning on the blade, Izuku blinks innocently. “What about him?”

And just like that, Plume’s leverage is lost. It’s not a bluff, either – Yuto is a trusted friend, though that might have to be reevaluated after this entire experience. Information brokers in this world are very much vigilantes who work freelance jobs, and the police don’t take well to vigilantes.

Plume’s discomfort is clear now, his eyes shifting around the room. Occasionally, his red eyes will land on Sword and he’ll twitch, but for the most part, he’s avoiding eye contact.

“Allow me to be very clear,” Izuku says, voice serenely flat. With a flick of his wrist, he rests the tip of Sword’s blade underneath Plume’s chin. The fear in those red eyes goes to show how young the boy really is. “You hold no power over me, and I won’t listen to your foolish qualms. I am, however, willing to come to a fair agreement on whose terms we can both agree with.”

Relief and anger flicker over the boy’s face. “What are your terms?”

Tipping the blade upward, Izuku offers a grin as Plume twitches his head up. “Speak to anyone about me, and you’ll find yourself arrested faster than you can turn tail and run. Ah – I know what you’re going to say. And no, it’s not the same for me. It’s my word against yours, and frankly, between an innocent child and a small-time broker, I believe the police will be more partial to me.”

After a moment of deliberation, Plume grits his teeth and nods curtly. “Fine.”

In one smooth movement, Izuku dismisses Sword and flips on the Sealing Staff, leaning his weight on the unfamiliar-yet-familiar staff. “Help me locate the shadow-thing with all the energy you can muster, and I swear by the moon that I’ll return the favour in its exact form, nothing less, nothing more.”

Plume’s showing much more emotion now that his bravado has been torn down. With an expression between confusion and irritation, he says, “That’s not any more specific than my terms.”

To a young broker, of course it wouldn’t sound different. Sighing, Izuku gathers a small ball of magic in his hands, watching it turn with the chaos of the universe. “I told you: I’ll pay you back in the exact form of however you should help me. Time, effort, energy – it’ll all be paid back exactly.”
Crushing the orb in his hand, Izuku glances at Plume. “These are my conditions.”

Red eyes trail over the silver dust that surrounds Izuku’s fist. Eventually, the boy relents, holding his head high. “I’ll work within those conditions.”

“Excellent,” Izuku smiles, all teeth. He reaches out a hand.

A calloused hand meets his. With a firm shake, the deal is made.

_That’s enough for today, isn’t it?_

Something unhinges itself from Izuku’s mind, dragging all of the foreign knowledge and experience with it. Like before, Izuku barely manages to catch himself on his staff, using it as a crutch to support his weight. His breath comes faster than usual.

That – that was – the bells, what did Sakura say –

“Don’t pull that act on me,” Plume hisses, red eyes tinged with anger. He turns and flips himself onto the top of the scrap jungle gym with surprising dexterity and elegance, looking down on Izuku from above. “If you betray our trust, you’ll regret it.”

Izuku puts on a shaky grin. He’s been given a lesson, and he’s not just going to forget it. “Do try your best,” he offers, somehow managing to keep his voice from wavering.

Plume gives him one more hateful look, then scales up and onto the roof through a hole.

And just like that, it’s done.

With a burst of nervous laughter, Izuku drops to the ground. Kero bursts out of the bag, his eyes blown wide.

“You’re crazy,” the plush yells, strangely focused on Izuku’s eyes. “I can’t believe you managed to talk down someone who knows who you are.”

Izuku knows how Kero feels. He’s still processing it himself. “I have occasional bursts of bravery,” he half-lies. Right, the bells – Sakura said something about a Ms. Yuko, hadn’t she?

Spot on, the bells confirm with an ethereal laugh. _But now’s not the time. You’ve much to learn, and so much to see. If the time ever comes for you to meet me... then, we’ll talk._

Considering Izuku’s habit of getting screwed over by life, he’s fairly sure that it’s going to be inevitable.

Another soft laugh echoes within Izuku’s mind before the bells fall silent, leaving only the sounds of the city around him and Kero’s ranting.

“At least we have some help now,” Izuku offers.

With a huff, Kero crosses his arms. “We’ll see how far those gangsters can take us. I’m guessing not far, since they’re not magicians.”

Izuku’s tempted to point out that quirks are a lot more versatile than Kero might assume, but decides to drop it. Now that they have somebody – or is it some people, Izuku’s not sure – working on the case, he can direct his attention to other tasks with less anxiety pounding at his head.

He really hopes everything goes meh-ish. Izuku isn’t dumb enough to assume that everything will go
Getting called over to Sasha’s place for fitting is exciting. It’s also a great way to pry Izuku away from the spiral of doom he slowly feels himself slipping into.

“Ta-da!” With a grand flourish, Sasha holds up the new utility belt, pride written all over her face. “The best utility belt I’ve ever made, heroes included!”

The belt is a compact thing, black all around with silver linings and crescent moons stitched onto the pockets. Pockets line the length of the entire belt, accompanied by strange buttons that Izuku is only slightly wary of.

It even has a holster for his baton. Izuku thinks he’s going to cry.

Sasha laughs good-naturedly as she pats Izuku’s back, eyes glittering with fond amusement. “Well, don’t leave me hanging! Try it on, and we’ll tell you everything about it.”

Izuku perks up. “‘We’?”

With a slight pause, Sasha nods excitedly. “That’s right; you haven’t met my niece yet. She’s your age, so I’m sure you guys will get along just fine!”

Oh, no, no, no. Izuku’s not good with people his own age.

“Wait,” he says meekly, only to be overshadowed by Sasha’s bellowing call.

“Hey, Mei!” She yells, poking her head into the back of the shop. “Your guinea pig’s here!”

There’s an enormous clatter of something falling, followed by some more loud noises and a yelp. A few seconds later, a girl with pink hair and the most piercing eyes Izuku’s ever seen slams the door open. Sasha steps out of the way with a practiced motion.

“Guinea pig!” Approaching much quicker than Izuku’s comfortable with, the girl proceeds to throw her hands all over his body.

Well. That’s an approach far more tactile than he’s ever experienced before, and that includes Zing, who picked him up and threw him into a pit of foam blocks the first time they met.

“Mei, stop that!” Batting the girl’s hands away, Sasha steps in between the two of them, exasperated. “Izuku here doesn’t like it when strangers feel him up.”

It’s hard to find someone who actually likes that, is what Izuku wants to say. Instead, he stays resolutely silent, recalibrating his thoughts. The muffled snickering from his bag isn’t helping.

With a laugh, the girl – Mei – leans forward, her eyes skimming over Izuku’s figure. “You’re so boring! How else am I supposed to get a feel for his body shape?” Looking directly into Izuku’s eyes, she says, “You’re very fit, by the way. Very solid.”

Oh. Her eyes are scopes of some sort, colouring her pupils yellow. Either way, it’s much easier to focus on the Mei’s eyes than the words that come out of her mouth.

“Come on, try the belt on,” Mei insists, hands fidgeting eagerly. A diabolical sort of aura radiates off her as she grins, eyes wide with anticipation. It’s kind of disturbing.
Sasha pushes Mei further back with one hand, offering the utility belt to Izuku with the other.
“Ignore her,” the woman sighs. “Let’s see how it fits!”

The two sets of eyes staring at him is unnerving, but Izuku goes ahead anyway. Wrapping the belt around his waist, he pats himself down, jumping from side to side. It’s incredibly light despite how it looks, and there are so many pockets.

It’s a blessing. Izuku loves his friends.

Mei darts forward, ducking under Sasha’s outstretched arm. “Ah, excellent! It fits well. Now, what else do you need?”

Izuku blinks. “What?”


“Um –”

“Stop badgering him,” Sasha scolds, placing herself between them once more. She pauses, processing Mei’s words, then turns to Izuku. “But seriously, if you need any more equipment, we’re more than willing to make something – well, as long as you help us out!”

Izuku nods. It’s hard to do anything but, when two very enthusiastic inventors have found interest in him.

(For a brief moment, Izuku wonders if there’s any way to make a sort of disk-like contraption like the ones from a very specific show involving magic cards. That would be very cool.)

Actually... considering the fact that he’s a pseudo-vigilante, a costume might be a good investment.

Wringing his hands, Izuku says quietly, “Um, a full outfit doesn’t sound too bad, really.”

Both Sasha and Mei look like Christmas has just come early.

“Details,” Sasha demands immediately, scribbling on a notepad furiously. In similar fashion, Mei slams her intricate goggles over her eyes, snatching up a stray pencil from off the floor in a very practiced and fluid motion.

Izuku takes a few steps back, raising his hands in front of him. “I – I don’t have anything concrete, but something with lots of mobility would be nice. And inconspicuous. And maybe green?”

Thankfully, the two don’t question his design choices. Instead, Mei begins wrapping measuring tape all around Izuku and mumbling numbers to herself. Sasha’s pulled out a drawing board from god knows where and is already beginning to sketch something.

“I think a magical girl design would be pretty accurate,” Sasha comments, and Izuku’s heart almost lurches straight out of his chest.

With a wheeze, he demands, “What?”

Mei hums an affirmative response as she measures Izuku’s chest. “There’s nothing more iconic than a costume that screams your name to the world!”

It seems Sasha and Mei have completely disregarded the ‘inconspicuous’ part of Izuku’s pitch. Also,
this conversation is implying all sorts of horrible things.

“So – does that mean –” Izuku can’t bring himself to finish the sentence.

Sasha takes it onto herself to finish it for him. “We know that you’re Deku, yeah. It wasn’t hard to figure out, especially since I know you so well!”

That makes three people that have figured out his not-so-secret identity, two of whom Izuku barely knows. Wonderful.

Izuku wonders when the ground will open up beneath him and swallow him up.

“Don’t be so tense,” Mei comments, her smile bright as ever. “We wouldn’t be so stupid as to tell the entire world who made the extraordinary equipment Deku carries around with him!”

Sasha nods, only half-listening as she draws furiously. The speed at which she’s sketching is incredible.

After a few minutes, Mei bolts to the back of the shop with a clutter of noise. This leaves Izuku time to slowly piece together what’s left of his sanity.

“How’s this design look?” Sasha flips the board up, a proud smile on her features. “It’s practical and cute! A total win-win!”

The outfit Sasha’s designed consists of a green jumpsuit, puffy pants, a shawl of some sort, a hood with what looks like bunny ears, and a whole lot of frills, wing pins, and crescent moons. Next to the design, GREEN is scrawled in large font and circled several times.

“Maybe a visor too,” Izuku says, then claps a hand over his mouth.

Sasha nods energetically, adding on a simple visor. Mei stumbles back into the room, looking more ragged than before. “By the way, I’m adding on a wireless communication device. Wing or moon?”

“Moon?” Izuku replies, finally realizing that he’s inadvertently contracted himself to the brilliant and terrifying girl before him.

Mei gives a quick nod. “The space aesthetic is powerful,” she states very seriously, then drops a large crate of small gadgets onto the table. It appears as if she’s had a revelation of some kind, because her smile grows even larger, which is borderline disturbing. “Moon rabbit,” Mei exclaims with a tone of reverence, launching herself over to Sasha’s side, chattering rapid-fire about jetpacks and grappling hooks.

Izuku should probably intervene before he gets turned into a green Batman.

But... despite the fact that they’re discussing Izuku’s – Deku’s – vigilante costume, it’s sort of fun.

“I don’t need a jetpack,” Izuku interrupts, not quite sure how he should phrase his thoughts. “I can, um, fly.”

Two sets of eyes turn to stare at him. Izuku shuffles awkwardly.

“Of course!” Mei’s the first to respond, scope-eyes wide. She’s somehow able to wire a gadget so it lights up while keeping a conversation. “You can fly on your staff! Oh, but grappling hooks are still valid. Wonderful, wonderful. We can use that free weight to add so many goodies.”

Sasha turns to Izuku, mouth flat and eyes serious. “How do you feel about flash bombs?”
The following conversation takes two hours and gets Izuku far more excited than he should be. There’s something about hanging out with Sasha and Mei that’s exciting to begin with, and their contagious enthusiasm fills the entire room.

(Izuku learns a worrying amount about the usage of flash bombs and knockout darts. As interesting and amazing as Mei and Sasha are, he hastily talks them out of making flamethrowers or freeze rays. Besides, he has magic cards.)

In the end, they decide on keeping Izuku as mobile and light as possible, given the fact that he’s, you know, a vigilante.

While Mei drafts up rough designs for some sort of grappling hook gun, she casually asks, “So, why vigilantism?”

Izuku inhales sharply.

“With a quirk like yours, you would fit in perfectly at the top hero schools in the country!” To emphasize her point, Mei waves a pencil in the air. “What’s your quirk, anyway? Bringing art to life or something?”

There are two options to choose between: lying, and telling the truth.

Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku can see Sasha tilting her head ever so slightly in their direction while rummaging through fabrics.

Izuku trusts Sasha, and he thinks he can trust Mei, too.

(If Kacchan taught him anything, it’s that trust is a feeble, feeble thing. It’s time to build some real trust.)

“I don’t have a quirk,” Izuku says firmly. He’s made up his mind.

Sasha quirks up an eyebrow and smiles, silent as she eavesdrops. Izuku’s never spoken to her about his quirklessness, but he has a feeling that she’s known all along.

Mei leans in with renewed interest. “How interesting! Then how is it you can do the things you do, guinea pig?”

Izuku takes a deep breath. It’s now or never. “Magic.”

Underneath her goggles, Mei’s eyes narrow. Then, after a moment, she gives a wide smile. “Incredible! Fascinating! Oh, you’re so interesting, guinea pig.” Clapping her hands together, Mei leans forward. “Tell me more. Tell me everything.”

“Hang on,” Sasha says, sharing a glance with Izuku. Her eyes are shining with curiosity, but she cracks a lopsided grin. “We can’t keep Izuku here too long. After all, we have to do our own stuff, right?”

Laughing, Mei slaps down her pencil. “Why, of course! A simple magical vigilante like you couldn’t possibly comprehend the genius of my process!” Before Izuku can react, Mei pulls out a phone with a comically large and fanciful case. “Before you leave, I demand your contact information.”

Izuku gives Mei his email and phone number. He’s awful with social interaction, especially with people his age, but he considers this a victory.
As he leaves, Mei makes Izuku promise to visit once she’s finished with the wireless communication device. “Ground support,” she explains, which sets off a whole choir of alarm bells in Izuku’s head.

Once Mei has returned to do whatever crazy and ingenious things she’s planning to do, Sasha walks Izuku out the door.

“Magic, huh?” The woman hums, amused. “I expected a lot of things, but I can’t say that ever crossed my mind!”

Izuku flushes, wringing his hands. “I – it’s complicated. But I swear, I’m just trying to help. Nobody – nobody else can help, and I won’t let people get hurt because I’m too scared to act.”

Sasha gives him the same look Sakura did. It’s a strange mix of sadness and appreciation and pride mixed all into one, which makes it incredibly difficult to decipher.

“I’m really happy you decided to trust us,” Sasha says. “I hope you continue to put your trust in us, because we’ll never let you down.” Grinning, she adds, “We might not be heroes, but we’re always supporting heroes like you from behind.”

That’s – but –

Rubbing his eyes with one hand, Izuku stares at his shoes. “I – I’m not a hero.”

Patting his back gently, Sasha’s grin breaks into a wide smile. “You’ve always been a hero, Izuku.”

That...

That means something.

Izuku’s known that his recent actions are very much vigilantism, no matter how he puts it. He knows that there are people who will see him as a threat, while others will call him a hero.

There’s no way the public would know of the hours and hours he’s taken out of his own life to give to others, and he’d rather keep it that way. But he refuses to fall into the same misfortune Sakura did. He won’t let his duties as a cardcaptor become his identity, and he won’t ever forget that he exists as someone in the greater world outside of his bubble of magic, no matter how large it may be.

And what Sasha said – she knows that Izuku’s a vigilante, yet she’s calling him a hero, not because of his magic nor the spectacles he puts on, but because she’s watched as Izuku throws himself into trying to make the world a better place, bit by bit, by giving his time to others.

Real heroes help anyone and everyone, whether or not they’re in trouble!

It’s horribly embarrassing, bursting into tears in front of Sasha’s game shop. It takes a solid two minutes for the tears to stop coming, and another two for Izuku’s breathing to return to normal.

“Remember to keep in touch,” Sasha calls as Izuku shuffles down the street. “We’ll make sure you’re safe and well-dressed!”

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Immediately after Izuku rounds the corner, Kero’s head pops out of the zipper, his eyes blown wide.

“What just happened?” He asks, baffled.

Izuku doesn’t blame him.
“I don’t know what to say, kid,” Kero admits. “I mean, it’s sort of worrying that people are starting to pick up on the whole secret identity thing, but you just told those two that you have magic!”

“I trust them,” Izuku answers, his mind still a little fuzzy from his recent breakdown.

With a small sigh, Kero shrugs. “It’s your call. If you think what you’re doing is right, I won’t do anything to stop you.”

The trust and freedom that Kero’s offering unto Izuku is both a blessing and a burden. For now, he’s just happy that Kero isn’t interrogating him about his life choices, his feeble emotions, etc.

(But Kero’s never done that before, has he?)

A light chime startles Izuku out of his thoughts. Grabbing his phone, he sees a new message from an unfamiliar number.

[17:34] ???:
What the hell is up with your shadow thing.

A pit of foreboding churns in Izuku’s stomach as he replies.

[17:35] Izuku: Is this Plume?

[17:36] Plume (?): Yes.
I’d like you to know that the shadow thing’s probably pretty pissed off.

[17:36] Izuku: Is there... a reason for that?

[17:37] Plume:
You wanted us to find it.
We did.
Problem is, it bolted.
There’s someone on my team with a light-based quirk, so we tried to contain it.
Didn’t really do anything except make it real angry.

[17:39] Izuku: You could tell it was angry?

[17:40] Plume:
It threw two of my people into a wall and tore up our base.
So yeah, I’m pretty fucking sure it’s pissed.

This day has not been very fun.

[17:40] Izuku: I’m sorry.

[17:42] Plume:
Apologies aren’t going to do anything.
We’re doing our job. All you need to do is keep up your side of the deal.

[17:43] Izuku:
How is everything? Are you guys okay?

[17:45] Plume:
That’s not pertinent to the mission.
The shadow thing escaped, but we’re keeping a visual on it.
It’s not doing anything right now.
When do you need its location?

“If we can’t find Shadow before sundown, then things will really start to go downhill,” Kero says, peaking over Izuku’s shoulder to read the messages. “But we don’t want to push at it too hard, otherwise Shadow might go on a rampage. I say we let Shadow roam for a while, let it calm down, and only intercept it when we need to.”

Now that Izuku thinks about it, all the particularly violent cards he’s captured have been poked at by heroes beforehand.

Maybe it’s better to let the cards settle into their new environment before jumping into the fray.

[17:46] Izuku:
As soon as it starts moving, or at sundown.
Whichever one comes first.

[17:47] Plume:
I’ll contact you then.
And if you’re planning to take this thing on, you’d better be careful.

After that, no new messages come. It’s nice to know that Plume is keeping his word, but Izuku isn’t sure how Plume managed to get his number. Maybe from someone in the neighbourhood.

Speaking of which – Yuto has some questions to answer.

Izuks’s a little more on edge than usual as he makes his way to Stationary Stop. Something about the air feels heavier than usual, like it’s saturated with a sort of invisible fog. It might just be Izuku freaking out again, but he doesn’t want to take any chances.

There must be a strange expression on his face as he walks through the door, because Yuto quirks an eyebrow up. “I guess Plume wasn’t very kind, was he?”

A sting of betrayal makes Izuku flinch ever so slightly. So Yuto and Plume know each other. But Yuto’s a good person, so why...?

“I know Plume might come on as rude and mean, but he’s a good guy,” Yuto says, sighing. A strange kind of exasperation colours his features, not necessarily in a kind way. “I’ve known him for some time now, and I can say with confidence that he’ll keep his word.”

Now that catches Izuku’s attention. Maybe Yuto isn’t actually affiliated with Plume – maybe they’re just childhood friends, and Yuto feels some sort of obligation toward Plume.

Most of the time, Izuku isn’t very good at picking up on social cues, but the contracting emotions that flicker of Yuto’s face paints a story that Izuku knows all too well.

It’s so shockingly familiar that Izuku feels like throwing up.

“He texted me just now,” Izuku replies, swallowing the nausea as best as he can. “He, um. He’s
really fast at this tracking thing.”

Yuto nods, sighing. “He’s always like that. So, did you need anything?”

The conversation lulls from there. It’s clear that Yuto’s feeling a bit awkward, and Izuku is in a perpetual state of awkwardness, so he offers a hasty goodbye not five minutes later.

He decides to make a quick trip home to drop off his bag. It’s very likely that he’ll have to seal Shadow tonight, and Izuku wants to try out his new utility belt.

(It’s nice to have something to do to keep his mind off the impending showdown with Shadow. If anything, it keeps the anxiety at bay.)

As Izuku drops his bag on the floor and begins transferring objects to the belt, Kero tucks himself into one of the larger pockets. He pauses as he’s halfway in, pulling out a small, marble-sized object.

Kero and Izuku stare at each other.

“I think that’s a miniaturized smoke bomb,” Izuku says.

“Maybe you should check all the pockets first,” Kero replies.

It takes far longer than expected. Most of the objects are marble-sized balls, which is really quite concerning. Some of them are black, while others are white, and a few are blue. Izuku isn’t sure what the colours correspond to, and he’s worried that he’ll find out accidentally.

In the end, Izuku leaves with two large pockets of the marbles, a small first aid kit, fishing wire, a switchblade, his phone, and his baton. He probably looks very strange, leaving his apartment like he’s going off to a tactical battle.

Izuku’s phone chimes the instant he’s out the door. It seems like life isn’t done screwing him over today.

[19:21] Plume:
Shadow thing’s on the move. Seems less violent than before, but much faster.
At Second St. right now, but it’s headed west.
Civilians are starting to notice. Some of them are on their phones. Most likely notifying authorities.

[19:23] Plume:
We’ll keep tracking it until you arrive. Don’t expect any more help from us after that.

It takes several deep breaths for Izuku to be able to formulate a proper response.

[19:23] Izuku:
Got it.
I’m moving out now. Be careful.

“You barely even know him,” Kero mumbles as he scans over Izuku’s most recent message.

“I’m not going to let people get hurt because of my own incompetence,” Izuku grits out, ducking into the loneliest and darkest alley he can find. Thankfully, he’s wearing plain and inconspicuous clothing – and he has a hood. Oh, thank god.

Izuku bursts from the alleyway atop his staff, leaving a trail of silver dust behind him. Fly’s beating wings lift him up above the city in a matter of seconds.
“Second Street’s in the middle of downtown,” Izuku mumbles, mostly to himself. Why do the most troublesome cards always choose the location with the most people to come out and mess around?

“Lots of lights and lots of shadows,” Kero says, his mouth a grim line. “We’d better take Shadow down quickly.”

As Izuku flies over Second Street, a bright glimmer from the rooftops below catches his eye. A person in a hoodie waves up at him, a bright light emitting from their hands.

“Down here!” She shouts. “Quickly, or the shadow-thing’s gonna bolt!”

In one smooth movement, Izuku directs Fly to the roof, hopping off and running toward the light-waver. Double-checking to make sure his hood is up, Izuku eyes the figure cautiously. “Are you with Plume?”

“Obviously,” she snorts. “You’d better get moving. The rest of the team’s down there –” she gestures to the alleyway – “Keeping an eye on your monster.”

Izuku lets out a breath, gripping his staff tightly. He nods his thanks, then scales down the side of the building and into the alleyway.

And... yeah, that’s definitely a card.

An enormous mass of darkness is sprawled out all over the walls and ground of the alleyway, creating a nightmarish web of shadow. Every so often, it twitches, which is just awful.

Plume hops over not a moment after Izuku hits the ground, an irritated look on his features. “You’d better pay us back accordingly,” he hisses, red eyes glowing in the darkness. Here, in the narrow alleys of the city, Plume stands tall with several hooded figures behind him.

Izuku lifts his head and stares Plume down. He’s not sure where the courage comes from, but this situation doesn’t require Plume and his people anymore.

This is a cardcaptor’s duty, and Izuku will never run away from responsibility.

Surprisingly, Plume looks away first. As he turns, the people behind him follow without hesitation. In the span of a few seconds, they’ve disappeared above the rooftops, leaving only eerie silence behind.

Kero climbs out of the pocket, his arms crossed and eyes narrowed. “Still don’t like them,” he huffs.

“I think we have a bigger problem on hand,” Izuku laughs nervously, clamping his jaw shut so he can’t say anything demoralizing.

And because life hates Izuku, Shadow chooses now to rise upward, tendrils snapping outward.

With a panicked call of “Windy!” Izuku blasts himself upward in an explosion of green-hued wind, stumbling onto the roofs once more.

Shadow’s magic is unlike anything Izuku’s ever heard. Whispering tones and low chants ebb and flow into Izuku’s mind, with no discernable pitch or rhythm. The sound is just there, ever-present, a constant hum in the background of the universe before it.

“Shadow, please,” Izuku pleads, cautiously stepping toward the enormous mass of darkness. “Come peacefully, and everyone wins.”
Apparently Shadow doesn’t care, because it slithers out of the alley and into the lights of the street with incredible speed. The screams start immediately afterward.

“Let’s go!” Kero darts back into the pocket, and Izuku takes off, dread pooling in the base of his stomach.

It’s time to do his job.

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The thing about trying to seal Shadow is that it’s incredibly difficult to do at night.

Izuku quickly learns that all corporeal and non-magical attacks do jack shit against Shadow. This is proven by the brave citizens who try to defend themselves and others using their quirks, which pass straight through Shadow.

“Get back!” Thrusting his arm out, Izuku commands Windy to defend the civilians from Shadow’s tendrils. Green wind snaps outward, creating a faint green wall between Shadow and the civilians.

Another thing Izuku learns is that even though projectiles fired toward the shadows don’t do anything, Shadow is perfectly capable of snatching cars off the road and hurling them at the hoard of escaping civilians. Windy’s deflected at least four vans and a truck. Izuku feels really, really bad.

Kero floats by Izuku, hollering warnings to civilians that stray too close to the wind wall. “This isn’t something you can handle! Get to safety; we’ll handle this!”

It’s nice to know that subtlety has been thrown out the window.

Shadow may not be particularly powerful or violent, but it’s still very much capable of causing widespread damage to the city and the citizens. If Izuku wants to seal Shadow, he needs a plan, and he needs it now.

All he gets is a lone child, stumbling past the wind barrier and directly into the Shadow’s path.

Here’s what happens:

The child freezes under Shadow’s looming figure, tears in her eyes.

Shadow’s tendrils erupt outward eagerly.

Kero cries out, “No!”

And something that Izuku thought he’d lost years ago unfurls itself, screaming –

You need to be a hero.

His body moves without any thought. Charging headfirst into Shadow’s attack, Izuku tosses his baton into the air, throws Sword’s card upward, and calls, “Sword, lend me your power!”

The baton’s form shatters like glass, revealing Sword’s immaculate blade underneath in a flurry of shining white feathers and silver dust.

With the Sealing Staff in one hand and Sword in the other, Izuku swings with all his might, cleaving through the assault of Shadow’s tendrils with one clean, horizontal cut.

The darkness explodes backward in a burst of pink and silver light. Silver aether trails behind the
blade, leaving the glowing image of a crescent moon that chases away what remains of the shadows. Behind him, Windy trills, attacking with binding chains of wind.

In one smooth movement, Izuku dispels Sword, slams his baton into his holster, and scoops up the child.

Izuku takes a deep breath, tugging his hood further down.

This is all too much. But it’s not about him – it’s about making sure nobody gets hurt.

“Be careful, okay?” Putting on the best smile he can, Izuku sets the child down behind the wind barrier. “Leave this to us. We’ll make sure nobody gets hurt.”

The sheer awe and respect that shines in the girl’s eyes makes Izuku look away. That look isn’t meant for him.

Behind him, Shadow seems to analyze the situation. After a brief pause, it collects itself into an enormous bundle of darkness and takes off down the street, carving deep gouges into the pavement with its claw-like tendrils. Civilians scream as they scramble out of the way.

“Go, go!” Kero snatches onto Izuku’s hoodie just in time for Fly’s powerful wings to launch them after Shadow. Windy dispels the wind wall and follows after them, singing soft yet firm notes of determination and perseverance.

It’s nice to know that he can summon two cards at the same time. It sucks that he had to find out while chasing a rampant, spectral mass of shadow around the city.

“Where’s it going?” Izuku demands, performing a rather impressive barrel roll to dodge incoming chunks of pavement that Shadow just loves to hurl. Even without looking, Izuku knows that Windy’s catching the projectiles behind him, either destroying them or dropping them harmlessly to the ground.

Over the wind, Kero struggles to raise his head. “Shadow’s not as aggressive or powerful as Watery, but it knows when it has to run,” he answers, shouting so his voice can be heard. “We need to pin it down or trap it! As long as it’s night, we’ll never find the stamina to keep up with it!”

But how? It’s clear that Sword can cut through Shadow, but there’s no way Izuku can defeat Shadow just by slashing around a blade. No, he needs something bigger, something stronger, something that Shadow’s naturally weak against –

Three pro heroes jump onto Shadow, and every rational thought in Izuku’s head goes down the drain.

“Wait!” There’s no way that any of their attacks will affect Shadow. All they’re doing is throwing themselves into the fray with no chance of victory whatsoever.

But pro heroes are called pro heroes for a reason. Two of the heroes are thrown off rather violently, but manage to catch themselves before hitting any buildings. The last hero recovers more gracefully than the other two, using strings to catch her fall.

“Let’s go!” The string hero – oh, that’s Puppeteer’s successor! – throws her arms out, and thin strings weave a net across the street. One of the other heroes fires a bolt of light at the strings, and the entire net sparks to life with brilliant sparks of energy.

Izuku knows an opportunity when he sees one. With a flick of his hand, he commands, “Windy,
push Shadow back as hard as you can!”

Roaring wind blows past his ears as Windy rushes forth, slamming into Shadow’s enormous form with the speed of a bullet. The force of the attack shatters windows on the nearby buildings, but manages to topple Shadow backward and into the net.

Lowering himself to the ground, Izuku is quick to tug his hood back on and rush to Shadow’s incapacitated form. He needs to do this now, before things get even messier.

“Hey!” One of the heroes steps in front of him, arm raised. “Stay away from the villain. We’re going to need you to come with us.”

Ah ha ha, no way in hell is that happening.

Izuku backs up slowly, one hand on his cards and the other grabbing a handful of marbles. The familiar pressure of anxiety builds in the base of his neck. No. No, there’s no way he’s getting caught here. He has to protect the cards – he has to protect everyone –

Shadow bursts free from the energy net, releasing an awful screech that resonates through the night. The whispering and chanting have evolved into full-on screaming, and if that doesn’t show that Shadow’s seriously pissed off, Izuku doesn’t know what will.

It’s no surprise that Shadow was able to break free of the net, given its magical nature and all. But now Izuku knows that what he needs to win this fight is light, and a whole lot of it.

Luckily, he knows just the place to go.

“Shadow!” Izuku waves the Sealing Staff above his head, jumping up and down to catch the card’s attention. “Hey, you stupid card!”

Shadow’s definitely a little angry, because Izuku’s treated to a tendril attempting to claw his face off immediately afterward. Stepping to the side to avoid having his body torn in half, he prepares to run for his life.

“You’re a dishonorable and pathetic card, running away from me like that! If – if you want to beat me, you’re going to have to catch me!”

The heroes don’t appear to have expected Izuku’s outburst, because their eyes are blown wide with shock. “What are you doing, kid?” The string hero steps forward, eyes flickering nervously between Izuku and Shadow. “Stop taunting it!”

It’s a little too late for that, because Shadow leaps forward with an angry screech, tendrils outstretched.

Izuku’s already running. “Fly, Windy, get me out of here!”

As Fly pushes Izuku into the air, Windy propels him forward with an incredible blast of wind. Kero’s clinging onto the hoodie for dear life, his face pale. Izuku doesn’t risk looking back, but Kero’s free to do so.

“I’m guessing that Shadow looks like some sort of horrible eldritch monstrosity that wants to cleave me in half,” Izuku says, miraculously managing to keep a bubble of hysterical laughter in.

“You’d be right,” Kero replies, sounding very worried and tired at the same time.
The distance between Shadow and Izuku is most definitely closing, but the Sports Dome is already in sight. From here, it’s a matter of crossing his fingers and hoping for the best.

“I’m going to take advantage of the high-beam lights in the Sports Dome,” Izuku informs Kero, remaining calm to the best of his ability. “There’s a master switch — a big blue button — in the control panel in the glass box that overlooks the stadium. Can you hit it while I keep Shadow distracted?”

Familiarity lights up in Kero’s eyes, followed by faint amusement. The plush nods. “Big blue button. Got it. Now, let’s go!”

Izuku dives head-first into the Sports Dome, thanking whatever deities are watching that the roof is open. The normal lights are already on, but it’s not enough to immobilize Shadow.

Once the screeching mass of darkness that is Shadow has landed in the stadium, Izuku raises Lock into the air. “Lock, under the name of your new master, Deku, seal all exits in this building!”

For a faint second, Izuku can feel the energy draining from him. He shouldn’t be surprised; the Sports Dome is enormous, and the gaping hole in the ceiling is really an exit as well, as proven by the shimmering barrier of silver that blankets over the dome.

When he looks back, Kero’s already gone, halfway to the control panel. Now all Izuku needs to do is keep Shadow occupied.

“Watery,” he commands, raising the card above his head, “protect us from harm!”

It’s a surreal experience, watching shadows snatch at a magic water-mermaid-thing. Watery is clearly more proactive than Windy, lunging out with high-pressure jets and whips of water. Shadow isn’t pulling any punches either, thrashing out in a terrifying combination of unholy screaming and convulsing. As powerful as Watery is, the night is Shadow’s reign, and Izuku knows he doesn’t have the energy to keep going much longer.

Around the stadium, the high-beam lights flicker on simultaneously, focusing downward onto the field. The lumbering mass of shadows dissipates instantly, leaving a simple figure in an inky black cloak.

“Go!” Kero yells, his high-pitched voice echoing across the dome.

Izuku bolts toward Shadow’s true form and brings his staff down on the card’s head.

“Shadow, I command you return to your form confined!” It’s almost over. Oh, thank god, *it’s almost over.* “Seal!”

In one final burst of darkness, Shadow’s form condenses into a pink card, fluttering onto Izuku’s palm. Alongside it, Watery and Lock’s cards slip back into his pocket, and the silver blanket over the dome fades out of existence.

Izuku really, really wants to go home. Kero darts down to float by his shoulder, and even he looks exhausted.

“It’s been a long day,” the plush says, patting Izuku’s shoulder. “Let’s get out of here, grab some food, and head on home.”

With a nod, Izuku prepares to call on what little energy he has left and fly to a safe location.

And then the floodgates quite literally burst, with police streaming in through the entrances of the
Sports Dome in droves.

Okay, Izuku definitely isn’t tired now.

“Police! Stay where you are and don’t move!” And – that’s a gun, yes, that’s definitely a gun, they all have guns, oh my god, he’s going to get arrested and he’ll disappoint so many people, oh my god that’s a gun.

Kero’s frozen as well, but manages to whisper into Izuku’s ear. “There’s no way we’re getting arrested tonight. How about trying out those marbles?”

Right. Right, right. Being confronted by the authorities is a very obvious risk that Izuku takes every time he intercepts and seals a card. That’s why Mei and Sasha are making an outfit to keep him safe, and why he has two pockets full of marbles that can aid his escape.

As he slips his hand into his pocket, the officers approach him, their weapons raised. “Hands where we can see them!”

“I know, sir,” Izuku manages to say, keeping his voice as monotone as possible. “I’m just. Putting my cards away.” Slowly, slowly. He needs to be very careful as to not tip any of them off.

“Hands behind your head!”

“I know,” Izuku repeats. His hand tightens around Fly’s card and a handful of marbles. “But let me get back to you on that one.”

In one quick movement, Izuku smashes the marbles downward. The result is an incredible chain explosion of smoke, light, and – yes, those are actual explosions, enveloping the entire field within the chaos that is Mei’s inventions.

There’s no time to waste. Izuku has homework. He has school tomorrow. He has so many errands to run. He doesn’t have time to get arrested.

“Fly, let’s go!”

In the midst of the hellish fog, Izuku darts upward with Kero clinging onto his sleeve. He rises, he rises, and he rises, until the city is a jigsaw of lights beneath him.

Oh god. He just ran away from the police. If people didn’t think he was a vigilante before, they definitely do now. Oh, his life is in shambles.

As if reading his mind, Kero pats Izuku’s back sympathetically. “Well, on the plus side, we know what the marbles do now.”

Izuku laughs feebly. What else can he do?

With a very loud and very long inhalation, Izuku lowers his altitude and circles around the city carefully, eventually finding an alleyway that’s far, far away from the action downtown.

“That was really cool, you know?” Kero perks up brightly. “You really cemented yourself as a force to be reckoned with!”

Izuku pushes down the urge to smack his head against the wall. “That wasn’t what I was trying to do.”

Pushing Izuku toward the street, Kero shrugs. “Don’t worry about it too much. Speaking of which,
don’t you have an essay due tomorrow?”

He freezes. Smacking his head against the wall doesn’t seem like a horrible idea now. “I... do. Oh, no.”

Kero sighs, shaking his head like it’s a situation he’s very used to. Hopefully Sakura had a habit of cramming work too, because it’ll make Izuku feel much better about himself.

“I’ll raid the kitchen for snacks. We should probably pick up some energy drinks on the way back, because you’re gonna need them.”

Cramming in an entire essay in one night after chasing the magical embodiment of shadows around the city. If that doesn’t describe Izuku’s life in a nutshell, nothing will.

***

Thankfully, Izuku is an excellent student who takes meticulous notes, so he finishes the essay around two in the morning.

Kero’s already sound asleep, having dozed off against a bag of jumbo marshmallows. Izuku can’t blame him; it’s been a very long day, and he’s really not looking forward to waking up in four hours.

As he’s about to slip into his bed, his phone chimes.

[2:03] Mei:
Hello, minion!! This is a quick update to say that I’ve finished making the wireless communication devices!
I’ve decided to call them ー★DekuComs★ー in honor of your vigilante alias! Be proud, minion!!
Also, the show you put on a few hours ago was pretty impressive! Anyone who can ditch the police like that is a badass in my book!
By the way, that sword you used to save that girl? I must see it. Your equipment needs to suit the weapons you use!!!

Mei’s eccentric personality is a welcome change to the haze of sleep that’s been plaguing Izuku for the past four hours. The faintest of smiles makes its way onto his face as he reads of Mei’s texts. It’s nice to know that someone has his back, even past the entire vigilantism thing.

Wait. How... how does Mei know so much?

Oh. Oh, no, no, no.

A quick glance at his social media tells him that mainstream media has officially deemed the vigilante Deku as a topic of interest. A simple tag by the name of #Deku is trending, and Izuku wants to throw himself out the window.

And – and there’s a video, clearly taken from a phone camera, that shows him slashing Shadow’s attack back with Sword. It’s a very surreal experience, watching himself pick up the lost child and drop her off behind Windy’s makeshift wall. The audio quality isn’t great, but it manages to pick up, “We’ll make sure nobody gets hurt.”

If Izuku didn’t know any better, it would sort of look heroic.

There’s no lack of videos in the tag. There he is, chasing after Shadow atop his staff, and there he is again, commanding Windy to push Shadow back. There’s even footage of Izuku’s daring escape from the police, which is just as confusing as it is terrifying, because who was filming?
Regardless, the situation isn’t looking very good.

“Kero,” Izuku wheezes, feeling faint. It’s a good thing he’s already in bed, because he’s pretty sure he would’ve collapsed otherwise. “Kero, wake up.”

Flopping over, the plush moans as he rubs his eyes blearily. “What?” Looking over to the clock, Kero sighs. “It’s... it’s two in the morning, what is it?”

Izuku scrolls to the worryingly long page of the #Deku tag and places it in front of Kero. The plush leans over, scrolling through the posts. After a while, a tired smile makes it onto Kero’s face.

“You’re famous, kid,” Kero comments with a wide smile, which really doesn’t help. “Look at you, inspiring so many people! Have you seen these posts?”

Actually, no. He’s been too busy freaking out. Hesitantly, Izuku leans forward.

**polypeptides** @thatotherwhiteguy
more of a hero than the actual heroes. where u at, pros? #Deku

**Kirari Fujiko** @fudgiko
what a kind person!! dont know who he is, but no villain would jump in the line of fire to save others!! #Deku

**cheap steak** @kendomunch
not all heroes wear capes. some wear hoodies and sweatpants. #Deku

Scattered in between are the suspicious and negative opinions that Izuku was expecting. But... strangely enough, most of the posts are actually supporting him?

Intelligently, Izuku says, “What?”

Kero’s smile hasn’t budged. His expression has shifted to something older and wiser than he normally acts, and it’s only in times like these that Izuku remembers that Kero is the Guardian of the Cards. “You’re a hero to these people, kid. Vigilante or not, you’re saving people, and that’s what matters.”

It... it’s far too late for this. Izuku – Izuku needs to go to sleep, get a good four hours of rest, and wake up early so he can help Ms. Kino with some gardening tasks before he heads off to school.

Izuku isn’t a hero. He’s not. He’s just a fledgling magician who also happens to be double as a vigilante. It’s almost shameful to compare him to someone as amazing as All Might.

“I think that I should go about my life pretending I never heard that in order to keep my mental health intact,” Izuku says.

Kero stares at him for a long while, then nods. “Do whatever you feel is right.” The plush pulls a fluffy towel over the bag of marshmallows and sinks into his makeshift bed. “And get some rest. You’ve got a busy day ahead of you!”

Despite everything, Izuku complies.

Some people think he’s a hero; others think he’s a menace. The media’s debating about what Deku is, who he is, what his intentions are, and everything in between.

But those are thoughts for another day. Right now, all Izuku knows is the peaceful embrace of sleep.
my boy izuku, finally hitting the media in a big way. he's trying. he really is.

also, izuku calls hatsume by her first name because he never actually got her full name and at this point it's too awkward to ask.

and the headmaster. well. you don't need to worry about him yet.

about bakugo - izuku has decided to deal with that behemoth of an issue by letting it simmer down slowly. if you try to fix something too hard, you risk breaking it, and izuku isn't willing to take that risk. but this definitely won't be the end of their interactions. it's just a break.

thanks for all your kind comments! i'm really happy to see that people enjoyed chapter 3, because it was really fun to write.

thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Jump, Flower, Sleep, and Shield. A strange someone who knows more than he lets on, and an absurd amount of magic.

Chapter Notes

izuku would very much like for his life to stop being such a dumpster fire, but alas. he suffers.

also. that magic tag. i wasn't kidding.

Because Izuku can be very determined when he wants to be, he manages to go through the entire day without having to give his opinion or thoughts on the vigilante wonder, Deku. It’s fairly easy to redirect a conversation as long as you know the person you’re talking to, and frankly, Izuku knows just about everyone in his neighbourhood.

For the most part, the day turns out to be relatively normal. Ms. Kino’s too old to really care about young vigilante upstarts, which is a wonderful start to the morning. At school, Kacchan gives him a hard, cold stare that chills him to the core as he’s walking down the hallway (can’t confront him, can’t talk to him, let him realize). Izuku wisely decides to pretend that never happened and continue with his day.

That’s right – he needs to visit Mei and see what hellish contraption she’s come up with.

“Guinea pig!” Mei laughs cheerfully as Izuku enters Tall Tower, flipping her goggles upward. “You’ve come at an excellent time! Follow me.”

Izuku quickly discovers that Mei’s workshop is a complete reflection of her personality.

Tools, scraps, and wires are strewn around messily, though not without organization. Charts, diagrams, and schematics line the walls, with one large whiteboard on the back wall that has some sort of grappling gun draw onto it. A pile of gadgets stands in one corner of the room, slowly pooling outward. Everything looks like it could explode at any time, so Izuku tries not to touch anything.

“Here it is!” With a triumphant flourish, Mei slams down what appears to be a metal ring box onto the table. “Your very own DekuCom, created by none other than myself!”

The so-called DekuCom is surprisingly elegant, given Mei’s bold personality. It’s a simple crescent moon, no larger than a button, coloured a sleek silver. When Izuku lifts it up, he realizes that it’s an earring.

“There’s no way you knew I had pierced ears,” Izuku says, a bit shocked.
“You underestimate me,” Mei replies, which isn’t terrifying at all. “Try it on! As you can see, I have another DekuCom on my own person!” Brushing her hair back, the inventor displays the single moon earring on her right ear. “With this communicator, we’ll be able to talk to one another as long as we’re within 80 kilometers of each other!”

Oh. That’s certainly handy. Izuku’s not exactly sure how Mei managed to pull off something so ambitious, and frankly, he doesn’t want to know. He has a sneaking suspicion that it might have been very illegal.

Once the earring is safely secured on his right lobe, Mei grins. She taps her earring twice, and static crackles in Izuku’s ear.

“Wonderful, isn’t it?” Mei beams as she speaks, her voice echoing almost perfectly in sync through the earring. “As I just demonstrated, to activate the DekuCom, all you need to do is simply tap the device twice! The same goes for turning it off.”

Mei then goes on to describe the progress she and Sasha have made with his costume, eagerly showing Izuku some prototypes. If she sees Izuku tear up a little, she doesn’t comment on it. It’s very likely that Sasha has warned Mei about Izuku’s feeble emotions.

When Izuku asks for the cost of the entire job, the inventor hums for a bit, then nods her head decisively. “In return for making your costume, you’ll be my errand boy!”

“Okay,” Izuku replies, only realizing a second later that he’s agreed to an indefinite job as the minion to a mad scientist.

At the very least, it’s good to have someone he can count on to have his back if anything ever happens.

***

The strangest thing about the Sakura Cards is how diverse they are in terms of appearance, power, and personality. Izuku’s learned that each card has its own unique traits that separates it from the others, like Watery’s borderline sadistic nature, and Sweet’s energetic and childish personality.

Apparently some cards are just... a bit dumb.

“Hey, Izuku.”

“Yeah?”

“Uh, tell me if I’m just seeing things, but I’m pretty sure there’s a pink rabbit thing jumping up and down outside the window.”

Izuku takes a deep breath. He turns around slowly, following Aki’s startled gaze.

There is indeed a strange, pink, rabbit-like animal bouncing outside their window. That’s a cause for concern, given that they’re on the fifth floor of the hospital.

Putting his playing cards down, Izuku tries to stand up calmly.

“I’ll be right back,” he says to Aki, who blinks confusedly as she watches him bolt out the room.

Kero lets out a long sigh, poking his head out of Izuku’s bag. “Let’s cut to the chase. That was Jump. Annoying, pretty stupid, and mostly harmless.”
“Am I allowed to smack it over the head and end this as quickly as possible?” Izuku asks, speed walking down the pristine halls.

“Yes,” Kero replies without a beat of hesitation.

As it turns out, Izuku doesn’t even need to smack anything. The instant Jump makes eye contact with Izuku, it gets so excited that it shoots toward him and slams directly into a truck that’s conveniently just pulled into the parking lot.

Izuku blinks vacantly as he taps his staff on Jump’s unconscious form. It kind of looks like neon roadkill. “Jump, I command you return to your form confined. Seal.”

There’s nothing much Izuku can say, but wow, he’s never felt a stronger emotional connection with a card.

“I’m sorry,” he adds, because he feels that it’s necessary.

When he returns to Aki’s room, Izuku lets out a world-weary sigh. Since Aki’s very familiar with Izuku’s dumpster fire of a life, she simply blinks and pushes Izuku’s abandoned cards toward him. “Let’s wrap up this round, and then you can go and do whatever it is you need to do in order to avoid a mental breakdown.”

Izuku loves his friends.

***

There’s something truly wonderful about sakura season that’s difficult to put in words.

The main reason why Izuku loves sakura season is because everybody’s happy. The world just seems a little more colourful, and that joy is reflected by everybody Izuku knows.

(Also, sakura-flavoured treats are always wonderful. Given the fact that about half the restaurants in the city are familiar with Izuku, there’s always a stack of pink foods sitting in his fridge for all of April and most of May.)

Yes, sakura season is great. Izuku’s just confused as to why it’s happening in October.

The entire gym seems to be confused as well. Even Zing’s peeking out a window, a startled expression on her features.

Satoshi stares at the shower of pink petals that falls from the sky, hands pressed against the glass. A blank sort of confusion colours his features. “Okay. So... is this just a really weird villain attack, or has Mother Nature truly given up on us?”

“Mother Nature gave up on us a long time ago,” Izuku replies numbly, mostly out of reflex. He makes his way over to the window, thankful that his screaming is all internal.

Outside, sakura petals rain down in thick sheets, fluttering in the wind. Faces are plastered against windows as people turn and watch the out-of-season bloom. The sheer volume of petals that fall from the sky is actually sort of worrying.

There’s also a familiar buzzing in Izuku’s head that he’s really not in the mood to confront.


Finding the source of the petals is a much easier task than expected. Kero grumbles something under
his breath as Izuku makes his way through the streets, but stays silent for the most part. Using his magic-enhanced senses and common sense, Izuku finds himself on top of the tallest building in the city a few minutes later.

Dispelling Fly, Izuku watches as a lady in a fluffy pink dress twirls around atop the Musutafu Business Centre, corkscrew pigtails bobbing with her every movement. Flowers dangle from her ears and her wrists, and a pink symbol of some sort glows faintly on her forehead. Petals flow out from her in swirls, dancing with the wind and spreading to the rest of the city. With her porcelain-white skin, she appears as an ethereal spirit of nature, dancing freely above the cityscape before her.

“Excuse me,” Izuku says, approaching slowly. “Excuse me – um, hello?”

A gentle wave of wind chimes and ringing notes hums to life in Izuku’s ears, soft and light, with all the innocence and happiness of his happiest memories. It’s kind and so happy, and Izuku doesn’t know what to think.

The woman prances toward Izuku, laughing. She bows deeply from her waist, then proceeds to dance in little circles around him. There’s something about the card’s carefree yet fun-loving nature that brings a little joy into Izuku’s life.

It reminds him of an earlier time in his life, when he was able to run alongside childhood friends, when people accepted him for who he was, when quirks weren’t what determined potential in life.

They’re good memories. Bittersweet, but they’ve shaped Izuku into who he is today.

With a small smile on his face, Izuku raises his staff. “Flower, I command you return to your form confined. Seal!”

Izuku feels lighter than he’s felt in a very long time when Flower’s card floats onto his palm.

Kero nods his head, floating by Izuku’s shoulder. “Flower’s always a peaceful card. Man, if only more cards were this cooperative...”

Out of all his captures, this one has to be the smoothest by far. As the last shower of petals rain from the sky, Izuku manages to slip away into an alley without being spotted.

“It’s good that the cards we’ve been encountering have been peaceful,” Kero mumbles, keeping his voice low as they pass by some civilians. “It’s a good break from all the action we’ve been seeing.”

For the rest of the day, Izuku wanders around town, completing a few tasks for people he knows. Mei orders him to visit a rather suspicious-looking mechanic in an old part of the city with a list of very obscure and potentially hazardous orders and materials, but other than that, everything else is fairly normal. Once everything’s out of the way, Izuku makes his way to a nearby cafe to relax a little.

It’s been some time since he was able to have some time to himself. With Sakura Cards popping up left and right, it’s difficult to tell when something dangerous or life-threatening will occur. But his friends have told him that it’s important to take care of himself and find some time to just... relax.

That’s what Izuku’s trying to do. The hot chocolate and banana loaf are great.

The news on the television is less so.

“...An accident on Third Street,” a reporter says, in front of what seems like a particularly serious traffic accident. An eighteen-wheeler is somehow rammed into the side of an office building, and a
trail of accidents follows behind its path.

“Reports say that the truck came down the road at an incredible speed and only stopped after colliding with the building. There have been no reported casualties, but many have been injured. The police are arriving on the scene, with the heroes following closely behind. As of now, the driver of the truck has been taken to Musutafu General Hospital for questioning.”

The barista sighs as he glances over to the screen. Thankfully, he doesn’t try to make conversation, and instead continues to busy himself behind the counter.

“Officials believe that this accident may be the most recent in a chain of narcoleptic attacks around the city,” the reporter continues, and isn’t that just wonderful. “These attacks may be the result of a sole villain, or a group of individuals. No further information has been disclosed...”

Izuku tunes out the reporter’s words after a certain point. The banana loaf doesn’t seem so appetizing now.

Kero’s eyes narrow, but he continues to pick off pieces of his own chocolate loaf, munching along as he speaks. “I’m gonna be blunt about this. I can’t tell if it’s a card or a villain.”

Izuku finds himself praying to god that it’s the latter of the two options. That way, at least some competent heroes can take care of it. He just barely escaped from the police not two weeks ago, and he’s really not looking forward to putting himself in the line of fire again.

(But if someone’s in danger, there’s no way he’s going to stay back and watch people get hurt. He may not be a hero, but he’s human.)

If it really is a card that’s running around and causing these accidents, then Izuku can’t just let them happen. “I think –” Taking a deep breath, Izuku wraps his hands around his hot chocolate. The warmth soothes him, just a little. “I think we need to look into these accidents and determine whether or not it’s a card that’s doing this.”

Izuku desperately wishes he could take in everything with the same grace that Kero does. The plush simply nods, stuffing the last of his chocolate loaf into his cheeks. “Okay. So, where do we start?”

Pulling his laptop out from his bag, Izuku heaves a tired sigh.

Researching and making notes is one of his hobbies. It’s enjoyable, for the most part. This? Not so much.

Interestingly enough, not many news networks are covering the narcolepsy incidents. It makes sense, everything considered. Why focus on small incidents when more dangerous villains are fighting prominent heroes?

Even with the lack of information, it doesn’t take long to find something that seems a bit strange. There’s no correlation between any of the attacks – they’re sporadic, and don’t seem to follow any sort of pattern at all. They all caused some sort of spectacle, but only some of them ended with injury.

If the villain was truly aiming to do harm, why not choose more prominent figures, given that the narcolepsy has had such great effect on normal civilians?

Izuku drops his head into his hands.

It’s starting to look more and more like the doings of a Sakura Card. He sort of wants to cry.
Kero frowns after being informed on the situation. A flash of irritation crosses his face, and he scrolls down the spreadsheet of victims that Izuku’s created.

“This is really starting to look like something Sleep would do,” Kero says contemplatively. “Making people randomly fall asleep is basically Sleep’s specialty.”

That’s wonderful. Izuku loves when magical cards cause great danger to civilians, thereby generating a bubble of anxiety that he knows can only be somewhat deflated by throwing himself in front of the card and putting the danger to rest himself, which in turn blows up a new bubble of anxiety, because wow, sealing cards gets dangerous real quick.

Maybe it’s time to ask for some help.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku taps twice on his new moon earring.

After a slight buzz of static, Mei’s energetic voice answers. “Oh hoh! I see you’re putting my marvelous creation to use immediately!”

A few more customers walk through the door of the cafe, and Izuku folds his laptop screen down. Perhaps it’s better to continue the conversation somewhere else. Packing up his items and picking up his hot chocolate, Izuku gives the remainder of his banana load to Kero, who grabs at it hungrily.

Waving a silent goodbye to the barista and receiving a slight nod in return, Izuku leaves the cafe with the ambient noises of Mei’s workshop in the background. “Um, hi, Mei. You know those narcoleptic attacks that’ve been going around?”

Mei hums in recognition. Something clinks; probably another one of Mei’s inventions. “Ah, yes, those. Very strange incidents. What about them?”

“I think I need to get involved soon,” is all Izuku can offer without destroying his own precariously dangling sanity.

The clinking stops. There’s a small pause during which Izuku feels incredible uncomfortable. Kero, who has shifted to hiding in his hood, crawls upward a bit more to eavesdrop.

“Excellent!” There’s a giddy type of joy in Mei’s voice that’s very worrying. “Oh, how wonderful. Your magical shenanigans are always so interesting! Tell me what you need.”

Despite the horribleness of the situation, Izuku finds himself relaxing. Mei’s confident, perky personality fills in the confidence and perkiness that Izuku doesn’t have, making him feel a little better about finding Sleep.

“I’m sending you a spreadsheet of the attacks,” Izuku tells Mei. With a few key swipes, he fires off the email. “If – if you could find a way to map it out and find some background information on the victims, that would be great.” Izuku only processes his incredibly demanding request after it comes out of his mouth. “B-but if you can’t, I mean, if you don’t want to do it, then –”

“Invasion of privacy!” The gleeful tone in Mei’s voice has turned sinister while somehow retaining the same happiness. “My second favourite hobby, after inventing, of course!”

The sound of shuffling and things falling echoes through the DekuCom, and Izuku winces. Following the clatter is a series of rapid-fire typing, and wow, Mei types quickly. “Um, so...”

“I’ll have what you need in a jiffy,” the inventor replies. Izuku can hear the smile on her face. “In exchange, you’ll tell me everything you know about this magic of yours!”
Kero stiffens. Izuku inhales.

There’s no use keeping information from Mei. If anything, she’ll just find out more by herself. At the very least, Izuku wants to control how much she knows.

Nodding to no one in particular, Izuku lets out a surprisingly smooth exhale. “That’s okay. I’ll tell you.”

Mei cackles a laugh supervillains dream to achieve. “Wonderful! I’ll contact you later, guinea pig!”

With one last buzz of static, the line is lost, and Izuku taps the earring twice to turn it off.

Okay. Okay, okay. Mei’s going to help. That’s good, because he sort of feels like collapsing in the middle of the street and rocking himself back and forth in fetal position.

“Be careful,” Kero warns, arms crossed. He doesn’t say anything else, but he does fix Izuku with a stare that seems to pierce straight through him.

Izuku gulps. “I’ll do my best,” is all he can promise.

Kero’s gaze softens a little, and he slumps back, his small head hanging out from the hood. “Then that’s all you need,” he says, leaving Izuku at a loss for words.

Eventually, Izuku makes his way back to the apartment. It’s only when he’s plugging in his laptop for charging that he realizes he’s thrown himself into a police investigation and is, once more, performing vigilantism.

It takes a tremendous amount of effort not to smash his head against the nearest wall. He does, however, stand in the shower for half an hour mumbling to himself about how his life is comprised of chaos and accidental vigilantism and nothing else.

Eventually, his mother calls on him, startling Izuku out of his thoughts. With hair dripping wet, Izuku trods into his room, feeling more exhausted than ever.

Kero’s sitting in front of his laptop, eyes scanning over the screen. “You should come check out this map Mei made,” the plush says, a hand on his chin. “I think we might be able to find a pattern out of it.”

He’s... not wrong.

Including the most recent one, there have been five attacks so far. Mei has kindly labelled the attacks in order, adding on information about the victims. Izuku is very worried and very scared as to how she was able to get so much information so quickly.

As Izuku traces the pattern of attacks with his eyes, he realizes that he’s been tracing the path of a star.

With a single burst of nervous laughter, Izuku drops his head to the desk with a resounding thump. When Kero asks what’s wrong, Izuku very flatly and monotonously tells him, “The cards are out to kill me by slowly whittling away at my sanity.”

“Yes,” Kero replies simply, which is just wonderful. He then turns back to the screen and narrows his eyes for a good minute, eyes flickering over the map. His eyebrows shoot up. “Oh.”

Izuku’s no magic specialist, but he’d be blind not to realize that a Sakura Card’s tracing a giant star
into the city not dissimilar to the giant star in the middle of the magical circle on the cards.

Despite everything, Kero’s surprise passes quickly. “That’s weird,” he mumbles. “Sleep’s never been that methodical.”

Izuku is ready to embrace death.

“But it’s a new world entirely, so maybe the cards have grown a little?” The plush contemplates this for a moment, shrugs, then leans in to poke the centre of the star. “I think we should scout around this area. That way, we can seal Sleep before something else happens.”

That’s a perfectly normal plan of action. The problem is that the area just so happens to be in a very large and very busy residential district of the city, and the thought of searching for one potential victim out of thousands gives Izuku nightmares.

“Maybe we should try talking to the victims,” Izuku says, mostly to himself. “If we find some sort of trend between them, we can narrow down our search.” He then claps a hand over his mouth, because my god, he’s really getting into this vigilantism thing.

“Well, the truck driver’s out,” Kero huffs, unperturbed. “We’re not getting past the police, and it’d be super suspicious if we walked into his hospital room and starting grilling him!”

That leaves only four others. Two of the victims are still in the hospital, while another one’s out of town due to a family emergency (how on Earth did Mei find that out).

Which means Izuku’s going to have to somehow talk to the last victim – Shinsou Hitoshi – and get some answers.

He prays to whatever deities are watching him (and probably laughing as they plot how to screw over Izuku next) that this Shinsou is nice, because he’s not sure how much more he can take before he dissolves into a sad puddle of hysterical tears.

The next day, Izuku leaves his apartment with a box of cookies in his bag. After Sweet’s capture, the owner of Jugemu Sweets has been very generous, giving Izuku whatever’s left over from the day. It really helps on days when he’s feeling particularly sad or overwhelmed. So, almost every day.

As usual, Kero slips into Izuku’s bag. Izuku makes Kero promise not to eat any of the cookies, because then he’ll lose his bargaining chip.

The plan is to locate Shinsou Hitoshi and hopefully get some intel to narrow down Sleep’s potential targets. That, in and of itself, is nerve-wracking to think about, so Izuku decides to walk all the way to a cafe that Mei pointed out was one of Shinsou’s most frequented places outside of his own house.

Showing up at someone’s house is a little bit weird. Even Izuku knows that. Also, the fact that Mei was able to map out all the victims’ schedules is sort of terrifying.

It’s fairly early in the morning, but Izuku taps the DekuCom twice regardless.

“You’re up early,” Mei says from the other side of the line, voice chipper. It sounds as if she’s welding something. “I know I’m amazing and all, but you seem to be in dire need of my assistance!”

Izuku flushes, sputtering. Oh no, did he make things weird? How often are you supposed to talk to your associates when you’re a vigilante? Is he asking for too many favours? Does he need to bring Mei out for dinner, or is that only between people in relationships? This is why Izuku doesn’t have many friends his age. What does he say now?
Mei laughs boisterously, quelling Izuku’s shaken nerves. Oh. Maybe it was just a joke.

“Well, let’s hear it! What sort of top-secret vigilante activities do you have planned today?”

“I’m – it’s not vigilante stuff,” Izuku tries to deny, and clearly fails, if Mei’s short laugh is any indication. “Okay. It’s a bit vigilante related. I’m going to talk to Shinsou Hitoshi, the second victim of the narcoleptic attacks. He might be able to offer some helpful information.”

Mei hums in confirmation. “Ah, yes, him. He didn’t look very friendly in his photo!”

“That was taken when he was being questioned by the police,” Izuku says, wincing a little. He really didn’t look friendly, but to be fair, if Izuku was taken in for questioning by the police, he’d probably look like a nervous wreck, especially given his participation in recent events, so there’s no room to judge.

“Nonsense!” The clank of a hammer meeting metal echoes through the communicator. “In the face of adversity, you always put on a smile!”

Oh.

Holy shit, that’s amazing advice.

Izuku can’t think of a reply that’s as meaningful or powerful as Mei’s incredibly deep comment, so he decides to bring the conversation back on track. “A-anyway, if you could give me updates as to where Shinsou is, I’d appreciate it.”

“Of course,” Mei answers. It sounds like she’s whacking something and typing incredibly quickly at the same time, and Izuku isn’t even surprised by the fact that she’s probably ambidextrous. “Location settings are so easy to hack! The truly intelligent people are the ones who turn their location and wifi off when they don’t need it!”

In one smooth motion, Izuku slips his phone out of his pocket and turns off both his location and wifi. Kero nods quietly but vigorously.

After a moment of key-tapping, something beeps. “Your target is currently headed toward his favourite cafe, Triple Cup. It’s actually his fifth time there this week!” Cackling, Mei brings down her hammer down onto whatever she’s working on, hard. “He must run on as much coffee as I do! Ah, the camaraderie we Four-Hour Sleepers share!”

Izuku rubs his temple. “It’s positively stunning,” he mumbles, because isn’t that a mood.

The trip to Triple Cup takes about 45 minutes by walking. During that time, Mei’s energetic voice keeps Izuku from slipping into the pit of anxiety he knows he’s at risk of teetering head-first into. It’s incredibly meaningful to Izuku, even if Mei was just rambling.

“I’m here,” Izuku informs Mei, breathing out a shaky breath. A cafe has never looked so imposing before. “I’ll update you if anything happens.”

“Good luck!” Mei chirps, and Izuku turns off the DekuCom. His hands are shaking a little. God, he hates seeking people out. His way of making friends is waiting for people to take interest in him, not the other way around.

At the very least, it’s comforting to know that Mei’s two taps away, while Kero’s right beside him.

With a deep breath, Izuku pushes the cafe door open.
He hopes Shinsou Hitoshi likes cookies.

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“What do you want,” Shinsou Hitoshi says, so bluntly and emotionlessly that it makes Izuku feel like being born was a mistake.

By some miracle, Izuku’s able to slip into Shinsou’s booth without fainting or crying. It’s a major win.

“I-I’d like to talk to you,” he manages to stutter out, wringing his hands underneath the table. Kero crawls out of the side pocket, seating himself so he can’t be seen by anybody else but Izuku. Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku can see Kero give him a small thumbs-up. It’s the best reassurance he’s going to get at this point.

Mei’s comment about living off coffee seems like it applies greatly to Shinsou, if those prominent eye bags are any indication.

It’s clear that Shinsou doesn’t care about what Izuku wants, because his flat gaze pierces directly into Izuku. “And who exactly are you?”

“I’m Midoriya Izuku,” he answers, voice quivering only a little. “It’s. Um, nice to meet you.”

A flash of surprise passes over the purple-haired boy’s monotone features. He shifts forward ever so slightly, his body language suggesting that – that he recognizes the name?

“Midoriya,” Shinsou repeats, then pauses. “Riku knows you.”

Izuku perks up at the familiar name. “Oh, Riku! Yeah, we have game nights on Tuesday. He’s a really cool guy, and he cares a lot about his grandmother. That’s why he’s at the hospital so often. He always finds loopholes and exploits them, which is annoying, but it really goes to show how creative he is.”

Immediately after speaking, Izuku wants to punch himself in the face. His friends are great, but god, why does he talk so much?

Shinsou stares, a strange expression on his face. It’s not much better than the flat, almost annoyed look from before. “You talk a lot,” he states.

“I’m sorry,” Izuku blurts out, then looks down at his hands. Why does he even try?

After a brief moment, Shinsou sighs. “Riku talks about you,” he tells Izuku, twirling the coffee spoon in rhythmic circles. Izuku wonders if there’s any way a meteorite could land on his head and end him, right now. “From what I’ve heard, you’re incredibly awkward, selfless, and precious.”

“Okay,” Izuku says, because his brain isn’t working anymore.

Shinsou sighs again, and a little bit of hope revives itself when Izuku sees that Shinsou’s expression has shifted to something less guarded. “Fine. Let’s hear what you have to say.”

Sweet, sweet victory.

Izuku fumbles for his pen and notepad. Kero passes his pen to him, and flips his notepad to a new page before handing it over. Kero’s the best.

“Um – I just have some questions about the narcolepsy attacks. I heard that you were, um, affected,
and I’d like to know a little more about what happened.”

Shinsou’s eyes narrow, and Izuku feels like he’s guilty of some heinous crime under that gaze. “Where’d you hear that?”

“Riku,” Izuku lies and immediately feels guilty.

“Of course,” Shinsou mumbles, as if it doesn’t surprise him. With a sigh – huh, he sure does that a lot – he leans back into the firm cushions of the seat, a tired frown on his features. “Whatever. Ask your questions.”

The following conversation is curt, blunt, and to-the-point, which Izuku both appreciates and is terrified of. Shinsou’s short, simple answers make it easy for Izuku to scribble down points of interest, but throughout the entire conversation, Izuku can’t tell if he’s really bothering Shinsou or if the expression of mild irritation is just Shinsou’s resting face.

He does, however, pick up on an interesting pattern.

Between sentences, Shinsou will grumble, “God, it’s too early,” even though it’s well past ten. There are a lot of “I’m too tired for this” and “I need a nap after this” as well.

Izuku latches onto it immediately once he’s determined that Shinsou’s actually being serious and not just being dramatic, like some of his other friends. “Are you tired often?”

The question leaves Shinsou at a loss for a moment.

“...Yeah,” the purple-haired boy replies, rubbing his temples. “Insomnia.”

Ah. That explains a lot.

“Thank you,” Izuku says earnestly, because his answer was pretty intrusive for a stranger-to-stranger conversation, and Shinsou gave an honest answer anyway. “I, um. Those are all the questions I have. Thank you for taking your time to talk with me.”

Because he has no idea how to talk to strangers his age, Izuku stands, bows a little, and pushes the box of cookies toward Shinsou.

Shinsou looks at the box, then looks at Izuku, and then looks back at the box. He lifts up the flap and blinks.

“You brought me cookies,” he says in that eternally monotone voice of his.

“Yes,” Izuku answers, trying to keep his fidgeting to a minimum.

“You don’t even know me,” Shinsou points out.

“It’s polite,” Izuku says, and by god, he hopes that’s true. “And – and you took time to answer my questions, and I appreciate that.”

After a moment of silence, Shinsou lets out a sigh. Izuku flinches.

“I’m going to give you my phone number,” Shinsou says.

Izuku’s brain has stopped working again, so he relies on muscle memory to create a new contact page. When he passes his phone over to Shinsou, the latter’s eyebrows raise, but he stays silent as he enters his number.
People tend to be impressed when they see Izuku’s vast number of contacts. He can’t help it; Musutafu is a busy place with a lot of people who do different things.

Before he leaves Shinsou to enjoy his coffee in peace, Izuku makes sure to thank him one more time.

“You don’t need to be so serious,” Shinsou says, the edges of his lips quirking upward.

Izuku has officially run out of things to say.

“Have a nice day,” Izuku squeaks, trying not to sprint out the door. He can feel Shinsou’s eyes follow him out the door. There’s something strange about the boy that puts Izuku on edge, not necessarily in a bad way, but in an uncomfortable way. Maybe he’s just overthinking things.

As Izuku paces down the street, he breathes in and out deeply for a good two minutes before turning to Kero. The plush is watching intently from Izuku’s hood, tail swishing eagerly.

“So, insomnia,” Kero hums thoughtfully, and okay, they’re diving straight into this miserable card hunt.

Nodding numbly, Izuku taps his earring twice. Mei’s voice answers almost immediately.

“Ah, guinea pig! What can I help you with?”

“I – I think I’ve got a pattern. Can you see if any of the victims have insomnia?”

Mei makes a small sound of interest over the line, fingers racing over her keyboard. It doesn’t take long for her to reply. “Oh hoh! Your sleuthing skills must be pretty good. All five of the victims have insomnia!”

Bingo, Kero mouths, a wide grin on his features.

“Okay.” Izuku closes his eyes, trying to focus on the situation at hand. He can think about his horrible social skills and the new contact in his phone some other time. “You’ve probably noticed by now, but the locations of the accidents connect to make the shape of a star.”

Mei laughs. “A very accurate one, at that!”

“Can you give me the number of insomniac people who live in the center pentagon?” Izuku asks, and immediately wants to kick himself. Mei might be very capable, but that’s a very tall order, and Izuku has absolutely no idea what the correct way of showing his thanks is.

“Oh hoh,” the inventor chuckles darkly. “A challenge. I always knew you were a rebel.” Slapping her hand on some kind of metallic surface, Mei shuffles, and furious typing follows. “Checking the backgrounds of every resident in the city’s largest residential area? I accept!”

The line cuts off abruptly. Izuku knows he can trust Mei to return with valuable information.

Kero blinks. “Well, it’s good that Mei’s up to the challenge, right?”

“Oh-huh,” Izuku replies numbly, because today has been far too much for him to handle.

But the day is far from over. After running some errands, Izuku makes his way over to the residential area encircled on the map, scouting out places that Sleep could potentially target. Izuku quickly realizes that the residential area is very much just a residential area, which really sucks, because if Izuku has to break into someone’s house to capture Sleep, he’s going to cry.
“Hang on,” Kero interrupts as they’re passing a local park. It’s fairly small, with only a few play structures. “Do you think there’s a way we could draw Sleep out to the park and capture it here?”

That’s... not a bad idea. It sure beats breaking and entering.

It’s ridiculous, how much work goes into catching a Sakura Card. Sleep doesn’t sound like a dangerous or violent card – in fact, it seems like it’s just been putting insomniac people to sleep. The star thing’s a little stranger, but judging by face value, Sleep is a very passive card.

Then again, putting a truck driver to sleep as they’re driving isn’t the best thing to do, regardless of how tired they are.

A few hours later, Mei’s voice crackles to life from the communicator. “Your hunch is spot-on, guinea pig! Out of all the districts in Musutafu, this residential district’s got the most insomniacs! Makes sense, given the population density.”

That’s interesting. Unnerving, but interesting.

“Thanks, Mei,” Izuku says, and he means it. Mei’s been invaluable with her energetic support, both mental and physical. They met not long ago, and Izuku already feels confident in saying that Mei’s in his inner circle of friends. “I – I’ll be sure to repay you.”

“Well, of course! I can’t wait to see how my inventions will fare against your magic...”

“I see,” Izuku replies. Then, “What?”

A boisterous laugh echoes from the communicator. “I look forward to your next escapade, Deku!”

The line is lost, and Izuku is left in shock at the fact that Mei actually addressed him by name – well, maybe not his actual name, but it’s probably the best he’s going to get.

“There must be a way we can lure Sleep out into the open,” Kero ponders out loud, his hand on his chin. “What could we use as a replacement for a medical condition?”

An idea pops into Izuku’s head. It’s a really, really bad one, and he’s not surprised that his lack of self-preservation thought this one up.

“What about magical exhaustion?” Izuku asks, knowing he’s going to regret it.

A metaphorical lightbulb pops up above Kero’s head. “Hey, that’s a great idea! As a Sakura Card, Sleep should be attracted to magic, so if we take normal exhaustion and switch it up a bit...” The plush pauses and fixes Izuku with a severe look. “And you want to drain all your energy? What about the capture itself?”

“I didn’t need magic to capture Sword,” Izuku rebuttals. He hopes that Sleep isn’t some sort of lumbering dragon or violent spirit, because that would really suck. “It’s the best option we’ve got. We can control the most variables if I make myself a target.”

Conflicting emotions flicker over Kero’s face, but the plush eventually sighs, dragging a hand down his face. “Alright. Let’s go ahead with your self-sacrificing plan.”

Great. Now all Izuku needs to do is find someway to deplete his magic reserves, and wow, his life is really a spectacular dumpster fire.

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“This is such a bad idea,” Izuku declares flatly, staring at the cityscape below him.

Kero sits on his shoulder, shaking his head. “This was your idea,” he reminds Izuku, an exasperated exhaustion written all over his face. “And this is definitely the safest way to go about draining magic.”

Out of all the cards he has right now, the safest ones to use are probably Rain and Flower. A card that creates rain and another that makes flowers – how poorly could it go?

Izuku decides to terminate that train of thought as quickly as possible. There are so many things that could go wrong, and Izuku doesn’t really want to think about it.

The entire situation is surreal. Here he is, standing on top of the tallest building in the city, magic cards in hand, about to dangle himself in front of a card that’s been causing havoc around Musutafu.

Izuku takes a deep breath. It’s time to capture Sleep.

“Rain, Flower, heed my call,” Izuku commands, raising the two cards high in the air. “Let’s make it rain across the city!”

In a burst of light, the cards stream upward, carrying Rain’s childish giggles and Flower’s light laughter into the sky above. The two twirl around each other in the pattern of a double helix before colliding, releasing the calming aroma of flowers in full bloom and rain on a summer’s day.

All at once, rain begins pouring from the clear skies and sakura petals float downward with the wind, painting a truly surreal scene that only magical cards could create.

Izuku narrowly avoids careening off the top of the building, because god, he’s exhausted and it hasn’t even been a minute.

“I have remembered why I try to avoid this on most occasions,” he tells Kero, who gives him a flat look rivalling that of Shinsou’s.

“We can’t turn back now,” Kero says resolutely. “Use whatever energy you have left to get to the park. Once we’re there, we’ll be able to seal Sleep!”

That’s right. All Izuku has to do is make his way over to the park, and he can end this miserable day.

Ten minutes later, Izuku’s leaning against the play structure, his staff hanging loosely from his hand. With the awful light-headedness and nausea building in his head, it takes a great deal of effort not to fall asleep (ha, the irony) or throw up. The dizzying shower of petals and the drizzle of rain doesn’t help.

“Hey!” Kero gestures to the sky, eyes wide. “Target spotted!”

Oh, thank god Sleep isn’t big.

A tiny, sprite-like thing hovers curiously over Izuku, pale white dust trailing behind its movements. With short, unruly hair, pointy slippers, and a wing as its left ear, it really does look like a fairy. As Sleep flies around, its magic sings soothing, calming tones that blend together into one relaxing chorus of peaceful rest and dreams. Izuku finds himself dozing off before Kero kicks him in the cheek.

“You are not falling asleep,” he declares, a hint of panic to his voice. “You’ve gotta seal Sleep before it knocks you out!”
As Sleep approaches, wand raised, Izuku lifts the Sealing Staff above his head and brings it down on Sleep’s head. Hard.

It’s been a long day.

Kero and Izuku stare at the tiny, unconscious figure that lies feebly in the sand. Izuku can’t bring himself to say that he feels bad.

“Sleep, I command you return to your form confined,” Izuku says, stifling a large yawn. “...Seal.”

Kero watches with wary eyes as Izuku pockets his new card, hovering over Izuku’s shoulder. “You seem to have a habit of sealing pixie cards in very violent fashions,” he points out.

“I am very tired and therefore vindictive,” Izuku replies, thoroughly drained. Physically, he feels like he’s been run over by a bulldozer immediately after running a marathon. Emotionally, he wants to crawl into a small hole and bury himself alive.

The trip home feels like an eternity. With the puddles of water left from the earlier shower, the bright pink petals that are still out of season, and the exhaustion running rampant in Izuku’s body, the experience is reminiscent of walking through a surrealist painting.

“Oh, Izuku!” As Izuku opens the door to his apartment, his mother greets him excitedly. “Did you see the sakura petals? Was it like that all over the city?”

*It definitely feels like it was,* Izuku wants to reply. “It was,” he says instead, because that’s what normal people would say.

Retreating to his room, Izuku tosses his bag on the floor and face-plants onto his bed. He’s never been more exhausted in his life, and that’s saying something.

Kero floats his way over to Izuku’s bedside table, planting himself down with a sigh.

“It’s been a long day, huh?” Kero murmurs, and yes, it certainly has been a long day.

Izuku desperately hopes that this sealing-two-cards-in-one-day thing doesn’t form a pattern, because he’s not sure how his will to live will be affected by it.

A soft paw taps his head twice. “Just go to sleep,” the plush says, his voice gentle. “You deserve it.”

In the orange-tinted light of the sunset streaming through his window, Kero’s shadow seems to stretch out on the wall into the form of a glorious winged beast, watching over Izuku as he sleeps.

Well. Beast or not, it’s comforting to know that he’ll always have something to guide him through the chaos that is the world of magic.

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Kusakaba Mito @mitosaka
If you think Deku had to do with the spontaneous sakura season raise your hand

a small boy @junmichi
so does anyone think its weird that the narcolepsy attacks stopped the same day the flowers decided to just. rain from the sky

ibiki @hihiko
Not to be a conspiracy theorist, but I’m pretty sure Deku had something to do with both the flowers and the end of the narcolepsy attacks. Here’s my analysis: 1/15

***

There’s something... weird.

Despite his aching limbs and pounding headache, Izuku can easily tell that the air feels more saturated with magic than normal. The buzzing in his head is absent, so it isn’t a Sakura Card, so what is it?

“I feel it too,” Kero mumbles after Izuku points it out. “I don’t know what it is, either. Maybe there are other people in this world who can use magic, or maybe it’s just the residual effect of a card. Either way, we should be careful.”

And so Izuku leaves his apartment with his utility belt secured safely around his waist, prepared for the worst, because if there’s one thing he’s learned, it’s that the worst always happens.

His morning is normal, for the most part. After helping Sasha hack up some more metal at the seaside park, Izuku begins his typical round of errands. Mei’s requests stick out like a sore thumb, bringing him to parts of the city he’d usually avoid on all other occasions.

(Izuku passes a stray glance at the abandoned warehouse at the edge of the city. He walks past it.)

Everything seems normal. The city is abuzz with early morning energy, and Izuku feels at peace for a short moment.

And – hang on, was that building always there?

On the side of the road, in one of the quieter districts of the city, a strange house sits between two sakura large sakura trees. Dark green ceramic tiles line the Victorian-style building, contrasting with the dark wooden walls and the paper-screen door. A golden crescent moon stands on top of the roof like a weather vane.

The wooden fence that encloses the building is old and faded, like it’s been neglected for years. The building is pristine and clean.

Something’s off.

“There’s something weird about this building,” Izuku tells Kero, a bubble of anxiety building in his stomach. A foreign ringing buzzes in his head.

Kero’s eyes narrow, and he looks back at Izuku, worried. “...What building?”

“This one,” Izuku says, almost hysterical, stepping forward past the old fence as he gestures firmly. “I’ve never seen it before, and it just feels weird -”

An incredible cacophony of bells resonates in his head, and for a moment, Izuku feels weightless.

There he dangles, in the narrow boundary between there and not-there, on the fine line that separates existence from nothingness. Time slows to a halt, and the city around him flickers out of existence. Everything is quiet except for the familiar yet foreign hum of magic that slowly envelops him, as if he’s passing through an unseen membrane.

Izuku looks back. Kero isn’t there anymore.
Before Izuku can break down into hysterics (because what the hell, this is like meeting Sakura all over again, this is not okay), the door of the strange building slams open, and two young children run up to him.

“Welcome!” They say, exactly in sync with each other, smiling eerily. As different as their appearances are - one has a short pink bob cut and the other two long blue pigtails, and one's dressed in white and the other black - their facial features are identical, with the only difference being their eye colours.

Izuku wonders if there’s a way the ground can open up and swallow him this instant.

“S-sorry,” he stutters, taking slow steps back. He needs to leave. He needs to get out of here, get back to where he came from, get back to safety. “I have the wrong house. I’ll just leave –”

Izuku barely avoids passing out when the children grab onto his arms, somewhat mischievous expressions on their identical faces. “A guest for the master,” they singsong, dragging Izuku into the building.

“No – no, wait,” he protests, narrowly avoiding tripping over his own feet as grass changes to wooden floors.

Something’s wrong. Something’s weird. The weight of the magic pressing down on Izuku is foreign in a mysterious, almost frightening manner, yet is familiar in that Izuku knows he’s felt it before, been a conduit to its boundless potential –

“A customer?”

A smooth voice breaks through the haze of confusion and anxiety Izuku’s pulled over himself. There’s something familiar about it, not that Izuku can place a name or face to the voice, but the tone is most definitely one Izuku’s heard before.

Sliding open a paper-screen door, a young man steps out and quirks an eyebrow up when he lays eyes on Izuku. His features are incredibly plain – black hair, an average stature, glasses... and yet he exudes knowledge, old wisdom, and something incredibly archaic.

(He’s heterochromic – one eye is golden brown, and the other is light blue. In a society full of quirks, it isn’t anything special.

And yet something about the eyes tips Izuku off. From the golden eye, the faint sound of blowing wind and screaming sands trickles past Izuku, and he swears he can feel the scorching heat of something on his skin. From the blue eye, a quiet and somber melody plays, as it’s been playing for countless years, and the soothing current of water flows past him.

Izuku’s no veteran magician, but he knows something’s off with those eyes.)

Izuku looks at the man’s pristine, glossy clothing, and then down at his own disheveled school uniform. He wants to die, sort of.

“I’m so sorry for intruding,” is what Izuku decides upon, because he really has no idea what else to say. He gestures helplessly at the two smiling girls, feeling a nervous heat rise to his cheeks. “But – these two sort of – I don’t know, dragged me in, and I –”

“It’s alright,” the man offers calmly, stepping toward the open sliding-door behind him. He has a faint smile on his face, as if he’s not worried or concerned as to why a teenage boy has been kidnapped into his house by two creepily grinning children. “Why don’t you come in for some tea?”
It’s hideously unfair how everyone Izuku interacts with looks and sounds like they have their lives together.

By some miracle, Izuku finds himself not dead in a ditch or hyperventilating at the table. His hands shake only marginally as he accepts the herbal-scented tea, which is a major win. The only things keeping him from a nervous breakdown are the pendant around his neck and the cars pressed against his leg, reminding him that if things do go horribly wrong, he at least has some way to protect himself.

Izuku wonders where his life went so wrong. Probably when he picked up a magic book and managed to get all the very powerful and very troublesome magic cards blown to god knows where.

“I –” It takes two tries for Izuku to form a coherent sentence. Swallowing the lump of anxiety lodged in his throat, he exhales and takes in a quiet breath to get his thoughts back in order. “Where is this?”

The young man sitting across from him puts his own cup down, looking at Izuku with an all-knowing stare. It’s unnerving to hell and back. “This is the Wish-Granting Shop,” the man replies, as if that explains anything. “You’re here because you have a wish that you want granted.”

Intelligently, Izuku says, “What.”

“You’re here because you have a wish,” the man repeats, clearly and calmly. It appears he’s rehearsed his words or at least become very familiar with the situation, because he speaks with a confidence that Izuku wishes he could have. “There’s no other reason for your being in my shop.”

“Rebuttal,” Izuku says, because he’s an idiot. “I was dragged in here. I don’t – I don’t have any sort of wish I want granted.” Pausing, he rethinks his words. “At least, I don’t have any wish I don’t think I could grant myself. So. Yeah.”

The man’s gaze seems to look past Izuku at something deeper. Izuku looks away and takes a long swig of his tea, despite how hot it is.

Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku can see the two children stiffen. They no longer wear smiles; instead, their expressions are solemn, as if they’re simply dolls that stopped working.

“You must have something you want granted,” the man presses, leaning forward slightly. His mismatched eyes burn with cold flame as he speaks.

Izuku grips his teacup so tightly he’s afraid that it’ll break. “I don’t,” he grits out, and it’s the truth, why won’t this man believe him. “I’ve never seen this shop before in my thirteen years of living in this city, and I walked past the fence, and everything disappeared.”

Now that seems to catch the man’s attention. His eyes narrow behind the round frames of his glasses and his fingers twitch ever so slightly. It’s the first break from the tranquility displayed earlier, and Izuku doesn’t like it.

“You broke through the barrier,” he states. The serenity and calmness has shifted to something darker, forming a single flat, apathetic needle that pierces the enormous balloon of apprehension Izuku holds so delicately in his mind.

Barrier? What barrier? What on Earth –

Ah. Kero hadn’t been able to see the shop, had he? And the membrane-like thing that Izuku passed through...
Gulping, Izuku reaches up and lays a hand over the pendant that lies beneath the fabric of his uniform. “I think,” he begins, carefully plotting out his words as to avoid setting the man off, “That I may have accidentally walked past the barrier that surrounds this shop and wasted your time.”

The silence is stifling. Izuku wants to melt into a little puddle.

“Who are you?” The man demands. Though his figure is rather small and unassuming, his presence drives nails of fear into Izuku’s spine. “What are you, and what do you want?”

“What am I – are you kidding me?!” And there’s the fountain of hysteria that flows eternally through his veins. “I’m – I’m human, and I walked in here by accident.” Pushing his chair back with a resounding screech, Izuku stands and begins to make his way toward the paper-screen door. “And I’ll be leaving, because I have better ways to spend my time.”

Izuku’s had enough. This situation is beyond what he can handle, and he knows better than to push his anxiety to its limits. It’s done, he’s leaving, he’s out –

And then something ancient and deadly sweeps over Izuku.

It’s not just wave of anxiety or unease that Izuku’s been so accustomed to – no, a wave of pulsating magic reeking of deadly intent sweeps over Izuku, jarring him so badly that he feels his limbs lock in place for what feels like an eternity and no time at all. It feels like fear. It feels like helplessness.

It feels like when Izuku was younger and weaker, when he was lonelier and smaller, when he chased desperately after Kacchan’s fleeting image. It feels like stinging burns and old scars, like late nights spent patching up the last of the injuries he tried so hard to hide from his mother.

It feels like regret and sadness and longing for what if. It feels like every emotion and memory that Izuku’s spent so long suppressing.

Izuku doesn’t know if the hitch in his breath is audible or not, but that’s not what matters. He can’t do anything – he’s going to die –

But no, he needs to move – he needs to fight back – there are too many people who’ve placed their hopes and expectations in him, and there’s no way that Izuku’s going to betray their trust by just – by just dying.

Calm down, he bells demand, ringing to life in the hollows of Izuku’s mind. You know what this is. You can overcome this.

I don’t, Izuku cries back, not quite sure if he’s speaking his thoughts out loud or not, feeling the beginnings of a breakdown leaking from his eyes in the form of hysterical tears. I don’t know how to – fight back, or break free –

You do, the bells interrupt, so confident that Izuku can’t help but listen. This power is yours to inherit, however you should choose to do so. You are the Master of Cards. Do what you think is right.

And then the chiming bells blanket over his mind, a plane of tranquility overlapping one of anxiety, and Izuku can’t help but feel that this situation seems awfully familiar. But... at the same time, it’s not. He’s no longer a spectator, watching his limbs being moved by some unseen force, or in a trance-like state, acting as a vessel for some unknown power.

This is his body, his mind, and his magic. He can’t be pushed along forever, blindly falling back on the hand that guides him.
Izuku takes a deep breath, thankful for the peace that eases itself over his mind.

It’s time to make this magic his own.

Purple butterflies dusted with silver burst from his skin, swirling around him in a helix of familiar yet unfamiliar magic. His staff is already in his hands, its true form glowing brightly (when did that happen?). The Sakura Cards hum with anticipation in his pocket, ready for whatever might happen.

The archaic magic that floods forth from the deepest ravines of his mind is the same as the one he’s being threatened by. Izuku isn’t sure what to make of that, but he can try and find a meaning at a later time. Right now, he’s facing what seems like a very competent and dangerous individual. There’s no place for nervous breakdowns when his life is on the line.

Despite everything, Izuku finds himself holding his ground. The strange man frowns, eyes narrowed, and steps forward. Gold magic ripples forward from his footstep, dragging a veil of grey as the gold travels through the floorboards and up the walls. It’s nothing like the magic Izuku’s witnessed before, and he doesn’t like it.

“Don’t,” Izuku warns, raising his staff. To his surprise, the Sealing Staff’s form flashes into Sword’s elegant form without a single cue. It’s unexpected, but certainly not unwelcome.

“The Sealing Staff.” A single eyebrow quirks up, and the man’s mismatched eyes widen. The glint of Sword’s thin blade reflects off his glasses. “You couldn’t be...”

The instant Izuku feels the man’s threatening magic pull back, he takes advantage of it. There’s no way of guaranteeing if anything he feels is right will actually work, but the bells – Ms. Yuko – have never let him down, so he’ll do what he thinks is right.

Mimicking the man’s movements, Izuku lifts his foot up and stomps downward. Cracks of silver zigzag on the muted surfaces of the room, and after a short pause, the cloak of grey shatters into pieces like glass.

The silence is uncomfortable, but Izuku doesn’t really care anymore.

“Oh, wow,” he contemplates out loud, because he’s far too tired to keep his filter up. “I can’t believe that worked.”

The purple butterflies are beginning to fade from the silver dust that floats around him whenever he uses magic. It feels a little wistful, watching the power he so recently managed to call his dissipate into nothingness.

This is just the beginning, the bells hum, amused. The rest will come with time.

The tone is soothing and gentle in a way only a mother could replicate, and wow, that’s a weird thought, better store that somewhere where it'll never see the light of day.

“Okay,” Izuku says, to no one in particular. The ceiling looks like it’s spinning, so he sits down on the wooden floor. “This day has been very long, I am very tired, and I still have no idea what’s going on.” A bubble of nervous laughter escapes from his lips, and Izuku wonders if he’s allowed to curl up into a small ball and take a nap on the floor.

“You’re the newest cardcaptor,” the man says, eyes wide. The twins peek out from behind him. “And you can use spatial magic.”

“Sure,” is Izuku’s eloquent reply, because yes, he’s a cardcaptor, and it’s nice to know what exactly
his newfound magic is.

After a moment of silence, the man sighs, pushes his glasses up, and offers Izuku a hand. Izuku takes it.

“I may have been a little overwhelming,” the man says, a little abashed. That’s probably the first good thing he’s said all day. “We really got off on the wrong foot.” Then, after a brief moment of hesitation, the man says, “My name is Watanuki.”

“Like April 1st,” Izuku mumbles mostly to himself, though the sharp look he gets from the mysterious heterochromic man indicates that it’s not only himself that heard it. “It’s written that way in kanji,” Izuku elaborates, because that was a very weird thing to say out of nowhere.

“You’re right.” The man – Watanuki – seats himself on his chair, and Izuku follows suit. “And what are you called?”

It’s a simple question with what should be a simple answer. But... there’s something that feels wrong, even potentially dangerous about giving away his name.

So, because he’s an idiot, Izuku says, “I’m Deku.”

Surprisingly enough, Watanuki doesn’t respond with surprise or shock. Instead, he lets out a gentle breath and waves the twins over. They refill the two teacups on the small table.

“Deku, then,” Watanuki muses, picking up his cup. “Let’s talk, shall we?”

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“So this really is a wish-granting shop,” Izuku breathes, trying to wrap his head around the whole business-that-grants-wishes thing, because apparently that’s a thing that exists.

Watanuki nods, serene and peaceful as usual. “This shop is on a separate plane of existence from all others. Only those with wishes they want granted can enter the shop, and when they do, they’ll state their wish, and I’ll help them for a price equivalent to the weight of their wish.” Pausing, he looks up at Izuku with a strange expression. “And, as I’ve learned today, people who have the same magic I do can apparently break in as well.”

“Sorry,” Izuku mumbles, though he doesn’t feel nearly as much embarrassment as he usually would. Maybe he’s just too tired to care.

“I’m curious.” Tapping his finger on the table, Watanuki rests his chin on one hand. “Where do you come from? What world do you call home?”

It’s a good thing Izuku’s tired, because under normal conditions, he’d be losing his mind. This conversation doesn’t really file under the definition of a normal conversation.

“I’m – I’m just from Earth. From Japan. From Musutafu,” he tags on helpfully.

“Your world must rely heavily on magic, then,” Watanuki hums contemplatively.

Izuku suppresses the urge to laugh. Oh, if only that were the case. “N-not exactly. People have quirks, which are basically unique powers and abilities, but magic...” Trailing off, he grabs at the pendant that hangs around his neck. “I think – I think I might be the only magician in the entire world. In my entire world,” he corrects.
It’s strange, how Izuku’s so willing to spill the details of his story to a stranger. But said stranger is clearly a magician, and a powerful one at that, and frankly, Izuku’s tired of carrying the burden by himself.

Watanuki leans back, folding his hands over each other. “Your situation is beginning to make sense. No wonder your magic is so unrefined.”

Oh, wow, that does wonders for Izuku’s self-confidence.

“I’m trying my best,” is what Izuku chooses to say, only slightly offended. The rest of him nods silently, agreeing with Watanuki’s blunt statement of you suck.

“That’s the only thing you can do. As the new cardcaptor, you must be under a lot of pressure.” A glazed look passes over Watanuki’s mismatched eyes, as if he’s seeing something from long ago. “The previous cardcaptor was a very kind person. I’d like to think that she chose you because she saw potential in you, and not because she was projecting her unfulfilled wishes onto you.”

Izuku’s breath is strangled out of his throat by the clutches of flaring anxiety. No, Sakura would never do such a thing. Regardless of how she died, or how she lived, or what wishes she had that were left unfulfilled, nobody as kind as her would do something so cruel.

(You barely even know her, and you’re already putting so much trust in her. Don’t you remember everybody who’s abused your trust in the past?)

Isn’t this just like Kacchan?)

No. No, that can’t be it. Izuku has to trust in Sakura, has to trust in her choice, has to believe that the power that was handed down to him was the result of his being worthy of it, and not of selfish desires.

With a shaky breath, Izuku clasps his hands together under the table, feeling his short fingernails bite into skin. “I’d like to believe that, too.”

This day just keeps getting worse, doesn’t it?

Watanuki’s expression softens. “You shouldn’t be hung up on something that you can’t control. Instead of talking out the legacy you belong to, let’s talk about that spatial magic of yours.”

Izuku jumps eagerly at the change of topic. “Oh, of course. Okay. This is actually news to me, you know, the whole spatial magic thing.” Lifting his hand, he tries concentrating the magic that he can muster above his hand. A ball of silver dust pops into existence, swirling slowly. “I thought I could just use the cards and moon magic. I’m not really sure where the spatial magic came from.”

For a moment, something akin to suspicion and hesitation flickers past Watanuki’s features, but it passes so quickly that Izuku wonders if he’s just psyching himself out. “It’s not a magic that anybody can just use. The only people who can use spatial magic are the most talented of magicians.”

“Oh, of course. Okay. This is actually news to me, you know, the whole spatial magic thing.” Lifting his hand, he tries concentrating the magic that he can muster above his hand. A ball of silver dust pops into existence, swirling slowly. “I thought I could just use the cards and moon magic. I’m not really sure where the spatial magic came from.”

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“Okay,” Izuku replies, because he’s not sure what to think anymore.

“Your magic reminds me greatly of someone I used to know,” Watanuki murmurs, eyes narrowing. “The purple butterflies... it’s almost uncanny.”

Oh, wow, that’s approaching territory that Izuku is incredibly uncomfortable with sharing.

“I can’t say,” Izuku says quickly, trying to keep his voice as natural as possible. To his relief, it
hitches up only slightly. “I’ve never met another magician in real life before. Um, before you, that
is.”

The twin girls standing behind Watanuki stare into Izuku’s eyes, unblinking. He isn’t sure if they’re
creeper with or without the smiles.

After a moment of uncomfortable silence, Watanuki shakes his head and sighs. “Perhaps I’m just
looking too closely into things.” Running a hand through his hair, the mysterious magician pushes
his chair back and stands. “Regardless, spacial magic is dangerous. In the hands of an inexperienced
individual, it can be uncooperative at best and lethal at worst.”

Izuku would love to be surprised, but with everything that’s been going on recently, he can’t muster
up anything but exhaustion. He stands as well, trailing weakly after Watanuki. “Oh.”

“It’s best if you find someone you can learn under, especially since you have such incredible magic
potential,” Watanuki suggests as they move toward the hallway.

“There’s Kero,” Izuku replies. “I mean – Kerberos, the Guardian of the Cards.”

Watanuki dismisses the idea with a wave of his hand. “He won’t do. He’s under sun magic, and I
doubt he knows anything about spatial magic.”

The fact that Watanuki somehow knows Kero is a bit worrying, but Izuku presses on nonetheless.
“Sakura can talk to me in my dreams.”

“Cross-dimensional dream-walking is an unreliable and unstable method of communication,” the
man rebuttals. “You need someone who can provide reliable, constant education.” A faint smile
makes it onto his face as he slides the door open. “A magician with potential as brilliant as yours
should be nurtured, not ignored.”

Izuku blushes all the way to his toes. That’s – surely he isn’t that amazing. All he does is try his best,
and he tends to get very, very lucky. “I’ll try my best to find someone.”

Watanuki turns back, somewhat exasperated. “Find someone? Why look for someone when you’ve
already found them?”

Oh, no. This is progressing far too quickly.

“I’m the shopkeeper of the Wish-Granting Shop, knowledgeable in things you can’t even begin to
fathom.” There’s no cockiness or pride in Watanuki’s voice as he speaks. Instead, his words are flat
and rather monotone, as if he’s repeated the exact line many times before. A glint of... something
passes over his eyes, but it disappears just as quickly as it appeared. “I’m willing to teach you.”

“You’re what,” is Izuku’s intelligent reply.

“I’ll teach you, but I’ll have to ask for something in exchange,” Watanuki says, as if Izuku isn’t bug-
eyed and this close to a panic attack.

But as always, Izuku doesn’t know how to refuse people. Maybe he should have learned, like, three
years ago, when he first started getting into the bullshit he now gets into every day.

Because Izuku has no self-preservation and a penchant for making his own life more stressful that it
already is, he says, “What do you want in exchange?”

“You’ll work in my shop every so often,” the man replies without a beat of hesitation. Izuku
wonders if he’s been in this situation before, because the look on Watanuki’s face is a little too mischievous to be natural. “I’m a busy man, you know. Deliveries, in-house visits, trades, the occasional exorcism… it’ll help me, and it’ll be a learning experience for you. We both profit.”

But Watanuki’s offer isn’t an unreasonable one. As he is right now, Izuku has no control over this new spatial magic of his. The only time he’s really used it was during his fight against Watery, and the magic output of Windy’s attack had been absolutely devastating. If that sort of power goes unchecked as Izuku continues building his magical ability…

With a shaky exhale, Izuku nods. “I’ll do it.”

Watanuki breaks into a wide smile. The change is so jarring at Izuku wonders if he’s been fooled this entire time. “Wonderful. Now, get out of my house.”

Izuku stares blankly. “What?”

“You’re my disciple now, aren’t you?” The glee in Watanuki’s voice is seriously unnerving. “I’ll call you when I need you. For the time being, go and do whatever duties await you.”

This… this is all one big joke, right? There’s no way Watanuki’s actually that much of an asshole, right?

“Did you just con me into free labour?” Izuku screeches, hysteria peaking.

The twins laugh at his predicament as they push him out the door. Ironically, Izuku finds himself digging his heels into the ground, staring incredulously at the magician standing at the doorway. Watanuki’s stance is much more relaxed than his rigid and formal posture from before; he leans casually on the doorframe, a grin on his face.

“It’s not free,” he argues, making a little tisk-tisk motion with his finger. “This is for your own growth and education, remember?”

“Education my ass,” Izuku yells back, fighting against the girls’ surprisingly strength. He has zero patience to spare, because what the hell, is this actually happening, has he just sold his soul to the devil? “You – I can’t believe –”

Of all things Watanuki could do, he chooses to laugh. It’s not mean-spirited, and Izuku knows that Watanuki will keep his word. But it’s been a very long day, and Izuku’s pretty sure he’s been made into a minion first and a disciple second.

“My life is a mess and so am I,” he says miserably. All three strange people before him laugh.

“Don’t worry,” Watanuki offers as Izuku feels himself pass through the membrane-like barrier once more. “At the very least, you’ll have my guidance.” Then, with a simple wave of his hand, the man turns his back and walks into the shop, his grin still brilliantly wide. “Godspeed, Deku.”

And then Izuku feels himself go weightless, hanging between there and not-there. Time warps around him, passing instantly and not moving at all, before spitting him back out onto the sidewalk from whence he came.

It’s a good thing he’s exhausted. Otherwise, he’d be hunched over on the ground, hyperventilating and crying.

Kero floats down, a worried expression on his cartoonish features. “Hey, what’s wrong? Are you okay?”
Izuku sighs deeply, though it comes out more like a choked laugh. “How long was I gone?”

“Uh,” Kero says, worry escalating, “You weren’t. Gone, I mean. All you did was stare at the plot of empty field for a good ten seconds and trip backward. Seriously, are you okay?”

When Izuku looks over, the Wish-Granting Shop is no longer there, and it is, as Kero said, indeed just an empty plot with many sad weeds.

That’s great. Izuku silently prays to the gods above to end his suffering.

Turning to Kero, Izuku fixes the plush with the flattest, most exhausted look he’s probably ever given someone. “Apparently I have spatial magic and broke into a wish-granting shop. Also, a weird magician man said he wants to train me and I think I may now be damned to hell.”

It’s good that this neighbourhood is quiet, because any civilian walking by would probably be very weirded out by the conversation Izuku’s having with Kero.

“Oh my god,” Kero breathes back, eyes blown wide. He’s surprisingly receptive, which is relieving as much as it is worrying. “You met with the Shopkeeper.”

“I can hear the capital S,” Izuku replies, dropping his face into his hands.

Kero looks around, eyes flickering to the empty plot. “Let’s talk at home. It’s safer that way.” Then, after a brief moment, the plush sighs deeply and crosses his arms. “I can’t leave you alone for even a minute!”

“I’m so tired,” is all Izuku says in return, praying that his legs can carry him all the way home.

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“...So essentially, you’re now the Shopkeeper’s employee,” Kero finishes with a shake of his head. “Man, normal magicians would kill to be in your position, you know?”

“That’s great,” Izuku speaks into the pillow he’s currently resting his face in. “I can’t believe he conned me into free labour.”

The late afternoon sun colours the walls of the room with a warm orange tint. For some reason, Izuku finds his eyes drawn to the cracked glass diamond that lies on his table. As strange as his situation is, Izuku has grown used to lying on his bed after the sun is no longer directly above him, discussing his chaotic spiral of a life with Kero.

With a sigh, Izuku pushes himself up. “I have to go to gymnastics soon,” he informs Kero, grabbing his bag off the floor. “Zing’s going to kill me if I’m –”

Izuku’s mouth clamps shut as he watches the strange, small, winged girl tap his window. She’s no bigger than his palm, but she pounds her tiny fists against the glass nonetheless, an irritated expression on her features.

“A fairy,” he finishes, feeling that life is being incredibly unfair right now. There’s no buzzing in his head, which means that the thing isn’t a Sakura Card, which means he has absolutely no idea how to deal with it.

Kero’s eyebrows shoot up. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“No, I mean –” Moving over to the window, Izuku slides it open, and the fairy thing jumps into his
room. He gestures at the tiny girl. “A fairy.”

Kero’s jaw drops. That’s not a good sign. Kero’s supposed to know everything, because if there’s something he doesn’t know, then that’s a very bad sign.

“You’re the Shopkeeper’s apprentice,” the fairy huffs, crossing her arms. Her voice is all windchimes and silver bells, high-pitched and melodic. She trots around Izuku’s desk for a bit before sitting down on a pad of sticky notes. “I have a request, magician.”

Wait, what?

“How do you know about that?” Izuku asks, shocked.

The fairy snorts, flicking a strand of her silky green hair out of her face. “Anybody who’s anyone knows about you, magician. You’ve been making a lot of noise around the city.”

Oh, no. “Have you – have you been watching me?”

“You’re the only magician in the entire city,” the fairy responds, as if Izuku’s an idiot. “You attract magical beings toward you, dummy. Haven’t you noticed the spirits that follow you wherever you go?”

A cold chill runs down Izuku’s spine. “The parade of what?”

The fairy looks both disappointed and sad. “You’re pretty dumb, aren’t you?”

“Whoa, hang on!” Kero drops down onto the desk in front of the fairy. He looks just as surprised as Izuku is, which really doesn’t help the situation. “First of all, who are you?”

Stiffening, the fairy lifts her head and crosses her legs. “They call me Sylvie,” she answers, and an unseen force billows past Izuku’s ears. Something smells like wildflowers and fresh rain and vast, open fields of countryside, and for some reason, the fairy’s figure seems to glow a bit brighter.

The power of a name, something deep in his mind provides.

“I’m Deku, and this is Kero,” Izuku offers, because it’s polite. He fixes Kero with a short, firm look, quietly saying, just go with it.

Sylvie narrows her emerald eyes. “Deku,” she says, as if she’s trying the word out on her tongue. “Deku, the magician. I want your help with something I think you’ll be interested in.”

It’s so tempting, to just break down, reject everything, and curl up in a small corner and cry. But Izuku vividly remembers Ms. Yuko’s influence guiding him through the art of negotiation and Watanuki’s serene, calm stature.

Summoning all the energy he can muster, Izuku slams down a mask of calmness over his features. The familiar crooning of his moon magic ebbs around him, surrounding his body in a faint cloud of silver dust.

“You’ll have to elaborate,” he says, words flowing smoother than they ever have. His mind is clear, and he knows what to do. “Is it a Sakura Card?”

Sylvie seems taken aback by Izuku’s sudden change in personality, but she presses on nonetheless. With a sharp nod, she says, “It has to be. It has the same aura as the other card-spirits, and nobody can get the stupid thing out of our forest.” Her nose crinkles in irritation. “Seal your annoying card-
spirit, and we’ll all be happy.”

“And the payment?” Izuku presses. Kero gives him an incredulous look, but stays silent.

After a brief silence, the fairy says, “Should you remove the card-spirit from our forest, then we’ll give you a pocketful of fairy dust.” The words come out hesitant and unsure, as if she’s expecting Izuku to – to what? Hurt her? Reject her? There’s really nothing Izuku can do but accept the deal if he wants to seal whatever Sakura Card’s on the loose now.

It doesn’t seem that Sylvie recognizes that she has the upper hand in the negotiation, so Izuku accepts quickly before she can demand anything more despite the fact that he has no idea what he’d use fairy dust for. “That sounds reasonable. Let’s go see what’s causing trouble.”

Kero turns to him, surprised. “What, now?”

“Yes, now,” Sylvie snaps back, floating upward. With a small flick of her wrist, she gestures for Izuku to follow. “The sooner, the better. Come, Deku the magician. I’ll lead the way.”

Stepping out of the apartment is a very interesting experience. This is because Izuku is now aware of the parade of strange creatures that trot behind him, following him as he walks down the street.

Most are small and appear to be harmless, if not strange-looking. Some look like normal children, save for the horns and claws and lack or surplus of eyes. Others are literal household objects that move around. Izuku swears he sees a broom and an umbrella trailing behind him.

And then there are the larger creatures. A worryingly large serpent with strange markings and feathers slithers after him, and a stag with rusted coins tied to its antlers trots casually beside him. A woman in a white kimono with dark black hair peeks out at him behind trees, leaving a sheen of ice behind her. Humanoid birds observe him from the rooftops, wielding spears.

That’s wonderful. Izuku wonders how is life can get even crazier, because this is the pinnacle of it all.

“You see them now, don’t you?” Sylvie huffs. “They’ve been following you for two months, though it seems you just broke through whatever veil was covering your stupid human eyes.”

“I can’t believe it,” Kero whispers, awestruck. He peeks his head out of Izuku’s bag, taking in the freakish sight. “I didn’t know – were we really missing that much?”

The fairy rolls her eyes. “We’ve always been here. We were here first, before your kind paved cement all over our earth and cut down our trees.” Sylvie sneers, revealing a set of surprisingly jagged teeth. “We’re here, and we’re always watching.”

It appears that some of the spirit creature things are beginning to realize that Izuku’s talking to a fairy, because they surge forward eagerly, brushing at his ankles.

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“Can he see us? Can he really see us?”

“The first magician to see us in years! It’s been so long, so many moons...”

“Hey, magician?” One of the smaller spirits tugs at his pants, looking up with eager eyes. She looks like a drowned child with her soaking wet kimono and grey skin, which is disturbing on so many levels. “Can you really see us? Can you really, really see us?”

Izuku looks to Sylvie for help. The fairy stiffens.
“Do whatever you want,” she says, turning her head. “Once they know you can see them, they’ll flock to you in droves.” Sylvie fixes Izuku with a severe look, and for a moment, she appears so much older than her perceived form. When she speaks, her voice echoes with the four winds, chilling and ancient. “Do as you wish, magician.”

Kero says nothing. For a moment, Izuku stands there, conflicted, wondering how his life has become so chaotic.

What else is there to lose, really?

And so he looks down at the small spirit, nods his head, and says, “I can see you.”

The spirit’s eyes grow even wider and her jaw drops. Then, after a brief moment of shock, she releases her grip on Izuku’s leg and trails back into the crowd of demons, whispering fervently to the others. Apparently the message travels along very quickly, because the entire crowd surges closer, mumbling excitedly amongst themselves.

“Congratulations,” Sylvie says flatly. “You’ve just made yourself into a pseudo-god.”

“I did what,” is Izuku’s intelligent reply.

“Master magician,” the stag-creature says, its voice so ancient and low that Izuku can just barely understand it. “You are the first in a very long time to speak with us.”

It takes an incredible amount of effort not to flinch as hands begin to grab at his clothing. When one clawed finger pokes at his pendant, Izuku feels his head go light with anxiety (don’t touch don’t get away), and something silver flares from his skin in a brilliant flash of light.

Kero yelps as the parade of spirits hurries back, kept at bay by the faint silver glow that now surrounds Izuku’s body. The stag, however, continues to trot at his side, undeterred. It turns its head back and sends the crowd a chilling glare before looking back at Izuku.

“My apologies, magician. The young ones get excited easily. Some of them have never seen a magician before.” It bows its head ever so slightly, coins dangling gently from its antlers.

Sylvie huffs. “Your children are so loud.” Gesturing at the growing number of spirits that trail behind Izuku, she brandishes her terrifying teeth. “Look at how they crowd! They have no respect for the old rules.”

The stag stiffens, shifting its icy glare to the fairy. Izuku has a feeling he’s missing out on a lot. “The old rules are meaningless in this world.”

The tension in the air is absolutely stifling. A horrible sort of pressure pushes down on Izuku’s shoulders, compressing his anxiety into a wonderful package of internal screaming.

“Hey now,” Kero interjects, a deep frown on his face. “We’re getting carried away. Mr. Stag, we’re going to have to ask you guys to give us some space. We have a favour to grant.”

Thank god for Kero and his easy acceptance of all things weird and horrible and magical.

The stag nods its head, slowly its pace. The fact that it complies so easily is both a surprise and a blessing. “I understand. We shall meet again, magician.”

Turning to the crowd of spirits, the stag speaks something ancient and unknown, and the crowd slowly dissipates into nothingness. In a short minute, the creatures that had been following so closely
after Izuku have disappeared entirely, leaving only faint, fading whispers.

Izuku feels lightheaded. He hopes that he can find a nice pile of leaves to sleep on in whatever forest Sylvie’s leading them to.

“What a waste of time,” the fairy hisses. “Come on, magician. The sooner we get rid of this barrier, the better.”

The walk is surprisingly short, a mere fifteen minutes from Izuku’s apartment. That’s strange, because the only forests the size of the one Izuku’s standing in front of are at least an hour away by car.

Sylvie clearly sees Izuku’s expression, because she sighs. “We altered the barriers in which we were walking through. You’re a spatial magician, right? You should know this.”

“I’m very new,” Izuku shakily replies, stepping nervously into the woods.

It’s... a strange experience.

The further they walk into the forest, the more the sounds of the city around them fade, until all that’s left is silence. The trees seem to melt into molds of shadow behind them, as if their image isn’t needed anymore. Occasionally, Izuku will hear a stray laugh or whisper floating by his ear, but when he turns to look, nothing’s there.

It’s incredibly difficult to beat magic cards in terms of insanity, but the introduction of spirits and fairies has certainly upped the ante. Izuku has a sinking suspicion that this will be troublesome for his mental health.

After a while, a set of stone stairs appears into view. They’re old, with flowers and grass and moss growing on them. Sylvie floats up casually, and Kero tenses, keeping to the bag.

Izuku is careful to avoid stepping on any flowers. For some unknown reason, it feels dangerous, and he’s not about to test that feeling.

“Here we are,” Sylvie finally says as they approach the top of the stairs. “Now, do your duty, magician.”

What appears to be a small, stone shrine lies in front of them, engraved with strange symbols and patterns that glow in the darkness around them. There’s really nothing special about it. It just looks like an old, abandoned shrine, and there are there are tons of those in Musutafu.

As Izuku steps to approach the shrine, something sparks, throwing him back. With a short yelp of surprise, he catches himself, and Kero floats out of the bag.

Sylvie heaves a deep sigh. She does that a lot. “Give us your analysis, magician.”

“It’s Shield,” Kero answers, knocking on the barely-visible barrier that surrounds the small shrine. Pink energy ripples from Kero’s fist, but nothing happens. “Irritating, but not hard to deal with. All it really does is protect precious things. One good jab from Sword should be enough.”

Izuku is infinitely grateful that Kero’s taking charge, because this is all too much.

Numbly, he chants a few words under his breath, and the Sealing Staff bursts to life in front of him. Sylvie’s eyes widen ever so slightly, but she looks away soon after.
It’s incredibly straightforward, but Izuku still manages to feel anxious. With one sweep with Sword’s magical blade, Shield’s bubble splits in half, and the Sakura Card floats gently onto Izuku’s palm.

“There we go,” Kero says, nodding his head. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sylvie snaps. “We’ve been stuck out of Faerie for a week! Any longer, and we would’ve started hexing you to get your attention!”

“Please don’t do that,” is Izuku’s weak response.

With a huff, Sylvie snaps her fingers, and a small pouch of something sparkly falls into Izuku’s hands. At the same time, the shrine creaks, and after a short burst of light, the doors slam open, swirling with an strange, foreign magic that Izuku finds himself backing away from.

“That’s your payment. Now, we’re going home.” Turning to the door, Sylvie whistles, a piercing call through the silence of the not-forest.

Little orbs of light blink into existence all around, laughing joyously. They spiral toward the door of the shrine, disappearing past it in small bursts of light.

Sylvie lingers for a bit longer, then turns back, a distorted expression her her features. “Keep helping us, and maybe you’ll be an ally of Faerie,” she says. “Good day, Deku.”

Then she slips past the gate in one last burst of light, and the doors slam closed. The shadows of the forest seem to slip away around them, and when Izuku blinks, he finds himself standing outside his apartment door.

Izuku wants to throw himself off the roof, because everything is bad and what the hell is going on.

“Okay.” Kero’s the first one to break the silence. “So, that happened.”

“I want to die,” Izuku replies very flatly and very honestly.

“Let’s recap on everything that just happened today,” Kero suggests, and yes, that’s probably a better idea. “You accidentally broke into a wish-granting shop, became an apprentice to the Shopkeeper, discovered that you have some sort of very obscure and very ancient magic, helped out a bunch of fairies, and captured Shield.”

Izuku drops his face into his hands. “And the spirits,” he adds on miserably. “I can see spirits, who have apparently always been there, who are very interested in me, and I don’t know what to do with my life anymore.”

Kero’s silent for a moment. Then, quietly: “You missed gymnastics.”

This day was been very long and very stressful and it’s unfair how Izuku hasn’t been struck by lightning yet.

***

It’s about three in the morning when Izuku’s phone buzzes. Startled, he smacks his head against the wall, which wakes Kero up.

“Whu – what’s happening,” the plush asks, voice slurred by sleep.

“Phone call,” Izuku replies, squinting through the assault of bright light. “From –” He almost chokes, because there’s no way he gave his phone number away to Watanuki. “From the Shopkeeper?”
Now that gets Kero’s attention. Stumbling over, the plush sits down on Izuku’s pillow, prepared to eavesdrop on whatever horrible, horrible conversation is bound to take place.

“Hello, Deku.” Watanuki’s unique calm-yet-amused voice echoes out from the phone. Izuku wonders how many people he would wake up if he started smashing his head against the wall.

With a long-suffering sigh, he brings the phone close to his ear. “It’s three in the morning.”

“Is it? Well, in my shop, time has no meaning. I suppose I should’ve greeted you with ‘good morning’ instead.”

The amusement in Watanuki’s voice is infuriating, but Izuku’s too tired to do anything about it. Instead, all he says is, “What do you want?”

The shopkeeper’s tone drops to something more serious, more business-like. “I hear that you helped out a group of fairies return home. What did you receive in exchange?”

“A pouch of fairy powder,” Izuku replies, sitting up a little straighter. There’s something about Watanuki’s words that sets him on edge. “Why?”

“You should be very careful with it.” The cold tone almost seems foreign now that Izuku knows of Watanuki’s playful nature. “As long as you hold onto it, you’ll attract trouble. There are beings that prey on fairies, and that pouch is like a magnet for trouble.”

Wait, what?

Kero and Izuku both turn to stare at Sylvie’s payment. The shimmering pouch on his table seems much more menacing now. “Then – then what do I do with it?”

“What do you think you should do with it, Deku?”

The question is phrased strangely, not in a condescending or curious manner, but more in that it sounds like Watanuki’s a teacher, asking his student a question he expects to be answered.

Returning a gift from spirits sounds like a horrible idea. Izuku can’t even return gifts normally without being stabbed repeatedly by the daggers of guilt his helpful mind thinks up, so there’s no way that’s happening. He doesn’t know how to use fairy powder either, and he’s not sure he wants to know how. And there’s no way he’s letting a pouch of doom hang around for long.

With a deep breath, Izuku says, “I think that I really don’t want trouble, and I think that I should trade it in with you for something else.”

The answer appears to be the right one, because the shopkeeper gives a satisfied hum. “A smart move. I’ll be expecting you, then.”

Just like that, the call ends, leaving Izuku and Kero alone in the darkness of the room.

As always, Kero speaks first. “Was... was he calling just to warn you about the powder?”

“I don’t even care anymore,” Izuku sighs, shuffling back into bed. All his problems can wait until the sun’s come up, at the very least.

***

This is the worst. There’s absolutely nothing that can top this in terms of oh god the world is ending, put me out of my suffering more than this.
“So, like, I’m pretty sure you’re Deku,” Satoshi comments, twirling his baton casually.

Izuku thinks his face-planting into the mats is very justified. “You what?”

The world is ending. The apocalypse has come. With the level of insanity of recent events, it’s no wonder that the Armageddon has taken the form of one of Izuku’s closest friends discovering that he’s a vigilante.

Satoshi gives him a strange look, snatching his baton out of the air. “I’m pretty sure you’re Deku,” he repeats, and wow, he took that literally.

It’s good that nobody else happens to be in earshot at the moment, because the breath Izuku hitches on makes it sounds like he just choked on a squeaky toy. “Why on Earth would you think that?”

“Well,” Satoshi begins, raising three fingers. Oh, god, there are three reasons. There are three horrible, miserable, life-shattering reasons that Satoshi knows Izuku’s (poorly-kept) secret identity. That’s three too many. ‘First of all, you’ve been really weird recently. You’re jumpier, and you seem even more stressed than usual. That’s saying something, considering you apparently get caught up in everything.’

That’s a very astute reason. It makes sense, and Izuku hates it.

Satoshi puts down one finger before continuing. “Second, a few days ago, you ran off the second the sakura petals started pouring down. That’s pretty suspicious. Did you check the news after that mess of a spectacle?”

“No,” Izuku admits. There’s no reason to check the news and get even more stressed out than he already is, so he goes out of his way to avoid any articles about the mysterious vigilante Deku unless there’s no way to avoid it.

“Well, a ton of people think Deku had something to do with it,” Satoshi continues, and isn’t that just wonderful. “They’re saying it might’ve been connected to the narcolepsy attacks somehow, since they stopped on that day.”

That hits a little too close for Izuku to be comfortable with.

In a valiant attempt to keep his breathing even, Izuku sits down on the mats, clamping his hands together to stop their shaking. “That’s – that’s a stretch. Isn’t it more likely just to be a coincidence?”

At that, Satoshi cocks up an eyebrow. “It’s not like you to debunk something so easily.”

Izuku decidedly clamps his jaw shut.

“And third,” Satoshi declares, dropping down to sit next to Izuku, “Only someone with a life as crazy and a sense of self-preservation as awful as yours could be Deku.”

That’s a bullshit reason. And yet it makes perfect sense.

With a weak noise of defeat, Izuku drops his face into his hands. What does he do in this situation? How have so many people managed to even uncover his identity when he hasn’t even been active for three months? Is he that transparent?

Satoshi quietly waits for an answer, spinning his baton atop one finger.

(Out of all the people Izuku can call his friends, Satoshi is one of his closest. Their friendship is a
strange one; they bond over gymnastics and casual conversations and silence. Never once have they verbally professed their appreciation of the other’s support and trust, and Izuku would rather keep it that way.

It’s immensely relieving to have a friend who’s just as socially awkward as Izuku is.)

There’s no use lying to someone who knows him so well.

“Please don’t tell anyone,” is all Izuku manages to whisper out.

Satoshi’s reaction is much quieter and reserved than Izuku expected. Then again, Satoshi has never been the sort to show much emotion at all.

With a breathy laugh, Satoshi falls back onto the mat, staring up at the ceiling with amused eyes. One corner of his mouth is quirked up in a lopsided smile. “What on Earth have you gotten yourself into this time, Izuku?”

A bubble of nervous laughter escapes Izuku. “That’s a great question.”

For a minute, they sit there in silence. It’s a very awkward minute.

Sighing, Satoshi flips himself back up and kicks his baton off the ground and into his grasp. “Well, whatever. Do what you need to do. For now, let’s get back to work before Zing comes over and starts yelling.”

Izuku blinks. That can’t be all. “You – that’s it?”

Satoshi glances back and shrugs. “You’re a good person, Izuku. Vigilante or not, if you’re doing something this big, I trust that you’re doing it for all of us.”

If Satoshi or any of the others in the gym hear Izuku’s pathetic sniffles, they don’t comment. It’s nothing short of a miracle that Izuku is surrounded by so many kind-hearted individuals, and there’s no way he’s taking their trust and support for granted.

(Izuku isn’t blind. He sees the stray glances the others send in his direction, and he sees them tilting their heads toward Satoshi’s declarations. But they don’t frown, sneer, or call him out. All they do is smile ever so slightly and continue on with their day.

How many people know of Izuku’s identity as Deku, but trust him enough to leave him be?)

With a laugh that would pass as short huff to anyone else, Satoshi nudges Izuku with his baton. “Come on, problem child. A good vigilante needs to be fit and agile, right?” Then, looking over at Zing, who just happens to be hefting an enormous stack of mats over her shoulder, Satoshi cocks an uneven grin. “Plus, no villain, hero, or police officer is as scary as Zing is.”

That’s a very reasonable statement. Izuku has seen Zing lift up a car with her bare hands.

With a shaky breath, Izuku pushes himself to his feet. So maybe Satoshi knows, and maybe a lot more people than Izuku first suspected know. But it’s okay.

It’s okay, because Izuku can trust these people. He’s built up relationships with everyone he’s met over the years, and he knows that they won’t betray him. These people trust him, and so it’s only fair that he trusts them in return.

“Okay,” is Izuku’s quiet reply.
A bit of tension drains out of Satoshi’s figure as he continues to spin his baton. He remains silent, but nods decisively, turning away with a soft smile on his features.

Trust is a silent agreement, and to Izuku, Satoshi offers his silence freely.

It’s going to be alright.

Chapter End Notes

lots of cards in this chapter! i don't think i'll ever go over four cards per chapter, but for some, i won't be fleshing them out as much as like. Watery or Shadow, who apparently exist to make izuku's life harder. in other news, Jump is now izuku's self-declared soulmate or something, because wow, same.

mei has inserted herself into izuku's life and now she's just. sort of there. also, shinsou. he's here now. i didn't have him spend too much time interacting with izuku because they're literally total strangers who just so happen to have a common friend. shinsou will be reappearing, though. oh, yes. he'll certainly be back.

some of you who've read xxxholic are probably confused as to the whole watanuki situation, to which i have to say: shhhh. it's okay. everything will be explained in time. and to those of you who haven't read xxxholic: it's all good. izuku's life is just a spectacular mess of stress and magic. again, everything will be explained in time.

izuku, staring at sylvie: oh yeah give me more errands why don't you

thanks for reading!
Chapter Summary

Time, Erase, and Libra. The shadows of to-be enemies, and the true beginnings of a vigilante.

Chapter Notes

izuku is constantly suffering, and at this point, he's accepted it. this is how things are. this is his life now.

izuku: you think chaos is your ally? you merely adopted chaos. i was born in it, molded by it

kero: seriously are you okay

this chapter has a few manga spoilers, specifically that of the hideout raid arc.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Everything is miserable and I want to die,” Izuku declares very flatly and very earnestly.

Beside him, Kero heaves a deep sigh and whacks his head against a wall. That’s not a good sign. “Normally I’d say you’re being dramatic, but you know what? I wholeheartedly agree.”

It’s been a very long week. Or, to be accurate, it’s been a very long day looped seven times in a row.

Currently, Izuku stands atop Timewick Heroics Agency’s clock tower, wondering what sort of heinous crime he committed in his past life to be handed down such unjust punishment by the gods. Time rests innocently in his hand, as if it didn’t just trap the flow of time in one of the top hero’s symbols of justice for an entire week because it was bored.

A few fairies dance around him warily, as if they’re expecting him to break into hysterics. It’s very tempting.

Seven days of trying to locate the magic, trying to seal it, failing to break the barrier on time – no, it hasn’t been the best of times.

Izuku glares vehemently at the card. He, for lack of a better description, has run out of fucks to give.

As the golden bell chimes to signal the start of a new day, Izuku and Kero both visibly tense. The fairies look up as well, frowning.

But nothing happens. There are no ridiculous time-warping shenanigans, no blinking only to wake up a full 24 hours earlier, no repeating the same day for a goddamn week. All there is is the muted bustle of the city below them, busy with late night energy.
Izuku lets out a burst of hysterical laughter, holding himself up by using his staff as a crutch. Kero looks like he wants to cry tears of relief. All the fairies do is laugh and giggle amongst themselves, whispering something too high-pitched and bell-like for Izuku to understand. They disperse shortly after, but not before offering an amused, “Do your best, magician!”

At least somebody’s happy with this nightmare.

“It’s over,” Izuku wheezes, feeling... something press against his chest. At this point, he’s not sure if it’s anxiety, exhaustion, or relief. “Oh my god, it’s finally over.”

Kero glides over weakly and immediately slips into his usual pocket on Izuku’s belt. “Let’s... let’s just go home and be done with all this Groundhog Day stuff.”

Izuku complies easily.

The rest of the day is much brighter than usual. Izuku runs around the city with the a bull-headed sort of determination, greeting people, performing random tasks, and intervening in any situation where his help wouldn’t normally be needed. Ironically, it feels like Time has taken time away from Izuku, dragging him into an endless loop with no definite end for what seemed like an eternity – and yet the city only experienced one day – one single, normal day – while Izuku spent so long trying to break free.

There’s really no reason to be so upset. Time didn’t do any harm. All it did was rewind time for a mere seven days, and the only ones affected by it all were Izuku and Kero.

(Maybe it’s because Izuku throws himself into helping others without ever looking back. Maybe it’s because the reason he busies himself everywhere and anywhere at once is to keep his mind off the fact that if he ever stops, he won’t be worth anything.

Maybe it’s because Izuku is absolutely terrified of stagnancy, terrified of being trapped in one place without escape, terrified of facing a world without change – a world that doesn’t need him.)

Regardless, there’s so much to do. There are so many people that Izuku hasn’t had the chance to see, so many things that he’s itching to do in order to get his mind out of the loop and back into the present.

“We better avoid going downtown today,” one of the passersby casually says to her friend as Izuku speeds past. That catches his attention. Is there something going on?

Her friend frowns, and Izuku slows his pace. “Wait, why? We have the day planned out and everything!”

“It’s dangerous,” the passerby answers. “Didn’t you hear? Some big yakuza group is attacking Musutafu General Hospital!”

What?

Time screeches to a halt. Nothing around Izuku matters; the city is muted grey, no sound makes it his eardrums, and for a moment, he feels weightless.

Aki and Miu – they spend their lives in the hospital, trying to reign over their powerful yet lethal quirks, living their lives as best as they can. Satoshi’s chronic migraines land him there at least once a week. What if Riku’s there as well, visiting his grandmother, and – what if they’ve all been caught up in the attack – how many people are in danger?
No. No. This isn’t the time to panic – no, Izuku needs to find out what’s going on, and he needs to do it now.

Ducking into the nearest alley, he wastes no time in tapping the Dekucom twice. The familiar buzz of static wrenches a little chunk out of the boulder of anxiety sitting on Izuku’s chest.

“Mei,” he wheezes, gripping his pendant as if it’s a lifeline. “Mei, you have to help me.”

“Guinea pig,” Mei answers immediately, an unfamiliar tone in her usually chipper voice, not quite serious, but worried. The usual tinkering that accompanies her is absent. “Hey, hey, what’s wrong?”

As Izuku takes several deep breaths to get his breathing back to normal, Kero climbs out of his bag, hovering closely by Izuku’s shoulder. His expression is just as severe as Mei sounds, and it’s in times like these that Izuku is infinitely grateful for Kero’s unfailing support and understanding.

“The hospital – Musutafu General Hospital is being attacked by villains,” Izuku answers to the best of his ability, his voice quivering. “The yakuza. That’s it. The hospital is being attacked by the yakuza, and I need to go and help.”

“I see!” Without a beat of hesitation, Mei begins typing up a storm of furious clacking. “You’d better get a move on it, guinea pig. I’ll feed you information as you’re heading there.”

With a sharp nod, Izuku lets his pendant hang loose from his hand. “Key that hides the hidden power of the moon, show your true form before me!”

Not a minute later, Izuku’s speeding above the city atop Fly. Kero sits carefully in the side pocket of the bag, his head just barely peeking out. This certainly isn’t their first time rushing across the city with Fly, but the sense of urgency that spurs Izuku on is incomparable, even to that anxiety caused by dangerous cards.

“Ooh, not good,” Mei sighs, startling Izuku. “Looks like you’re going up against a pretty competent group of criminals!”

Izuku shudders out an uneven breath. That’s great. A time loop, and now a prominent yakuza group. What’s next? Demons? Natural disasters?

“They’re called the Eight Precepts of Death,” Mei explains. “They’ve been involved in some pretty shady business, but mostly drug trafficking. And...” Her voice trails off, as if she’s realizing something mid-sentence. Her next words are cautious and ever so slightly hesitant. “And human trafficking, with suspicion of quirk experimentation.”

Izuku’s mind goes blank. Kero yells something over the crisp, cold wind, but none of it makes it to Izuku’s ears.

Human trafficking and quirk experimentation.

The Eight Precepts of Death are attacking a hospital.

Aki, Miu, and so many others call the Quirk Rehabilitation Center home.

No. No, no, no. There’s no way in hell that some – some yakuza group is going to hurt anyone. There’s no way in hell that Izuku’s going to let something like this slide. He has the ability to do something, to save people.

What kind of heartless monster would he have to be not to take action?
In a burst of speed, Izuku leans closer to the staff, pushing Fly even faster. Kero lets out a small yelp before tucking his head back into the pocket.

“Details,” Izuku demands, gritting his teeth. If he channels his anxiety into determination, maybe he’ll be able to stave off the impending panic attack he knows he’s going to be having. People are in danger, and Izuku isn’t going to allow his own incompetence be the reason for any harm that might befall them.

Nobody’s getting hurt today.

“The head of the Precepts is a man who goes by the name Overhaul,” Mei responds quickly, and Izuku can tell she’s reading off confidential police materials. “His quirk is called – huh, get this – it’s called Overhaul. If you ever run into him, you’d better watch out, because his quirk lets him disassemble and reassemble anything!”

So the leader is a man with a quirk that has incredible destructive potential. Izuku can only hope that the boss doesn’t actually show himself, or if he does, that he doesn’t use his quirk in a hospital.

“But that’s not all,” Mei continues, and isn’t that great. “He has a group of eight henchmen called the Cleansing Salvo! There’s not much info on them, but all of them seem real tough.” With a huff, the inventor pauses in her typing. “Honestly, it seems like you should avoid fighting altogether!”

That’s an excellent idea. But the hospital’s in sight, and Izuku has no idea how to avoid fighting.

“I’m going to have to talk to you later,” Izuku tells Mei, closing his eyes and breathing out one last line. “Stay safe.”

Mei lets out an incredulous laugh. “Well, you be sure to take care, too!”

And just like that, the line is lost to static, and Izuku taps the Dekucom twice to turn it off.

Unsurprisingly, an incredible number of police cars and pro heroes stand outside the hospital, giving it a safe berth. As Izuku lands on a building across the street from the hospital, he surveys the situation before him and clamps down on a burst of anxiety.

“This is dangerous,” Kero warns, climbing onto Izuku’s shoulder for a better vantage point. The plush’s expression is serious and dark. “This isn’t just a card we’re facing. It’s a full-on yakuza group, and they probably have hostages.”

So many hostages, Izuku’s brain adds on unhelpfully. “I know.”

If Izuku tries to slip in through a window or a door, he’ll be caught by either the officials or the yakuza, and that scenario is a total nightmare. No, he needs to slip in undetected, avoiding all eyes in the middle of the day –

– Oh. Yes, that’ll work quite nicely.

Raising Shadow’s card into the air, Izuku commands, “Shadow, under the name or your new master, Deku, sneak us into the hospital!”

In a short burst of darkness, Shadow envelops Izuku and Kero entirely. It’s an unnerving feeling, being completely blind to the surroundings, feeling weightless and so heavy at the same time, travelling at the speed of light and not moving at all.

And then light returns to Izuku’s eyes as Shadow falls away, melting into the darkness under Izuku’s
Kero slowly releases his death grip on Izuku’s shoulder, his eyes blown wide. “What was – what just – I’ve never seen someone use Shadow like that before!”

“We can talk another time,” Izuku whispers, ducking behind the nearest wall. “We’re in.”

The pristine walls of the hospital surround them, and the noise of the chaos from outside is muted. More notably, voices echo through the calls, not too far away, and it takes only a little focus of his magic-enhanced senses to hear the resounding, heavy footsteps of six different people.

Six? There are only six Precepts, and they still managed to capture the hospital?

With a gulp, Izuku tightens his grip on the Sealing Staff. That just means that they’re even more capable than he first expected.

“Let’s talk strategy,” Kero suggests, hovering close. “Mei’s right. We need to avoid battle. Who knows what’ll happen if we start a fight in a hospital?”

“Oh-huh,” Izuku agrees, shuffling slowly down the hallway, his senses still focused on the footsteps. “I – I really don’t think testing magic against quirks is a good idea.”

Kero nods in agreement. “Let’s go over what we can use. Watery, Windy, and Shadow are out. They’re too big, attract too much attention, and I don’t even want to think about the collateral damage.”

“Sword is useless against experienced fighters,” Izuku adds on. Analyzing a situation and breaking it down is one of his talents, and the familiar feeling eases him a little despite how awful the situation is. “And Sleep takes way too much magic to use. Every other card I have is too passive to really do anything in a fight.”

For a moment, Izuku and Kero sit in silence, wracking their brains for anything that could possibly help. But if none of the Sakura Cards can even be used appropriately, then...

Wait. No, there’s one more thing that Izuku failed to take into account. The Sakura Cards aren’t his only weapon, now are they?

Turning to Kero, he takes a deep breath and tries on a shaky smile.

*In the face of adversity, you always put on a smile!*

“I think I know what to do.”

***

It’s frustrating. It’s frustrating beyond relief, to watch as so many civilians are taken hostage without being able to help.

In his form – this inconspicuous, emaciated, *useless* form – he appears as just another anxious bystander, frustrated at the incompetence of the heroes.

And he is, really. All Might, the pillar of peace, reduced to such a pitiful state as to become incapable of saving people when they need him the most?

It’s shameful. It’s disgraceful.
“You’re doing it again.” Tsukauchi frowns as he makes his way over through the sea of pro heroes and police officers, dressed in his formal work suit. He’s tense, but keeping his tone light.

Gritting his teeth, Toshinori looks firmly ahead and at the building full of people he can’t save. “I can’t do anything. Once more, I’m forced to sit here, incapable of providing help when it’s most needed, because of my own incompetence –”

“Toshinori,” Tsukauchi interrupts, his tone firm. “You’re not the only hero that exists. Stop trying to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders, and let us police do our job, alright?” He offers a smile, gentle and understanding. “Nobody will get hurt today.”

As if that one sentence was a trigger, the door of the hospital swings wide open, and immediately, all attention is drawn to the figure that steps out.

A young girl, not quite a teenager, plants her feet firmly at the entrance, crosses her arms, and stares into the enormous crowd before her. The bravery in her red eyes is positively stunning.

Then, after a moment, she turns back and calls, “We’re clear, everybody!”

And just like that, a stream of people dressed in anything from hospital gowns to casual sweaters to lab coats pour out of the doors and toward the officials. Cries of relief and confusion ring out, from the ex-hostages and the officials, respectively.

Tsukauchi blinks. His face looks like it’s caught between calmness, confusion, and distress. It’s an interesting sight. “I... well, that was unexpected.”

Isn’t that an understatement.

“What on Earth happened?” Toshinori demands, making his way to the front of the crowd. Did someone manage to free the hostages? How? Or did the hostages themselves stage a riot and escape? Did the Precepts just allow it to happen?

The red-eyed girl is soon joined by another girl with pale blond hair. They keep to themselves, standing at the entranceway, mumbling something inaudible over the chaos. Then, as the stream of ex-hostages keeps coming, the red-eyed girl turns to the crowd and yells, “Keep it going, and don’t even think about going back inside! You all heard what Deku said, right?”

Deku? Deku, the vigilante?

Tsukauchi’s head swivels immediately to the red-eyed girl. Toshinori follows as the detective pushes his way through the crowd, eventually finding himself at the entranceway to the hospital beside a very confused detective.

The red-eyed girl gives them a scrutinizing look. The blond girl simply stares.

“Hello,” Tsukauchi begins, and the girls stiffen immediately. “I’m Detective Tsukauchi Naomasa. Are you two alright?”

The blond girl shrugs while the red-eyed girl sighs. “We’re fine. What do you want?”

Despite the lack of reception, Tsukauchi smiles gently and pushes onward. “That’s good. And you mentioned something about Deku...?”

The red-eyed girl frowns. “I sure did,” she fires back, suspicion evident in her voice.
Ah. Perhaps she’s one of Deku’s supporters.

“How did Deku manage to free the entire hospital from the yakuza?” the detective presses, keeping his tone as light as possible as to not make the children nervous.

“Beats me,” the red-eyed girl replies with a shrug. “When he got to us, he told us he’d already taken care of the yakuza – what was it, the Precepts – and that we had to leave as soon as possible and not look back.”

“He also told us to tell the police that they should capture the villains as soon as possible,” the blond girl adds on, her voice calm and smooth. Now that the flow of civilians has come to an end, she stands in front of the door, her arms crossed behind her back. “He told us that he’d trapped them so that they could be captured, but didn’t have the manpower to take them down all by himself.”

The girls clearly see the confusion and surprise on both Tsukauchi and Toshinori’s faces, because the red-eyed girl sneers and the blond girl snorts.

“Get a grip,” the red-eyed girl snaps, tapping her foot impatiently. Now that Toshinori looks closely, he can see the bracelets that indicate both girls as permanent residents of the Quirk Rehabilitation Center. “Aren’t you supposed to be the ones doing the rescuing, not waiting for the rescued to come to you?”

That hits Toshinori hard.

It’s true, isn’t it? What sort of hero is he if he's can't offer his help when it's most needed? What right does he have to call himself the Pillar of Peace when he's incapable of doing the most basic of deeds that fall under a hero's duty?

Just as he’s about to reply, Tsukauchi puts a hand on his shoulder, shaking his head.

“You should hurry,” the blond girl urges quietly, stepping aside. The police begin to surge past, accompanied by pro heroes. “I’m not sure how long Deku can last.”

A flash of something akin to worry flashes over both the girls’ eyes, but it disappears so quickly that Toshinori isn’t sure whether or not they actually know anything.

“Regardless, please follow the officers,” Tsukauchi says, gesturing to a few of his colleagues. “They’ll make sure you’re safe, and may ask a few more questions.”

As the two girls follow after the officers, Tsukauchi turns to Toshinori, taking a deep breath.

“Well, you were right,” Toshinori offers, because Tsukauchi’s been having a very long couple of months. “Nobody was hurt.”

After a brief moment of silence, Tsukauchi turns back to Toshinori, a somewhat lopsided grin on his face. “Of course. I’m always right, aren’t I?”

Toshinori is no fool. He knows that they got lucky in that Deku decided to take action and somehow incapacitate members of the very competent and very dangerous Eight Precepts of Death. Vigilante or not, Deku’s actions proved greater than the officers’ and the heroes’ combined.

If only he hadn’t used his time so liberally – then, maybe he would’ve been able to meet the elusive Deku.

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“Mission complete!” Raising his fist into the air, Kero lets out a whoop. A bright grin is plastered on his face as he dances little circles around Izuku’s shoulders. “I can’t believe that worked, but hey, we did it!”

Izuku nods numbly, leaning his back against the wall of the alleyway. The last of the adrenaline has faded away, leaving him drained of all energy. He can’t even bring himself to worry about the strange bird-people that look downward at him from the rooftops, spears and bows and swords in their feathery hands.

But Kero’s celebration is justified – after all, they did manage to bring down six members of the Precepts of Death without engaging in battle. It’s sort of miracle, really.

Lifting his shaking hand to his face, Izuku watches the silver dust and purple butterflies leak from his skin. Spatial magic, huh?

It’s all one big blur of silver and purple. Izuku remembers thinking of Sylvie’s comments from a week earlier – we altered the barriers in which we were walking – and envisioning each and every one of the six Precepts, trapped within an unseen cage of halted time, eternally frozen in place with no way of escape, living one moment of time over and over again.

And the outcome. Izuku has certainly been hesitant to use his magic before, but he’s never been scared of it.

“That was incredible,” Kero laughs, his eyes wide with excitement and wonder. His tiny wings beat quickly behind him as he flits around, fidgeting. “You trapped the villains in their own boundary of spacetime, right? That’s an ingenious way of doing things! And wow, it looked super cool.”

(A few blocks down, inside Musutafu General Hospital, a crowd of heroes and officers stare in awe at the yakuza that stand before them. Surrounded in a barrier of purple light, they appear to be trapped in an eternal loop of time. After performing one action, their image flickers, and they perform the action again, and again, and again. And yet the officers find themselves easily slipping into the light and cuffing the villains without being afflicted by whatever strange quirk befell them.)

Izuku laughs nervously, leaning his head back against the brick wall. The fact that he was able to cast such incredible magic hasn’t quite sunk in yet, because once it has, there’s no doubt he’ll be screaming into a pillow.

Maybe he should prioritize trading in the fairy powder. The sooner he sees Watanuki, the better.

As the last of the purple butterflies dissipate from his skin, Izuku finally relaxes, closing his eyes. Today... today was been stressful, but he did pretty well. Nobody was injured, and he managed to wrap the issue up in pretty wrapping paper and hand it over to the police.

Kero seems to have calmed down marginally, because he settles himself back into the pocket of Izuku’s bag, sighing contentedly. “You’re doing good, Izuku,” the plush says, putting on a proud smile. “The Master of Cards is always given so much power, and in this world, where villains and heroes call home, it’s so easy to use that power for self-gain. But a kid like you, who wants to help everybody?” Kero beams, and it’s so bright and happy that Izuku isn’t sure if he deserves it. “The only thing you think about is how to help others with this magic that you have. I’m proud of you.”

Heat rushes to Izuku’s cheeks, and he blushes all the way to his toes. That – well, it’s true, he’s never really thought of how he could profit from his newly-discovered magic – but it’s not that big of deal, is it? Who wouldn’t help people if they could?
Isn’t – isn’t that the basis of being a hero?

“Not everyone can be as selfless as you,” Kero says, and oh, did Izuku say that out loud? “Your kindness is a gift and a curse, you know. To be able to open your heart up to anyone – now, that’s a gift. But there’ll be people who try to use you and throw you away.” Looking up, Kero fixes Izuku with a flat, blank look. “You know that already, don’t you?”

Izuku swallows. Whispers of useless and worthless float through his mind before he violently expels them. They’re in the past; they have no place in the present. Move on. “Yeah.”

They stand in silence for a moment. Then, as always, Kero breaks the silence with a small laugh.

“It’s been a crazy month,” Kero finally says, shaking his head with a tired smile. “Let’s move on and put this all behind us –” Pausing, the plush makes a face, peeking up at the bird people that stare so intently. “Well. The spirits and fairies are a bit harder to put behind, but let’s try our best and live our lives as best as we can!”

There’s really nothing else Izuku can do, is there?

With a smooth, long exhale, Izuku hefts his bag over his shoulders and steps out of the alleyway. He has to check on his friends, talk to Mei, finish up some errands, and complete his homework for tomorrow.

So his life has somehow become even more chaotic. That’s fine. He’s been dealing with chaos his entire life.

If he needs to put a little more effort into every day, that’s alright. He’s been giving his time and energy to his city his entire life, so what’s a little more going to change?

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“You only choose to visit me after a month,” Watanuki smirks, leaning casually against the doorframe of the Wish-Granting Shop. The twins giggle on either side of the door.

“It’s been a rough month,” Izuku replies, offering a dry laugh.

Watanuki returns the laugh, though his is much more genuine. Stepping away from the door, he beckons Izuku in. “Of course. How have your cardcaptor duties been going?”

It’s hard to remember that Watanuki is some sort of legendary magician among all magicians when he puts on such a playful, relaxed demeanor. He makes elegance and serenity look effortless, smooth in each and every moment, calm and in control of every situation. There’s a sort of ethereal aura about him, and yet he feels approachable in a way one would share their stories and secrets with those wiser than oneself.

That sort of control must be amazing. Izuku wouldn’t know.

With a sigh, Izuku follows Watanuki into the shop, leaving his shoes at the door. “It’s... it’s been chaotic, I guess.”

“Of course,” Watanuki grins, teeth pearly white. “I’ve been hearing a little about your exploits. What’s this about vigilantism?”

It’s very tempting to bash his head against the nearest wall. With a rather pathetic noise, Izuku drops his face into his hands. “How does everyone know?”
“You’re not very good at keeping secrets, are you?” The Shopkeeper chuckles a bit as he slides open a paper-screen door that leads to a small garden behind the shop. An incredible sakura tree stands beside an equally as incredible pond with water so clear that it’s almost entirely transparent. It’s strange in the most beautiful way, watching as the swaying branches guide pink petals to the ground in front of a monochrome grey cityscape.

Watanuki takes a seat on the edge of the wooden floors, and Izuku does the same.

“Vigilante or not, I believe you have something to trade in,” Watanuki says, cocking an eyebrow.

“Yes please,” Izuku replies quickly, dropping the pouch of the evil fairy dust onto the wooden planks. “I’d like to avoid getting potentially mauled by whatever horrible entities eat fairies.”

With a hum, the Shopkeeper takes the pouch and lifts it above his eyes by the string. He examines it for a moment, then pockets the pouch.

“You’ve made some good friends,” he comments casually, and what does that mean. “I can most definitely give you something excellent in return.”

“Okay,” Izuku replies simply, because this is quickly diving out of his depth of knowledge.

Watanuki seems to contemplate something for a moment. Then, his eyes light up, and he snaps his fingers. A small wooden box pops into existence, which Izuku manages to catch before it hits the ground. It’s made of some sort of oak, glossy and ornate in the most elegant way. It’s much easier to focus on the box itself than the way the box just... appeared out of thin air.

At least it’s not the weirdest thing Izuku’s seen. “It’s a box,” he says intelligently, keeping his voice carefully flat.

“A box that can be opened,” Watanuki adds, the corner of his mouth quirking upward.

Izuku slides the lid of the box off and finds himself staring at a silver comb that lies upon a white pillow. At first glance, it seems unassuming, just a simple crescent comb with a few pretty details. “It’s a comb,” Izuku states flatly, reaching to pick it up. The moment his fingers touch the rounded surface, a blast of cold air rushes by him, and he almost drops the box entirely. “Okay, nevermind, it’s a magic comb.”

“It’s a mermaid’s comb,” Watanuki says casually, as if that’s a normal thing. That’s certainly not a normal thing, and hold on, mermaids?

The comb seems to hum in his hand as he examines it. Yes, there’s certainly a strange aura about the comb that reminds him of Watery – cold, flowing, and mysterious, but strangely soothing as well.

“Okay,” Izuku says, because there’s really nothing else he can say. “Um, thank you for the comb, but…”

“It won’t attract anything dangerous,” the Shopkeeper explains, as if sensing Izuku’s hesitance. “In fact, I think you’ll find it quite useful.”

Combs do tend to be pretty useful, especially with hair as unruly as Izuku’s. “Okay,” he repeats. “I guess I’ll just. Comb my hair with this.”

A mischievous sort of grin rises to Watanuki’s face, and he glances over to the twins, who return the grin. It’s actually sort of terrifying and most definitely worrying. “Oh, you do that. I’m sure it’ll serve you very well.”
Izuku stares at Watanuki, then at the comb, and then back at Watanuki. Then, very flatly: “If I die using this I will be very unhappy and spread very unfavourable rumours of you as a ghost.”

The Shopkeeper chuckles. “As long as you don’t cause any trouble, I’m sure everything will be just fine.”

There’s something about Watanuki’s eternal calm that’s sort of infuriating.

“Then are we done?” Packing the comb into his bag, Izuku turns to leave. “I’m busy, and –”

“I believe so,” Watanuki interjects, that irritating knowing smirk on his features. Leaning against one of the wooden supports, he lazily stares into the clear waters of the pond. “There’s a little something I’d like to ask of you, but it can wait. You’re going to have a lot on your plate soon.”

That doesn’t sound worrying at all. “I always have a lot on my plate,” Izuku replies, slowly and hesitantly.

Watanuki waves his hand dismissively. “Yes, yes, of course. But do keep an eye out for any officials who might want you behind bars. I can’t teach you if you get arrested.”

An icy jolt runs down Izuku’s spine. Is Watanuki hinting at something, or is he just joking? There’s no denying that the man is strange and mysterious Izuku can’t even fathom. What if he’s some sort of prophet? “I...” His voice shakes as he speaks. “I’m always careful. I won’t get arrested.”

“Oh okay,” is all Watanuki says in response, light and calm as always. Offering one last, piercing gaze, he nods. “Well then – I’ll see you soon, Deku.”

And with that simple dismissal, Izuku finds himself standing at the rotting fence in front of the empty space that just so happens to house the Wish-Granting Shop on another plane of existence. A few of the more upfront spirits perk up upon witnessing his return from an unknown dimension, settling back into the strange parade that follows him everywhere.

Kero jolts when he sees Izuku. Pushing off the old posts, the plush hovers warily. “Did you get everything figured out?” he asks.

Izuku laughs nervously. Sure, the fairy dust has been safely quarantined, but now he has a – a mermaid comb, and some sort of obscure prophecy about getting arrested.

It seems like every time Izuku leaves the Wish-Granting Shop, he leaves with more questions than he had originally. That’s just wonderful, because he doesn’t understand anything that’s going on his life.

“More or less,” is the answer he decides on, because there’s really no use dragging someone else into his mess.

Kero points a suspicions look at Izuku, but drops it quickly. Slipping into Izuku’s bag, the plush sighs. “Well, if you say so. Now, back to that card’s presence we were talking about earlier...”

***

“He’s a goddamn prophet.”

“Hey, keep it down! They’ll hear us!”

“He’s a goddamn prophet. Oh my god, I’m going to kill him.”

“Maybe think about homicide later,” Kero hisses, doing his best to keep hidden underneath Izuku’s
shirt. His soft, fidgeting limbs tickle Izuku’s stomach. “We have bigger problems at hand.”

If that isn’t the understatement of the year, Izuku doesn’t know what it is.

Currently, Izuku sits in some sort of holding cell, cuffed to a metal table. There’s one of those one-way mirrors on the wall facing him, and by some miracle, the cloud of silver magic that so often clouds his features without his knowing protects him from identification. He’s seen how it appears to others without magic sight. It doesn’t exactly censor his face, but it warps it, so that his features should be clear as day, and yet for some reason are indescribable.

Magic is very weird. But it’s the only thing preventing the officials from discovering his real identity, which is an upside.

That is, until the officers inevitably come in and start taking fingerprints. There’s no doubt they’ll be allowed to act, given the fact that Izuku’s basically a pseudo-criminal.

Another amazing thing is the fact that Izuku hasn’t had a mental breakdown yet. Maybe it’s because he hasn’t had time to, and if he does take time to curl up in the fetal position and rock himself back and forth, he’ll waste precious time plotting his escape. There’s no way he has time to waste, given the fact that he ditched his math homework to go seal a card. Normally, escaping wouldn’t be a tedious task at all. With his cards, Izuku would simply call upon Shadow to carry him into the night, and everything would be fine.

The issue is that the officers confiscated his cards. Luckily, they overlooked his pendant-slash-staff, so as long as Izuku manages to retrieve his cards, everything will be alright.

(Spatial magic is still mostly a mystery. If the hospital incident proved anything, it’s that the magic is incredibly powerful, but one mistake – one teeny, tiny mistake – is all it would take to erase someone from the face of the planet. And in this environment, where Izuku’s barely holding it together...

No. He won’t risk others’ lives just to run away.)

With a shaky sigh, Izuku takes a single step out of the self-defense mechanism that takes the form of a bubble of logic and instantly heaves a shaky exhale. Dread pools in his stomach, and his hands shake. The frantic whispers of What a foolish young magician, getting caught so easily and Perhaps we should offer our assistance brush past his ears as the fairies around him flitter nervously, which really doesn’t help.

Oh, god. He’s a criminal. He’s just been arrested.

“It’s going to be okay,” Kero whispers, keeping his voice low. “This is nothing. So maybe we got arrested, but as long as we get the cards back, you can bust you out with that handy new card, can’t you?” The plush then proceeds to throw a venomous gaze at the fairies, silencing them.

Izuku nods to himself, cupping his hands together tightly. That’s right. Yes, that’s absolutely right – one simple call and a bit of magic is all that would be needed to bust out of here, as long as he has his cards –

Then the door opens, and his train of thought comes to an abrupt halt.

A man – probably a detective, given the situation – seats himself across the table from Izuku, his expression unreadable. His features are plain, with short black hair and brown eyes, and his clothing is simplistic yet pristine, offering no indication toward his status or importance.

Shit. How should Izuku approach this?
Thankfully, he’s given time. It’s sort of surreal, hearing the oh-so famous warnings recited to him. Never in his life has Izuku imagined being at the receiving end of the Miranda warning, but alas, here he is.

The only thing Izuku really catches from the detective’s little speech is, “Knowing and understanding your rights as I have explained them to you, are you willing to answer my questions without an attorney present?”

Closing his eyes, Izuku does his best to organize his thoughts. “Yes.”

There’s no way he has time to wait for an attorney. Besides, he’s staging a jailbreak soon. The sooner he answers the detective’s questions, the faster he gets out.

“Deku,” the man addresses, placing a notepad and some sort of recording device on the table. “That’s what you go by, isn’t it?”

An enormous lump of anxiety rises to Izuku’s throat, but he crushes it mercilessly. There’s no time to panic, because if he panics, he’ll end up spilling his secrets, and then everyone around him will suffer because of his own incompetence.

That’s one thing that can’t happen.

Serenity; that’s what Izuku needs right now. He needs Ms. Yuko’s wise yet confident guidance and Watanuki’s quiet yet unquestionable authority. They’re always in control no matter what, their words always heeded, always one step ahead of everyone else.

And so Izuku calls upon all the energy he can muster, and with a deep exhale, he slams down a mask of calm over his features. Purple butterflies and silver dust burst from his skin in a great cloud of magic, swirling around his body in a helix of magic nobody but himself, Kero, and the fairies can see. The fairies shriek excitedly, dancing around the swirling magic, intertwining their own magic with Izuku’s gleefully.

That’s right – Izuku has allies here. He’s not alone.

“You can call me that if you want,” Izuku replies smoothly, the familiar crooning of his moon magic harmonizing with the ancient song of spatial magic, creating one smooth melody that plays through his mind. Shifting into a more relaxed but formal posture, Izuku offers a smile. “If ‘Deku’ is who you want me to be, then it’s who I’ll be.”

Kero stiffens, and when Izuku peers down inconspicuously, he can see the plush’s wide eyes staring at him. Izuku quirks the corner of his mouth up, then shifts his gaze back to the detective.

The detective’s eyebrows raise slightly, but he continues on with a nod. “Deku it is, then. I’ll be straightforward with you. Your vigilante status gives us enough reason to charge you, but if you can offer us any information as to the reason or source behind the recent chain of villain attacks, we’re willing to come to a compromise.”

Now isn’t that interesting. The police have put together some sort of pattern regarding the Sakura Cards.

With a click of his tongue, Izuku taps his knuckles on the metal table. “Hang on a moment. I’ve given you my name; it’s only polite that you give me yours.”

The man seems taken aback for a short second, but continues on smoothly. He appears to be looking at Izuku in a new light, his features ever so slightly more guarded. “I’m under no obligation to give
you my name.”

Rude human, the fairies hiss, baring their predatory teeth, some of them settling on Izuku’s shoulders, their coloured skin bubbling with magic barely kept under their tiny forms.

“Don’t get riled up.” It’s a message to everyone in the room. Chuckling, Izuku gestures to himself. “I told you: I’m Deku. Is that who I really am? Maybe; maybe not.” Leaning back as best he can while being cuffed to the table, he smiles. “Come on, now. Any name will do. Just give me something to call you by, unless you happen to want me to address you as Anonymous Plain Detective Man.”

Something flickers past the detective’s eyes. It’s either irritation or amusement, or maybe both. “In that case, you can call me Detective Tsukauchi.”

It feels as if a stone has been thrown into a calm pond. Something in Izuku’s mind ripples outward, a wave of new knowledge dancing on a glassy surface of tranquility.

The power of a name.

“Detective Tsukauchi,” Izuku repeats, testing the name on his tongue. It’s unfamiliar, and yet so heavy. “It’s a pleasure to be here.”

Tsukauchi ignores Izuku’s sarcastic statement. Professionals and their professional uptightness.

“Returning to the question: do you know anything about the villain attacks?”

“You’re under the assumption that I know anything to begin with,” Izuku says, shaking his head. “I understand why you arrested me – after all, under your definitions, I’m acting outside of the law – but what makes you think I can give you any satisfactory answers?”

A single eyebrow quirks up, and the detective shuffles through a folder, placing some photos on the table. In each of them, either Shadow, Watery, or Fly can be seen generally causing mayhem, and Izuku is right there as well, wielding his staff or commanding his cards. “Every situation you’ve been involved in involves a rampaging villain. From the footage of these incidents, you seem to trap the villains in some sort of cards and use their power in subsequent accidents.”

Hmm. That does look bad, doesn’t it?

“And yet you’re asking me if I know anything about the attacks,” Izuku replies, cocking his head. “Which means that you don’t think I’m the one instigating them.”

With a single nod, the detective gestures to a photo of Izuku standing on a sandy beach, in the middle of sealing Watery. “These fake villain attacks, as we’ve been calling them, are likely the product of another villain. These so-called villains that you’ve been sealing don’t appear to be human beings, but creations of some sort.”

Izuku almost bursts out laughing at the sheer accuracy of the statement. Tsukauchi’s words are spaced evenly and paced slowly, as if he’s explaining something that he doesn’t expect Izuku to already know.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” is all Izuku says, without elaborating.

The detective’s eyes narrow. “What do you mean?”

Leaning forward, Izuku looks Tsukauchi dead in the eye and smiles. The fairies that hover beside him mirror his smile, all pointed teeth and condescension. “I mean that it’s interesting how you’re so close to the answer, and yet so far away.”
A clear heaviness falls upon the room as Izuku’s words leave his mouth. The detective frowns and sits up straighter while Izuku smiles innocently, Kero glances upward nervously, and the fairies shake with laughter.

“You know something,” the detective says after a moment of silence, a grim sort of disapproval in his voice.

Letting out an amused huff, Izuku crosses his legs over each other. “I know many things, Detective Tsukauchi. You’ll have to be more specific.”

The detective takes a moment to look down at his notes, and then to the pictures. He seems mildly irritated. “Then let’s start from the very beginning. What sort of quirk do you have?”

Oh, that’s rich.

Laughing boisterously, Izuku allows his head to drop as his body shakes. Of course his magic would be seen as a fanciful quirk; after all, isn’t that how this society works? The strong, the capable, the awe-inspiring – they all have quirks of some sort. Just as there are no quirkless heroes, there are no quirkless vigilantes.

“Oh, that’s a million-dollar question,” Izuku chuckles out after his fit of laughter has passed. A purple butterfly lands on the back of his hand, and he claps down on the urge to laugh again. “Then allow me to answer with a million-dollar answer: I don’t have one.”

Crooning happily, the fairies press against his skin, their magic singing with wind and water and fire and earth, all-encompassing and powerful in ways incomprehensible by simple humans who can’t see past their own simplistic quirks. *You’re so wonderful, precious sparrow.* The fairies run their tiny fingers down his arms and through his hair as if he’s a treasure of some sort. *Quirks are a curse, gifts humans don’t deserve. Your magic is so pretty and splendid. Don’t listen to these foolish humans.*

The silence is enough to demonstrate Tsukauchi’s disbelief. There’s no discernible emotion on his face, but the tensing of his muscles is a clear enough message in and of itself.

Surprisingly, the detective continues on instead of asking for the supposed truth. “If that’s the case, then how is it possible for you to perform such massive feats?”

Izuku stares at the butterflies that flutter around his hands with an amused grin. There’s no use attempting to explain the absolute wonder and glory that is magic to a simple man. “You couldn’t possibly comprehend it. Some things are just out of your scope of understanding, Detective Tsukauchi.”

*So pitifully out of your scope,* the fairies chirp.

The next few minutes are comprised of Tsukauchi pressing about Izuku’s supposed lack of a quirk, what he means when he says magic, and if he’s working for someone else. To all the questions, Izuku calmly answers, “I waive my right to remain silent,” except for the last, to which he says, “No, of course not. There’s nobody for me to work in the first place.”

After a while, the detective decides to shift on to another set of questions. “You appear to have known that the attacks weren’t caused by individual villains. How did you know this?”

Well... maybe he can offer a little information. “Every so-called villain you’ve seen me turn into a card – well, I can’t do that with anything. The only things I can seal are those who fall under my duty, my role.”
“And what is this role?”

“To seal away the strange villains that you’ve correctly identified as fake villains,” Izuku explains, spreading his hands. He then pauses. Maybe some context is required. “This isn’t me declaring my self-imposed duty as a vigilante. I’m being very serious.”

Tsukauchi frowns deeply, scribbling down something on his notepad. “What do you mean by that?”

The best lies are those that aren’t truly lies at all, but in fact just a very obscure version of the truth. And so Izuku puts on his best game face and offers a brilliant smile. “Think about it this way. In every big spectacle I’ve gotten involved with, pro heroes have either always been on the scene first or intervene soon after my appearance.”

*But they’re so useless*, the fairies sneer, voices shrewd and condescending. *Stupid humans and their stupid quirks.*

“And despite the fact that the heroes have years upon years of experience over my three months of activity, I’m the only one who actually manages to take the fake villains down.” It’s difficult to prop his head up on his hand while being cuffed, so Izuku settles for leaning forward with a sardonic smile instead. “Ever wonder why that is?”

After a brief moment of hesitation, Tsukauchi says, “An exceptionally powerful quirk or benefactor could be helping you.”

Sighing, Izuku drops his smile. He’s just offered the detective the reason why he’s a vigilante, and the man’s still looking for excuses. “I’m a minor, Detective Tsukauchi. I have no reason to be working with someone else, especially if it puts me in danger.”

“And yet you’re willing to put yourself in danger to seal the fake villains,” the detective points out, unwavering. “Therefore, it stands to reason –”

“You’re not listening,” Izuku interrupts firmly, tapping a finger on the table impatiently. Silver dust bursts from his skin and hangs stagnant in the room, creating a pressure unseen to normal eyes. But it’s still felt all the same, and the detective’s words cut off immediately, and his eyes widen ever so slightly.

It’s incredibly difficult and frustrating to explain his situation to individuals as rigid as the officials. People like Mei and Satoshi are younger and more open-minded, having yet to form firm biases and worldviews, and as such, much more receptive to the magic that the general populous is blind to.

“I’ll put myself in danger, because if I don’t, people will get hurt,” Izuku explains, in the simplest way he knows how. “It’s impossible for anyone except for me to put a stop to the fake villain attacks, and the only way to put a stop to the fake villains is to seal them as I do.” Lifting his chin, Izuku stares directly into the detective’s eyes. “And because I’m the only one who has the ability to prevent harm from befalling innocents in these situations, I’ll throw myself in the line of fire.”

A resounding silence settles across the room. Familiar emotions such as disbelief, confusion, and suspicion flicker across the detective’s face, accompanied by others that Izuku can’t identify.

Excellent. Confusion is wonderful, because Izuku can take advantage of it.

With a sigh, Izuku allows some of the tension to drain out of his body. “How about this,” he begins, catching the detective’s attention once more. “If you don’t believe me, I’ll prove it to you. Bring me my cards, and I’ll prove that I’m telling the truth.”
"Tricky boy," one of fairies cackle. She stands on his shoulder, eyes glimmering red and hair a wild plume of flame. "You want to leave this place, don't you? How about I help you a bit, hmm? We'll talk payment later."

Izuku's eyes flicker to her for a moment. Her voice is so much clearer than the other fairies'. Perhaps she's one of the more powerful among the bunch.

Izuku's no fool. He'll take help when it's needed.

And so he looks down toward Kero, hoping the plush will understand his intent. Kero, being Kero, understands immediately. From his place on Izuku's lap, Kero nods his head toward the crimson fairy.

The fairy breaks into a sharp grin. "Excellent. I am yours to command until you leave this awful place. Call me Adara."

In a wisp of flame and ethereal laughter, Adara plunges and disappears into Izuku's chest. Kero barely keeps down a screech, tightening his grip around Izuku's shirt. The other fairies whisper to each other fervently. And yet Izuku is still calm, still in control. The fairies are on his side; they respect him because he's the only magician they have. If anything, they new warmth in his chest reminds him that he is more than capable of breaking free.

"I'm afraid we can't grant that request," Tsukauchi answers carefully. "Handing you your cards is akin to handing you a loaded gun."

Izuku grins. That's an accurate way of describing things. "Fair enough. Then do this instead: allow one of your colleagues to hold a card, and have them follow my instructions. Then, if you bring the card into this room – you don't have to let me touch it, besides, I'm cuffed to the table – I'll demonstrate how every one of my statements have been true."

It takes a moment for the detective to come to a decision, but eventually, he relents. "Those are acceptable terms." He then fixes Izuku with a warning look. "But if you choose to act out –"

"I gain nothing from doing that," Izuku lies. To make it more convincing, he tags on a sigh. "Please, just make this easier for both of us."

A minute passes, and a deep, rather tired voice comes in over the speaker. "What card should I choose?"

"Let's go with something you might be familiar with: the card labelled 'Shadow', please."

"You've probably seen and heard me do what I do." Leaning forward, Izuku says, "Repeat after me: Shadow, heed my call."

A short pause precedes the repetition. It's pretty awkward. "Shadow, heed my call."

And then there's silence. Izuku cocks his head. "So... did anything happen?"

"No," the voice answers, too flat and gruff to really identify any emotion from it.

Tsukauchi frowns, but opens the door for a scraggy-looking, long-haired man. He holds -- oh, nice -- he holds Shadow's card in one hand, and the rest in the other. There appear to be some sort of long bandages wrapped around his neck and shoulders, which Izuku guesses are probably weapons of
some sort.

It’s very likely that this man is a pro hero.

“Thanks for coming,” Izuku chirps, grinning. He’s met with a flat yet firm glare. Not the most receptive, huh?

“Don’t try anything funny,” the hero warns, stepping forward as Tsukauchi closes the door behind them. The hero raises Shadow’s card, muscles tense and ready to act on a moment’s notice.

“I know,” Izuku sighs. “Give me a second, will you?”

Detective Tsukauchi and the pro hero both stand cautiously, eyes tracing his every movement. It’s a shame, really, that all their hard work needs to go to waste.

Conjuring the inner flame that rests beside his heart, Izuku reaches inward and calls, “Adara!”

*That’s more like it. Let’s go, young magician!*

A furious fire blazes to life in Izuku’s eyes, and the serenity that so gently enveloped him is torn down, burnt to ashes in a great storm of energy and power and courage. With a firm tug of his wrists, the cuffs shatter into an explosion of flame, tickling at Izuku’s fingers.

This power – it’s not his, and unlike his spatial magic, it doesn’t want to be his, and yet here it is, coursing through his veins like molten lava, all heat and glorious victory.

*You think too much, magician,* Adara says from a place unseen. *Come – let’s free you from this miserable place!*

There’s action in the corner of his eye, but Izuku has no time to focus on it. Instead, he ducks under the table with a joyful laugh, thrusting the table up and into the ceiling. The hero moves, and Izuku takes the opportunity to bolt past the scraggy man as a whisper of flame, snatching his cards out of the meddling hero’s hands.

Oh. Well, that certainly worked well.

*Hero or not, no human can match up to a fairy and magician’s combined potential. Stay focused!*

Nodding, Izuku grabs the pendant that hangs around his neck. Just as he’s about to call for his escape, bandages pull taut around him, and the hero glares intently at him for some reason – ah. He’s trying to erase Izuku’s non-existent quirk.

So the pro hero is Eraserhead. That’s a thought for later.

The detective’s saying something, but Izuku has no more time to spare. It’s now or never. “Key that hides the hidden power of the moon, show your true form before me!” In a burst of silver dust and flickering flame, the Sealing Staff extends to his full length in his grasp. Immediately after, he follows with, “Sword, heed my call!”

As the staff shatters into Sword’s gleaming figure, bandages twist the blade out of Izuku’s grip. That would be problematic – well, without Adara, that is.

Cackling, Izuku-and-Adara lashes outward with whips of crimson fire. The restraints around Izuku-and-Adara loosen just a little, but it’s enough for a single controlled whip to snatch Sword up from the ground and back into Izuku-and-Adara’s hand.
A quick slash is all it takes for him to rend through his restraints. Eraserhead lunges, but Izuku’s already planned ahead. As much fighting experience as Izuku has from fending off Kacchan and bullies, there’s no way he can take down a pro hero in combat.

So when the gold-and-silver Lifestrings behind the hero drag in front of Izuku, Izuku grabs a fistful of the strings, and with one firm tug, the hero collapses to the ground, unconscious.

*Now that’s what I’m talking about!* Adara cheers, her brilliant flame dancing around Izuku’s wrists.

Giving the shocked detective one final grin, Izuku raises his newly captured card and Shadow to his lips. “Shadow, hold him down!”

Tendrils of darkness burst outward from Shadow’s card, pinning Tsukauchi to the ground. The scene is surreal, really: Eraserhead, incapacitated (by Izuku’s hand, no less), and a man who appears to be the lead detective in the Deku case, plastered against the floor and struggling against Shadow’s unforgiving grip. Kero’s death grip on his shirt and Adara’s lively laughter only add to the overall absurdity.

It’s truly a scene that Izuku will never be able to forget.

Offering one last wave, Izuku turns to face the wall of the room and raises Erase into the air. “Erase, heed my call! Under the name of your new master, Deku, erase the wall that stands before me!”

The wall blinks casually out of existence, as if the room never had four walls to begin with. The surgical precision with which the wall was removed is a little concerning, but no more concerning than the situation at hand.

“Thank you for your hospitality, but I’m afraid I’ll be taking my leave,” Izuku says to the detective, bowing from his waist. Kero shuffles out from his shirt, an enormous grin on his features. “The next time we meet, I hope it’ll be under better circumstances!”

Laughing as he calls the cards back to him, Izuku leaps into the brilliant cityscape beneath him. The fairies follow behind him, cheering and laughing joyously, with Adara laughing the loudest of them all. Fly’s wings burst from his staff in a flurry of silver dust and glowing feathers, lifting him into the cold winter night, far, far away from any officers who want to arrest him.

And into the night Izuku slips, Kero roaring with laughter at his side.

***

“Did... did you possess me?”

“Possession? Of course not. We respect magicians above all others. What we shared was a mutual contract. For a moment, your power belonged to me, and my power belonged to you.”

“And it was terminated? Our contract, I mean?”

“As soon as you left that building, yes. But I have to say, if you ever need my help again, don’t hesitate to call upon me. I’m sure we can build a very powerful friendship.”

“Okay. Sure. I’ll... do that. Then – goodbye, Adara.”

“Godspeed, Deku.”

***
[23:34] Watanuki:
I did warn you.

[23:36] Izuku:
I hate you so much.

[23:38] Watanuki:
Ha ha, of course you do.
In other news, you’re certainly a force to be reckoned with.
Small fish, making big waves in the ocean.

[23:42] Izuku:
My life has been chaotic to the point that I can’t even trust my own eyes anymore.
This all started after I met you.
I’d like you to know that.

[23:47] Watanuki:
That’s not surprising at all.
Everything great begins and ends in the shop.

[23:49] Izuku:
Would it kill you to be straightforward for once.

[23:52] Watanuki:
Who knows? I’ve never tried it!

[23:58] Izuku:
I am so, so close to muting you.

[23:59] Watanuki:
Now, don’t be hasty.
Besides, I come with a warning.
The fairies may be your friends, but they’re fair weather friends.
Spirits revere you as some sort of god, but fairies want you because of your power. Remember that.
They’ll offer you their power, but their goal isn’t to help you. It’s to make you theirs.
The further you stray from the human world, the further to walk into theirs.
If you aren’t careful, one day, they’ll lead you so deep you’ll never come back.
And we can’t have that! You’re my disciple, aren’t you?

[24:42] Watanuki:
You’re overthinking things. I can tell. My mentor senses are tingling.
Well, do your best, cardcaptor.
Sweet dreams.

***

“Greetings, guinea pig! It’s been an exciting week for you, hasn’t it?”

Izuku gives Mei a wary look as he steps into the workshop. “Um. Maybe. Why?”

With a worryingly knowing grin, Mei gestures at one of the many monitors. There’s some sort of document displayed on the screen, and it has an uncanny resemblance to a police report. That’s probably because it is one.
“Every time I see you, your arsenal increases!” It’s unfair, really, how Mei laughs so cheerfully while Izuku is tempted to run out into the street and throw himself in front of a car. Also, Mei’s complete disregard for the legal system is absolutely terrifying. “Did you really take down a pro hero – oh, Eraserhead, was it? That’s a poor matchup!”

“I tried to tell them I didn’t have a quirk,” Izuku mumbles, dropping down into a nearby chair with his face in his hands. “Of course they would call in Eraserhead; he’s a pro hero who can erase quirks. He was probably watching me behind the glass, keeping eye contact... but it didn’t work, and I have no idea what the police think now...”

“Ah, but I do,” Mei singsongs, sliding into the swiveling chair that sits in front of her incredible setup of monitors, screens, towers, and keyboards. ‘Look at this – ‘We suspect Deku to be affiliated with a criminal ring. His abilities surpass those of any known quirks; therefore, we have reason to suspect that he is a member of either the Eight Precepts of Death or Mary’s Hand, the former being the more likely of the two.’”

What? Wait, what?

“I said I wasn’t working with anyone,” Izuku screeches, dropping his head to the table. Why are the police so suspicious? He’s a minor, and he had no reason to lie. Maybe being so cocky wasn’t a good idea, but if he went into that interrogation as he normally is, there’s no doubt he’d still be in that police station.

Then again, he did toss a metal table into the ceiling. He may have also looked a little like a pyromaniac.

Laughing, Mei throws another image onto the screen with a simple swipe. “The officials are so uptight. Even when you said you were working solo, they brushed it aside!”

Oh. That’s the transcript of the interrogation, typed up in neat, immaculate letters. Izuku decides to look away before he has a mental breakdown.

“Well, don’t worry about it,” Mei hums, sliding over to a workbench. Her eyes sparkle with amusement. “The police have no leads, and everything they have about you is hypothetical. Let’s just leave it be and move on!”

“I’m a fugitive of the law,” Izuku says miserably, wondering how his life went so wrong.

Thankfully, Mei doesn’t press any further, instead choosing to return to whatever invention of hers has taken her attention away from the conversation. For a solid fifteen minutes, she tinkers intently at the strange contraption in front of her, goggles flipped downward, tools in hand.

It should be sort of insulting, being completely and utterly ignored by someone who demanded that he come visit, but it’s not. If anything, Izuku’s immensely thankful that he has some time to collect his thoughts.

Now that Izuku thinks rationally about the police report, it doesn’t seem that outrageous. Although all the information he gave was true, he did follow up by taking out two officials and escaping by jumping out an Erased wall. The officers probably came to the very reasonable conclusion that he was either lying or bending the truth, and Izuku can’t blame them.

His involvement in the hospital incident could be seen as internal conflict if he was truly a member of the Precepts, but other than that, there’s no reason to think he’s working for another group. Besides, Mary’s Hand? That’s a name Izuku’s unfamiliar with. Maybe they’re an underground organization,
“Huh?” Spinning around, Mei’s eyes land on Izuku. In one hand, she holds a screwdriver, and in the other, a handful of screws. She blinks curiously as Izuku startles out of his thoughts. “Why are you here again?”

“Something about an outfit,” Izuku reminds helpfully.

Mei does this horrifying thing where she speedwalks toward Izuku, her body tilted forward, wedging herself deep into Izuku’s personal space. A borderline manic look gleams in her scope-like eyes, and Izuku finds himself fearing for his life.

“Of course!” With a mad scientist-worthy laugh, the inventor ducks behind a stack of cardboard boxes. She stands, holding a large, heavy-looking briefcase in her calloused hands, all smooth edges and metal. “We finished your costume! It’s an absolute marvel!” Thrusting the case at Izuku with one sharp motion, Mei fidgets eagerly. “Try it on, and we’ll see how it looks!”

Izuku doesn’t really have a choice, because Mei hounds him into the bathroom and slams the door shut behind him.

And wow, that’s a lot of green.

Based on what Izuku can recall from Sasha’s original draft, not much has changed. There’s a green jumpsuit ending in puffy shorts, sports leggings to go underneath, a thick shawl, and a bunny-ear hood. And, just as promised, a glossy silver visor lays on top of it all.

As Izuku pulls the costume on, he pauses. Why is he doing this again? Right – he needs a costume to protect both himself and his identity. It’s sort of a miracle that he isn’t hyperventilating over the sink right now.

Stepping shyly out of the washroom, Izuku inches quietly into the room. He clearly isn’t quiet enough, because Mei perks up sharply and spins around, a terrifyingly wide smile on her face. And, as Mei does, she proceeds to throws her hands all over Izuku’s body, feeling eagerly. Izuku holds his breath resolutely, looking anywhere but at the inventor.

“Excellent, excellent!” Cackling, Mei tugs at the outfit in every direction, presumably feeling out her creation. It’s unclear who exactly Mei’s talking to. “A perfect fit; not too tight as to be awkward but not too loose as to tear easily. The fabric should be durable enough to keep its form within a certain temperature threshold – oh, friction’s a different story though, so try to avoid falling off motorcycles if you can.”

“I’ll try.”

Mei continues rambling, running her hand over the stitching on the sleeves and the cloak. “Just so you know, the cloak comes off pretty easily when you apply a sufficient amount of force! It would be so horrible if a hero caught you by the cape, wouldn’t it?”

“It would.”

“And gloves! Of course; we made gloves for you as well. They should add a nice grip, especially since you use a staff. Plus, fingerprints are bad!”

“They are.”

“The design, as you can probably tell, is inspired by the classic magical girl look! With the hood and
visor on, you’ll be like a moon rabbit – cute, and totally out of this world!”

“I see.”

“And –” Pausing for a breath, Mei glances at Izuku, eyes narrowed. “Are you listening?”

“I am,” Izuku replies honestly. It’s so, so, so relieving, to have someone who can provide unconditional support.

It takes a while for Mei to go through all the features of the suit. Through it, Izuku listens attentively, careful to take mental notes. This is his uniform of sorts now, the outfit that will protect him from harm while screaming his name to the world. Deku won’t just be a faceless vigilante anymore – he’ll be the green moon rabbit that does his best to protect the innocents and oh my god, *his life is a waking nightmare.*

Eventually, Mei lets him go on his way, but not before gripping Izuku’s hands tightly, looking firmly into his eyes, and saying, “Take care of my babies, okay?”

Izuku nods, a sinking feeling in his gut. He desperately hopes Mei won’t kill him when he damages the suit, because it’s bound to happen.

At least he’ll look cool while he’s doing it. Right?

***

“Kero, have I done something horribly wrong? Am I the reincarnation of a serial killer?”

“You – uh, no, I don’t think so. Are you okay?”

“I’m absolutely wonderful. It’s just – after a certain period of time, you have to ask yourself, *what am I doing with my life? Was I born under an unlucky star? Have I wronged the gods?*”

“Izuku –”

“What sort of events lead up to pulling off a heist in *the biggest museum in Japan,* Kero? What sort of life am I living if I’m literally breaking into the nation’s most famous museum to steal – to steal a pair of scales? Aren’t you curious? *I sure as hell am.*”

The look Kero gives him is a very strange one, stuck somewhere between flatness, worry, and exhaustion. “I’m sure we’ll have time to answer those questions after we get out of here. As cool as you look right now, I really don’t think getting arrested for the second time in a week’s a good idea.”

Kero’s right. That’s a very reasonable thing to say, and Izuku should take that into account before he gives up completely and waits in fetal position until someone takes him into custody.

“I’m not the hero this city needs, and I’m sure as hell not the one it deserves,” Izuku laments miserably.

And so, after a good fifteen-minute anxiety attack slash Batman brooding session, Izuku leaps off the roof of the Musutafu History Museum, melting into the shadows of the city before him.

Izuku isn’t too sure when he’ll ever need to use a card like Libra, but he’s hoping that he doesn’t need to find out, and honestly, that’s enough about the situation said.

***
Alison Neve @allisoneve
Can we talk about Deku’s awesome new outfit? Not sure who designed it, but they’re a goddamn genius.

Big Cronch @feelthecronch
If you want to revamp society you gotta look sick and cute af while you’re doing it I’m sorry if you don’t have a Spiderman contraption closet to hide outfits in it’s just a rule #Deku

takao yuya @uuuuuuu
when you can’t decide between vigilante or phantom thief so you go for both #Deku

fritty pits @peachfuzzies
is anyone amazed at how ellusive Deku is bc i sure as hell am like how tf do u stay active for so long without getting arrested

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
Repeating to @peachfuzzies
Actually, let me tell you an interesting story about a certain vigilante who just so happened to be quietly taken in for questioning: 1/12

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
IF Y’ALL WANT SOME JUICY LEAKED POLICE FILES ABOUT DEKU GO READ @AYUMI’S THREAD HOLY SHIT

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
The absolutely amazing Reddit user philosoapopera uploaded a transcript of the interrogation, if you want to laugh and police incompetence or an absolutely badass vigilante who’s apparently a minor go check it out!!

julia @maldonuts
I don’t understand why the police think Deku’s part of a criminal organization. There’s a difference between villain, mafia, and vigilante, and apparently the officials don’t understand.

kitchen nuggets @givetheboynugs
Watching Deku tear apart the now overtly clear delicacy of the pro hero system is like watching someone crash a train into a station w/ Deku as the conductor but nobody gets hurt and you can bet people are gonna notice the wreckage

***

For some reason, Izuku’s phone is going off incessantly. Satoshi’s yelling something about Twitter and trending and leaked information, and Izuku wants none of it. Sometime around one in the morning, Kero yells at him to either mute Satoshi or turn off his phone.

Izuku turns his phone off and goes to sleep.

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“...Who the hell is this?”

“Deku; a vigilante who’s hit it big with the media recently. He’s responsible for putting an end to the Bird, Water, and Shadow villains. Apparently, he was taken into custody and questioned by the officials, but he managed to escape and leave some particularly interesting words.”
“He’s quirkless? That’s stupid. He’s obviously lying.”

“Evidently. What do you think his quirk is?”

“I don’t care. He’s annoying, he’s messing up our plans, and if this continues, I’m going to kill him.”

“Now, hang on a moment. Shouldn’t we ask Sensei before acting? Perhaps Deku has a unique quirk that we can use. Or, perchance, he might have more than one quirk. There is a good chance that we may be able to recruit him to our side. If not, then we can always take his quirk.”

“Fine. Stupid vigilantes, doing whatever the hell they want. Stupid NPCs, all of them.”

***

Christmas is a time of year that Izuku thoroughly enjoys. There’s certainly nothing wrong with receiving gifts – no, that’s a wonderful thing that makes Izuku cry without fail every single year – but the one thing that Izuku loves more than anything is the Christmas Parade.

“Who’re you going to be walking with this year, Izuku?”

Dropping down from the ledge of the float, Izuku grabs a long string of red tinsel from the supplies box. Satoshi passes him some more tape and string. With a solid heave, Izuku pushes himself onto the float again, tying the tinsel to the metal arc securely. “I’m not sure yet. A lot of people have been asking me, but I don’t know who to go with. What about you?”

Satoshi hums contemplatively. “Well, I’m probably going with Zing. She’s the only one who’ll let me do fire twirlies.”

Izuku frowns. That sounds very dangerous, and knowing Satoshi, it’ll probably end with him lighting the float on fire. Whether it’ll happen purposely or not is a very complicated question. “Satoshi, no.”

Satoshi fixes Izuku with a worrying wide smile and eyes that promise chaos. “Satoshi, yes.”

“I’m not sure it’s about fire twirlies. Not... fire twirlies.”

Everything can be about fire twirlies if you try hard enough. Now, hurry up and finish with the tinsel so we can check out the cooler floats!”

“It would be faster if we both – hey, wait!”

Izuku watches helplessly as Satoshi weaves his way through the crowd of float-decorators. Being a free spirit is nice and all, but not when you have to help decorate fifty parade floats.

Taking the opportunity, Kero peeks his head out of Izuku’s hood when nobody’s looking. The plush’s head swivels around as he takes in the incredible sight of hundreds of people working on giant, immaculate parade floats. “So, this is for a big parade or something?”

With a sigh, Izuku grabs the box of decorations and throws it onto the float, pulling himself up shortly after. “Yeah. They’re all for the annual Christmas Parade. It’s a charity event that’s a really big deal in Musutafu – well, in our prefecture in general. People come from all around to see the parade, which is why we’re putting so much time into it.”

Apparently Kero’s gotten pretty good at reading Izuku’s expression, because the plush’s face falls flat and he gives Izuku an expecting look. “Is that all?”
“...We may have this fun little thing called the Christmas Curse,” Izuku admits, because he’s terrible at lying, and Kero knows it.

“The Christmas Curse?”

“Every year, something really weird and inexplicable happens at the parade.” Finishing off with the last of the tinsel, Izuku sighs and hops off the float, waving to the owners. They cheerfully thank him and tell him to visit their shop more often. “It’s – it’s very newsworthy and attention-catching, most of the time.”

Kero’s brow furrows, as if he doesn’t understand. Izuku doesn’t blame him. “Wait, so, like a flash mob or something?”

Oh, if only. With a nervous laugh, Izuku makes his way through the crowd of float-decorators, returning greetings when they’re given. “Not exactly. Most of the time, they’re completely unplanned. Things just... happen.”

“Things like...?”

“Like a massive villain attack that just so happened to be countered by an enormous defensive hero force on the rooftops above the parade,” replies Izuku. “People thought it was a really cool show until the police released a statement on it a day later.”

“Oh.”

“Or the time someone’s quirk went haywire and all the floats started – well, the floats started floating. It only lasted fifteen minutes, but it was enough for the carollers to start and finish a song with parts based on their respective float heights.”

“Okay.”

“Last year, one of the biggest floats caught fire, and the marchers ended up toasting marshmallows around it. They gave smores out. Nobody got hurt, and they could’ve put the fire out, but they didn’t because it looked cool. Personally, I think it sort of looked like Santa decided to pursue arson as a viable career.”

“I... I see.”

Izuku nods to a group of ice spirits huddled around a group of ice-carvers as he makes his way through the crowd. The spirits wave back happily, then return to watching the ice-carvers raise and crack at blocks of crystalline ice with their quirks.

It’s sort of weird how spirits accept quirks so readily, but fairies hate them. Perhaps it has something to do with the history of both groups’ interactions with the human world. Izuku isn’t sure, and he doesn’t want to prod at that dangerous bundle of information.

After a good half hour of searching, Izuku decides that looking for Satoshi is a lost cause. Just as he’s turning around to walk home, the chime of his phone rings cheerfully. Kero peeks his head over Izuku’s shoulder to look at the text.

[13:22] Plume:
Time to pay back your favour.
“I really expected something more intense than this,” Kero huffs, his brow furrowed.

“Honestly, me too,” Izuku mumbles, pulling his shawl tighter over his shoulders. Thank god Mei accounted for the upcoming winter months while making his costume, because running around in a thin jumpsuit in this kind of weather would’ve killed him faster than his lack of self-preservation.

Currently, Izuku stands atop a building overlooking the main street of the parade. The lights are dimmed in preparation for the brilliant chain of floats that Izuku knows very well are soon to come, and he’s really not complaining. His new outfit is bound to throw the patrolling heroes off – in fact, some of them might even mistake him for one of them.

A cover of darkness and a mistaken identity that works in his favour. It really is a Christmas miracle.

Shuffling to dangle his legs off the roof of the building, Izuku sighs. “I don’t know why Plume chose this sort of thing for me to do. He could’ve requested so much more.”

“Maybe it’s for someone else,” Kero says, a contemplative expression over his face. “He doesn’t seem like the sort of guy to really go out of his way to come to these events, so maybe he’s asking you to do it to make someone else happy.”

That’s... not a bad guess. Plume does seem, for lack of a better description, sort of emotionally stunted. Despite how tough he appears, there’s clearly something underneath that rough exterior.

But really – *Make the Christmas Parade something that everybody in the city will remember more than anything else.* That’s an enormous request, not necessarily dangerous or life-threatening, but nearly impossible to pull off. The Christmas Curse makes it so every year has some sort of crazy spectacle that the city’s sure to talk about for a week. What sort of next-level stunt does Izuku need to pull to satisfy Plume’s infuriatingly vague request?

*You have a visitor,* Ms. Yuko’s voice informs.

Turning, Izuku finds himself face-to-face with the very group of ice spirits he saw at the float-decorating frenzy a few days back. He narrowly avoids flipping off the building.

“Hello, Deku.” The three white-haired women bow their heads deeply, the sleeves of their kimonos frosted over in spider web patterns and skin ghostly pale. “The Shopkeeper told us you required our assistance.”

Goddammit, Watanuki.

Putting on the most genuine smile he can, Izuku nods his head, standing. “Um, thank you. If you don’t mind me asking, what sort of spirits are you?”

“We are yuki-onna, the women of the snow,” one of the spirits explains, raising her head. Her eyes are glassy, almost like marbles. “We are more than willing to help you with whatever you may need, master magician.”

Oh, hang on. Yuki-onna, as in the demons of the snow that kill people who get lost in snowstorms? *Those* yuki-onna?

Kero frowns, clearly on the same wavelength. “Aren’t yuki-onna sort of murderous? Like, eat-your-liver murderous?”

The women shrug. “In the days of old, perhaps. But the times have changed, and humans no longer fear us as they once did. We have changed.”
“I see,” is all Izuku can say. It’s still weird as hell, but it’s nice to know that his liver won’t be eaten. Kero still looks hesitant, but Izuku needs a game plan, and he needs one soon, because the festive music of the parade has already begun.

So he needs to make a spectacle so memorable that it’ll beat out all other Christmas Curses, does he?

Taking a deep breath, Izuku turns to face the unsuspecting crowd below him.

It’s time to make good use of the attention the media’s been giving him.

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TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
BREAKING: DEKU IS THIS YEAR’S CHRISTMAS CURSE

festive koropo @korokoro
Replying to @thebiggestofall
I think u mean christmas miracle

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
For a surprisingly high-quality video of Deku’s latest escapade, look no further than Reddit user philosoapopera! Go check it out!

tsuki @tsukiart
holy shit is Deku just put every single christmas curse to shame did u see those flower fireworks how is that even possible

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Our boy has progressed from saving people when he’s needed to actively going out of his way to make this city a happier place, I’m so proud

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Heaving deep breaths, Izuku hides in the most obscure alleyway he knows around these parts, holding the wall for support. Next to him, Kero pants while the yuki-onna wait patiently.

“We pulled it off,” Izuku wheezes, trying to keep his legs from collapsing underneath him. “We – we managed to replicate a full-on Fantasmic show. Oh my god. I didn’t know that yuki-onna could cast illusions. I didn’t know that yuki-onna could make sentient ice monsters.”

The ice spirits laugh good-naturedly. “It is an ability that we’re quite proud of. By ourselves, we are not much, but with the guidance of our brethren and an incredible magician like you, we are able to demonstrate the full extent of our abilities.”

No kidding. It started off simple, with a simple shower of flowers from the sky. Then it escalated into making enormous, sentient ice sculptures with the help of Watery and some convenient freezing and enchanting. Kero came in sometime after that, zipping around the area to recruit spirits to keep the patrolling heroes at bay. And then it become a pseudo-battle between the ice monsters Izuku inadvertently created, too many illusions for Izuku to feel comfortable about, and Izuku himself, wielding nothing but Sword and whatever other card he deemed appropriate to take down the Disney ice villains. He’s pretty sure he used almost every card he has at his disposal.

And to end it all off was a shower of crystalline water droplets and flower petals, followed by a declaration that Izuku knows will come to bite him sooner or later.
From your friendly neighbourhood vigilante, Deku: Merry Christmas, and Happy New Year!

Izuku draws in a deep breath. It’s really about time he went home. Turning to the yuki-onna, he nods firmly. “Thank you for all your hard work. I really appreciate it.”

“It has been an honour to serve you,” the yuki-onna reply, bowing deeply. “If you should ever need us again, do not hesitate to reach out.”

In a freezing gale of snow, the three spirits disappear, leaving nothing but a thin sheet of frost where they once stood.

Kero slumps against Izuku’s shoulder, weariness painted all over his features. It’s an expression Izuku’s been seeing very often. “Can we go home now?”

If Izuku’s life has come to the point where Kero can’t even keep up anymore, then he really doesn’t want to know what comes next.

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[22:45] Izuku:
We’re done.

Whoever this was for, I hope they’re happy with the results.

Stay safe.

Chapter End Notes

three cards in one chapter, and yet none of them get the spotlight. in some chapters, i'll be focusing less on the cardcaptor side and more on the "oh shit, i'm a vigilante" side, especially as izuku continues to grow as a person.

an outfit. finally. izuku's truly a magical girl now. mei is delighted, because she recognizes this fact and is very excited as to what other articles of clothing she can force izuku into.

i'm slowly introducing the villains of the series. will they be threatening? yes. will izuku suffer? always. and to be specific, the yakuza izuku faced off with weren't actually the top tier of the Precepts. but it's good to toss in a few names that'll come into play soon.

izuku: okay, if the police ever catch me, i have to make a good impression, i'm doing this to protect people, i can't antagonize myself

also izuku: [kicks a metal table into the ceiling] fuck the police

as always, thanks for reading!
Any hope of having a peaceful New Year is dashed when Izuku steps through the door of the Wish-Granting shop and sees Watanuki’s splitting grin.

“Oh no,” is all Izuku can say, his fight-or-flight instinct activating immediately.

“Oh yes,” Watanuki laughs, rubbing his hands together excitedly. The twins – Maru and Moro, right, Watanuki introduced them over text yesterday, didn’t he – dance in happy circles around the Shopkeeper, laughing. It sort of looks cultish. “Do you know what tomorrow is, Deku?”

Izuku frowns. “New Year’s Eve.”

Watanuki’s happiness is an interesting break from his irritatingly knowing tone, but it’s such a dramatic shift that it’s just unnerving. “Yes! And do you know what that means, my apprentice?”

“I don’t like that smile on your face,” Izuku says warily, stepping back.

“It means it’s time to pay our respects to the god of doors and safe passage!” Smile unfaltering, Watanuki gestures to the mountain of shiny boxes behind him. There’s just about anything from immaculate red-and-gold cases to boxes of what appears to be instant ramen, and what? “Yorihiko is a good friend of mine, and he’s a very competent magus in his own right. You’ll find that he’s among the most powerful of spatial magic users in any world.”

That is way too much information to process all at once. “Wait,” Izuku interrupts helplessly, flailing his hands. “There’s a god, and he can use spatial magic, and he’s the god of – of doors? And safe passage? But, but – but he’s a – what was that word – oh, right, a magus, and –”
Wait. There’s one thing about Watanuki’s words that sounds like impending doom.

“What do you mean, ‘we’?”

It’s official. Watanuki is never allowed to be this happy, because his unabashed grin combined with his usual chaotic self is a recipe for disaster. “Why, you’re going in my place, of course. You should be honoured; not many people get an opportunity as wonderful as this.”

Izuku laughs nervously, because that’s all he can do in this surreal scenario. “Of course. Of course. I’m going to give a god some – some instant ramen. I’m sure he’ll love that.”

That’s a sentence Izuku never expected to say in his life.

“Gods are picky eaters,” Watanuki huffs, tapping the label on the cardboard box. “See? It’s a very specific brand from South Korea. It’s difficult to find because most people hate it, but Yorihiko won’t eat any other brand, so we’ll have to go with his positively monstrous taste.”

“I think that’s blasphemy,” Izuku says.

“Blasphemy is my middle name.” Turning to Izuku with his escort of creepily smiling twins and an equally as creepy smile on his own face, he claps his hands together and steps forward. “Now, my apprentice, this is your first task under my name. Your job is to deliver all these gifts to Yorihiko at his local shrine. Do you know where it is?”

“I can’t say I know where any gods’ shrines are,” Izuku says miserably.

“Perhaps not by name,” Watanuki interjects. “Yorihiko is a name not many know. How many shrines do you know in your city, Deku?”

A lot, actually. Years of exploring the city have led to some very interesting discoveries, including a surprising number of small yet eloquent shrines, hidden away in obscure corners or tucked in the older districts of the city.

If all of them happen to house gods, then Izuku really doesn’t know what to think anymore.

“I know some,” is what Izuku decides to reply, because for all he knows, his life is a poorly scripted sitcom that only masochists could enjoy.

“Some is better than none.” With a snap of his fingers, Watanuki summons an enormous map of Musutafu from god knows where. It floats down onto the ground, spreading out evenly and flatly. Maru and Moro lunge at it immediately with markers, drawing neat little bubbles so quickly and so perfectly that it’s actually sort of terrifying.

“Those... are all the shrines in the city.” Izuku feels the beginning of a headache pound at his skull. “Maru and Moro somehow know where all the shrines in the city are.”

“They know everything I know,” Watanuki says, which explains absolutely nothing at all and adds another item onto the list of Things Izuku Really Didn’t Need to Know. Then, looking over the map, the Shopkeeper points at one specific red circle. “This is Yorihiko’s shrine. Have you been there?”

Heaving a deep sigh, Izuku pinches the bridge of his nose. There’s no use trying to reason with Watanuki. The best thing to do is to just go with the flow of chaos and take care of problems as they arise. “West side of Musutafu, near the old park. Decently sized shrine along a residential road, has two willow trees and a tiny pond.”
Watanuki nods as Izuku speaks. “Yes, yes. Then you’ve been there before, have you?”

“A few times. One of my neighbours – Ms. Kino – has me send flowers there every month.” It’s a sweet gesture that Izuku thought was just the act of an elderly woman supporting a local shrine, but now that – now that a god apparently lives there, it’s a lot weirder.

There’s a strange expression on Watanuki’s face; something between surprise and amusement. “Is that so? What sort of flowers?”

“Magnolias,” Izuku answers, somewhat hesitant. By now, he knows that there’s no such thing as a meaningless question when it comes to Watanuki. And he’s clearly right, because the Shopkeeper laughs.

“So there are people who still remember the old gods,” Watanuki chuckles, raising a hand to his lips. “This Ms. Kino of yours is a wise woman. She’ll live a safe and pleasant life until the end of her days no matter what, because Yorihiko’s a stubborn god.”

“Okay,” is Izuku’s intelligent reply. Talking openly about the inevitable mortality of humans is sort of disturbing, so he moves on. “So, like, are the other circles also god-houses, or...”

Watanuki smiles that infuriatingly knowing smile of his, cocking his head to the side innocently. Izuku’s very tempted to clock him. “Who knows? Maybe, maybe not.”

“Can you please be straightforward for once,” Izuku asks flatly.

“There’s no fun in that,” replies Watanuki.

For a solid minute, Izuku and Watanuki stare each other down. Izuku only averts his gaze because he knows he’s fighting a losing battle.

“If this Yorihiko smites me I will be very upset,” Izuku grits out through clenched teeth, forcing himself to move toward the mountain of boxes.

Watanuki shrugs, smile unfaltering. “We’ll all be, won’t we?”

Izuku throws back the flattest and most monotone expression he can muster. Apparently there’s something funny with imagining his inevitable demise by divine punishment, because Maru and Moro start laughing, which spurs on Watanuki to start laughing as well.

Before he can start smashing his head on the nearest wall he can find, Izuku buries his face in his hands. His life is one big joke. “Just send me and these unwanted parcels home.”

“Will do,” Watanuki chuckles, sweeping his hand across the room. “Good luck, Deku.”

And with one stomach-dropping moment of dark weightlessness, Izuku finds himself in his room, standing in front of an imposing tower of sacrifices to a local god.

Kero jolts up from the DS stationed in front of him, his eyes wide as he stares at the boxes. Hesitantly, he asks, “Are... are those presents?”

“Sacrifices,” Izuku corrects.

Kero stares vacantly. “To what?”

“Yorihiko, the god of doors and safe passage, who lives about a half-hour bus ride away from here,” Izuku answers.
Kero’s silent for a while. Then, with a blank look: “I used to think you were just really dramatic, but this past month has been the closest to a literal hell on Earth I’ve ever seen, so if you want to curl up on your bed in fetal position and cry a little, I’ll understand.”

It’s official. Kero is the best friend-slash-guardian to ever exist.

(Izuku does, in fact, curl up on his bed and cry a little, because he now knows that gods are real, which just further validates the theory that he’s been cursed by higher powers to never be able to live out a peaceful life.)

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“So here’s how it’s going to go,” Izuku says, setting down the last of the presents into a neat stack. “I talked with a few of the spirits, and they agreed to help me carry some of the bigger boxes.”

Eyes intently following the strange stag creature that stands by Izuku’s side, Kero frowns deeply. “Yeah, I can see that.”

The stag bows its head. Rusted coins that Izuku doesn’t recognize clink together, yet the strings never once tangle, glowing with a mysterious aura Izuku doesn’t recognize. Behind the stag, a small group of spirits trot, whispering fervently amongst themselves. “It is an honour to be of service to you, master magician.”

Even without his enhanced senses, Izuku can tell that this spirit is no pushover. There’s something about it that’s different from the yuki-onna and the fairies, something darker, older, and more dangerous. Its magic smells of soil and wet rock and rust, echoing out deep, thrumming beats that travel through the earth and reach outward to the furthest corners of the world, always present, always seeing.

It’s probably a good thing that the stag’s on Izuku’s side.

“I’m sorry to use you as a pack mule,” Izuku apologizes, shifting some of the larger boxes onto the stag’s back. The spirit bows down to accept the load. “You’re meant for greater tasks than this.”

“Nonsense,” the stag echoes, a somewhat amused tone to its voice. “Delivering gifts to one of the many revered gods who make their home in Musutafu is an honour.”

“Many,” Kero mouths, shaking his head in disbelief. Izuku doesn’t blame him.

Despite everything, Izuku feels sort of bad when he looks at the unbelievable stack of boxes that lie atop the stag’s back. It doesn’t seem physically possible for a stag of that size to carry so much, but that doesn’t even come close to making the list of Things That Izuku Has Witnessed But Will Never Acknowledge, so he moves to pack as many of the smaller parcels into his own bag as possible. Kero hovers over his shoulder, carrying a small bag of his own, while the smaller spirits pick up packages of their own, eyeing them curiously.

The trip is rather loud. As usual, the strange parade of spirits slowly molds into existence, a trail of colours and whispers that Izuku doesn’t ever think he’ll be truly used to.

Izuku holds back a flinch when something tugs at his pants. Looking down, he blinks as his eyes meet glassy, drowned-fish eyes. That’s a face Izuku remembers.

“Hi, magician,” the drowned child spirit greets, a disturbing smile on her pale, dead features. She holds a red box on her hands and her steps are uneven. “It’s really nice to meet you. Do you remember me? I talked to you a little while ago.”
Putting on a hesitant smile, Izuku nods sharply. “I – I remember you.”

With an excited (and inhuman, oh god, like the cries of the damned) squeal, the drowned spirit sways, and *wow* is that unnatural and creepy on so many levels. “That’s great! I’m a new spirit, and all I’ve been hearing for the past twenty years is all this talk about the coming of a magician, and that’s super exciting, you know? It’s boring now that humans have quirks, so having someone who can actually see and make use of us is just amazing!”

Izuku’s not quite sure how he feels about – well, any of that.

A few of the other spirits waddle up beside the drowned child, appearing just as excited. “The first coming of a magician in hundreds of years, and he smells like old magic!” They laugh gleefully, prancing around in little circles a bit too rhythmically for Izuku’s liking.

Kero looks at the spirits, then at Izuku. His expression is carefully blank. “I think you smell fine,” he offers.

“Thanks,” Izuku says miserably, because this is so very much out of his scope of understanding.

It’s strange, really. Spirits clearly exist, and yet nobody seems to be aware of them. But the way they talk as if they’re longing for times of old implies that there once was a time where humans could see spirits, where they coexisted, where magicians consisted of more than just Izuku.

How long ago was that time?

(Do any other magicians exist in this world, or is it just Izuku?)

“Here we are,” Kero interrupts after a while, startling Izuku out of his thoughts.

In front of them stands a small stone shrine, decorated with little ornaments and bright red flags. A few peaches and mandarins in a red bowl lie on a stone step in front of the shrine, untouched and frosted over.

Izuku has been here so many times before, and yet he’s never once noticed the invisible pressure that presses down on his body and mind, thrumming through his skin like a gentle hum, tingling his toes and fingertips with a soft warmth. It’s surprisingly comforting, like huddling under a heavy blanket in the middle of winter, which is just so weird and wrong given the fact that this inconspicuous temple is apparently a god’s house.

“This is as far as we may proceed,” the stag hums, its eyes cloudy. “Only those invited may enter a god’s domain.” Then, with a strange sort of misplaced mirth, the spirit bows its head to Izuku.

“Godspeed, magician.”

“Godspeed, magician!” the rest of the spirits echo, all laughter and glee.

When Izuku blinks, the crowd of spirits is gone, leaving behind only an imposing stack of gifts and an eerie silence.

Izuku takes a deep breath. And then he takes another, and another. Kero pats his back supportively.

With a heavy sigh, Izuku drags a hand down his face. “Let’s... let’s just get rid of this load, and then we can go home and. I don’t know. Sleep?”

“Sleep sounds good,” Kero agrees.
And so Izuku stands in front of the small stone shrine, feeling very small and very confused. After a beat of hesitation, he clears his throat. “Um – Yorihiko, god of doors and safe passage, I’m here as the Shopkeeper’s representative. These items are gifts on his behalf.”

A sweeping silence billows over the shrine.

Great. Izuku desperately hopes nobody saw him, because oh boy this is awkward.

“Hey, Yorihiko,” Kero calls, knocking on the door of the shrine. It’s a very proactive method of getting a supposed god’s attention, and for a moment, Izuku’s terrified that Kero has just offered himself up to be smited. “You in? We’re here for a delivery. The Shopkeeper sent us, so if you’d let us in or something, that’d be nice.”

Izuku turns to face Kero. “Let us in where?”

Kero blinks, then gestures to the shrine. “His shrine.”

Izuku eyes the shrine that stands in front of them. It’s about the same height as him. “I think you’re pushing it.”

“You don’t even know,” Kero replies flatly. He’s right; Izuku’s probably better off not knowing.

A sudden snap startles both Izuku and Kero, and Izuku yelps when a something unseen brushes past his arm.

The Shopkeeper? You’re his new attendants?

Kero freezes and his eyes grow to the size of dish plates. Izuku stands there and desperately wishes that magical beings would stop trying to communicate with him telepathically, because he already has two voices in his head to worry about – namely Ms. Yuko and his self-doubt – and he really doesn’t need any more.

“I’m his apprentice,” says Izuku aloud, eyes scanning across the shrine grounds. “I was – um, I was tasked with delivering these packages to you on his behalf. We hope you like them.”

There’s a silence Izuku can only describe as amused. Oh? It seems that the Shopkeeper has a very keen eye for magical potential. Are you a magician, boy?

“Deku here’s the cardcaptor, the Master of Cards.” Crossing his arms, Kero faces off against the unseen entity, a firm determination in his eyes. He sounds a bit protective. “He’s a fledgling magician under my care.”

A cardcaptor, the god echoes, surprised. That’s a term I haven’t heard in a long time. Another silence follows. But you feel strange. A boy of your age shouldn’t feel so old. You don’t feel like a fledgling magician. You have far too much magic to be just another among the crowd. A sweeping wind blows through the narrow shrine grounds, shrieking as it fades into the cold of night. No, you’re familiar. I’ve met you before.

That’s... disconcerting and uncomfortable in so many ways.

“I can guarantee you that I’ve never met you,” Izuku says, feeling the anxiety slowly churning in his stomach. Again with the old magic. Why does every supernatural being comment on his magic? (Is there something that Izuku can’t see about himself that everyone else can?)
“I second that,” Kero adds, eyes narrowed. There’s a careful sort of hostility around him, as if he’s challenging the god directly. “I’ve been with Deku since the beginning of his cardcaptor days, and we’ve never met any gods.”

You take my words too literally, the god sighs. You mortals with your shells of flesh and bone, so ignorant of your own bright souls...

“We’re really sorry,” Izuku interrupts hastily. This conversation is diving into all sorts of crazy, and it’s better that they get this over with and leave as soon as possible. “We – we don’t really know anything about souls. We’re just here to deliver these presents.”

There’s another pause. Then: Yes, of course. Give Watanuki my thanks.

The parcels disappear in a flash of bright yellow light, and Izuku’s never been more relieved. Kero looks like he’s ready to fight the unseen god, which spells out certain doom, and Izuku has way too much to worry about to let the self-proclaimed Guardian of the Cards and the so-called god of doors and safe travel duke it out in the middle a quiet residential neighbourhood on the day before New Year’s Eve.

God, what has his life come to?

With a sigh of trained acceptance, Izuku beckons to Kero and turns to leave. “In that case, ah, we’ll be going. Have a nice New Year.”

Now, hold on, Yorihiko interjects, sounding a little haughty. I’m not so rude as to send my guests off without even greeting them. Please, come on in.

That swirling vortex definitely wasn’t on the shrine before, and oh no, this is all too familiar to Watanuki’s pseudo-kidnapping of Izuku, which is bad news on so many levels.

Before Izuku can voice his feeling of impending doom, the ground drops out from underneath them – no, that’s not quite right. They drop through the ground, falling and falling and falling through layers of darkness and soil and crystal, passing through the age of the Earth itself, one endless continuous drop, until–

“Now, isn’t that much better?”

The sudden halt is enough to bring Izuku to his knees. A rush of nausea surges from deep within his stomach, and it’s only with years of practice that Izuku avoids emptying the contents of his stomach. Kero’s no better, struggling to stay hovering by Izuku’s shoulder, a sickly green tint to his face as he drops to the ground and stumbles around in disoriented circles.

By now, Izuku should be more than used to magic-based transportation, especially those involving falling for what seems like forever, but unfortunately, it’s nauseating and miserable every time and Izuku wishes people would stop using it.

And wow, Izuku never thought he’d ever see a place weirder than the Wish-Granting Shop, but the spectacle of a scenery before him is... surprising, to say the least.

Below him, marble tiles form a glossy circle, radiating outward into what appears to be stained glass, and past that, simply fog. Doors of all sorts – wooden, metal, paper, embellished, labelled, battered – are littered throughout the landscape, and Izuku can’t help but think that this is all very Monsters Inc.

In front of them, standing in a pristine golden kimono, is... a small child?
“Okay,” Izuku says aloud, mostly to himself, after his thoughts have organized themselves. “This is new.”

The child crosses his arms, offering a smile. A black kasa sits neatly atop his unruly platinum hair, and a set of piercing golden eyes looks toward Izuku and past him, as if they see something Izuku doesn’t.

This must be Yorihiko.

Izuku isn’t sure exactly what he expected, but a small child certainly wasn’t it. Then again, his life is entirely made up of nonsensical things, so this really isn’t anything to lose his mind over.

“Welcome, Deku, Kero.” With a wave of his arm, Yorihiko gestures toward a low table surrounded by cushions that most definitely wasn’t there a second ago. “Please, take a seat.”

Obediently, Izuku shuffles over to the cushions and seats himself across from the tiny god, feeling very out of place.

Stretching, Yorihiko yawns. He adjusts his position to something more comfortable and relaxed. “It’s been so very long since a mortal magician visited me, you know? Goodness, I can’t even remember who the last one was...”

“There’s Watanuki,” Izuku offers.

“I’m talking about mortals,” the god answers dismissively, which sends an unwelcome chill down Izuku’s spine. “Regardless, you’re here now, and that’s excellent. What sort of magician are you?”

Izuku looks down at the pendant hanging around his neck. There’s no harm in answering such a question, right? If Watanuki trusts Yorihiko, then that should mean that Izuku should be able to put his trust in this strange, childish god as well. Hopefully.

“I’m – I mean, I’m using inherited magic, which is why I can use the Sakura Cards, but my personal magic is aligned with the moon.” To demonstrate, Izuku raises his hand, focusing his magic into his palm. A sphere of sparkling silver essence bursts into existence, swirling slowly.

Yorihiko nods, casually peeling a mandarin. How things keep appearing out of nowhere, Izuku doesn’t know. “Of course. A human like you would most definitely be a moon magic practitioner.” With a cocked eyebrow and a sly smile, the god raises his glowing eyes to meet Izuku’s. “Brave yet subtle, powerful yet quiet, determined yet calculating; all traits that are horribly unsuited for sun magic.”

Then, leaning forward, Hirohiko rests his chin on his hand, the sleeve of his kimono falling to reveal skin as dazzling as opal. “You’re a very interesting human. You see things that others don’t.”

It’s difficult to tell whether Yorihiko’s mocking of praising him, so Izuku just nods his head silently. He’s tempted to ask how Yorihiko knows so much about him, but considering the fact that Watanuki and the god are apparently friends of some sort, Izuku’s almost certain that he’ll be given a shrug and a knowing smile as an answer.

Kero, who has recovered somewhat, crawls onto the table, grumbling up a storm under his breath. “So this is your true form,” the plush snarks, crossing his arms. “Tiny, aren’t you?”

For a terrifying moment, Izuku fears for Kero’s life, because who the hell challenges a god?
Luckily, it seems that Yorihiko isn’t as uptight or proud as Izuku thought he was, because the god laughs, high-pitched and jovial. “You think travellers would accept help from strange adults? No, children are much more innocent.” Gesturing to his own small form, Yorihiko grins. “Look at me: tiny, cute, and precious! Much like yourself, Guardian.”

That one word is thrown down like a challenge. Izuku, being the wise person he is, scoots away inconspicuously and watches as Kero’s metaphorical hackles rise.

Raising his head, Kero stares the tiny god in the eyes. A burning pressure suddenly bursts from his plush form, radiating bitter heat and a terrifying sort of predatory instinct, locking all of Izuku’s limbs into a state of fearful stupor. Despite his comedic form, Kero’s very presence makes Izuku want to turn and run, to flee from the creature before him. “You’re real crass for a god, huh?”

Yorihiko smiles an unnervingly wide smile, all sparkling white teeth. He waves a slice of mandarin around casually and leans forward. The sound of shattering glass echoes through Izuku’s mind as a silent presence grasps his neck with cold hands, slowly squeezing the breath from his lungs, all while a freezing gale cocoons his body. “Oh, please. Pot, meet kettle.”

An invisible pressure weights down on Izuku’s chest. It’s suffocating, an intangible mess of blazing flames and flickering lights, leaving a parade of dancing lights before his eyes, an acrid blend of sage and heat on his tongue, a storm of crackling and chiming in his ears, and an almost painful tingle running through his skin.

Izuku has seen many things in the past few months, but he’s never seen two powerful, magical, and evidently dangerous entities clash.

Is this what magic really is? Terrifying, absolutely terrifying, capable of driving all the breath from a room, of inducing an feral fear in every living soul? Because god, the sort of hysteria that’s threatening to burst forth from Izuku’s being is something horrible and unnatural, like he’s going to die, going to fade away into his own insignificance–

It takes a second for Izuku to realize that he’s stopped breathing. Releasing a hideously shaky breath, he looks down at his white-knuckle grip around his pendant.

Oh, this is very bad. This is so very bad. Some sort of astral phenomenon is occurring right before his eyes, and it’s promising all sorts of pain in the future.

With a forced bark of laughter, Izuku snatches Kero into his grasp, offering a placating smile at the amused god. “We’re not here to make enemies. Kero’s just a bit grumpy from all the action that’s been going on lately.”

Kero opens his mouth to say something. Izuku slaps a hand over the plush’s mouth and throws a burning glare downward. Kero blinks and reluctantly relaxes.

“What a fearsome guardian,” Yorihiko laughs, and Izuku laments the fact that the god sitting in front of him always need the last laugh. Thankfully, Yorihiko moves on rather quickly, finishing the last of his mandarin and wiping his hands on a magically-spawned handkerchief. “But I digress. As much as I’d love to banter with you, there are a few questions I’d like answered.”

And with the end of one potentially catastrophic event comes another.

Releasing his grip on Kero, Izuku takes a moment to breathe, clasping his hands together underneath the table as if he’s praying (but certainly not to any gods, because at this point, there’s no way he can trust them). Perhaps he can pry some answers out of Yorihiko, especially those to questions
Watanuki’s been irritatingly vague about. “Yes. Sure. Of course. But only if you’ll answer some of mine.”

“Wonderful!” With a clap of his hands, Yorihiko offers another of his cat-like smiles. “You might think that speaking to me is a big deal, but I assure you, it’s even more exciting for me to be talking to someone like you.”

“Some like me,” Izuku repeats cautiously. Does he mean a magician, a mortal, or something else entirely?

Yorihiko nods, fiddling with the edges of his long sleeves. “It’s incredibly rare to see a magician so proficient in a strand of magic that doesn’t belong to them.”

Oh, thank god. That’s something that Izuku’s known since the very beginning. “It’s cardcaptor magic,” Izuku repeats, a bit of the tension draining from his body. “It’s been passed down – um, two times?” He looks down at Kero for confirmation.

“That’s right,” Kero says, looking much calmer than before, though a tick of irritation remains on his face. “The original creator was Clow Reed. The first real cardcaptor was Kinomoto Sakura, and the second one’s right in front of you.”

Under the distorted lighting of the strange realm, the god’s opal lips glimmer. Lifting his sleeve to his mouth, Yorihiko smiles a worryingly wide smile. Something entirely inhuman and twisted rises to the god’s face, and although he looks no different, the curl of his lips and the barring of his teeth are newly weighted with danger. “Oh? You’re very generous with names.”

Izuku swears he sees the entire realm flicker for a moment, revealing something distorted, dark, and void of life. Though the sight disappears in a blink of an eye, there’s something strange about the realm now, and when Izuku looks closely, he can spot little cracks in the pristine marble that leak wisps of twisting shadows.

(Why is it familiar? Has he seen that darkness somewhere?)

Despite everything, Kero waves dismissively. Either he doesn’t notice the shift (unlikely) or he simply doesn’t care (more likely). “Use those names however you’d like. They’re both long dead, anyway.”

A flash of... something flickers past Kero’s face, but it’s too quick for Izuku to decipher. If Yorihiko notices, he doesn’t comment.

“That’s a shame!” Slumping forward, the god splayed his arms across the table, a pout written across his ethereal features. “To think that all three of the magicians you inherited magic from are dead!”

And just like that, the darkness of the realm retreats back, returning everything back to the way it once was.

Thank god. Everything’s fine, Yorihiko’s not going to kill him, everything’s alright.

Oh, wait.

“What do you mean, ‘three’?”

Silence falls over the table. Ironically, Kero and Yorihiko share the same expression: blank confusion, though pointed at different people. Meanwhile, Izuku’s trying his best to reign over the waves of anxiety that choose now of all times to plow over him, threatening to pull him under.
“Uh, yeah,” Kero agrees. The plush raises two small fingers. “Clow Reed and Sakura – that’s two.”

“Well, of course! I can count.” Insulted, the god huffs and crosses his arms. “For your moon magic, which is simply a sublevel of cardcaptor magic, you have Clow Reed and Kinomoto Sakura.” The god raises a finger for each name. Then, raising a third: “And then, for your spatial magic, which I can sense very clearly off your person, there’s Ms. Yuko.”

Well, shit.

How, how, how? Izuku knows for sure that he’s never told anybody about Ms. Yuko. There was that one time he admitted to hearing voices in his head to Kero, but luckily, that was brushed off as a symptom of Sakura’s influence, not – not a strange, named-yet-apparently-unnamed individual whose, now that Izuku really thinks about it, intentions are entirely unknown and potentially dangerous.

Didn’t Watanuki say that Izuku’s magic seemed familiar? Is it right to compare Watanuki’s reaction to Yorihiko’s, or are they two completely different situations? Regardless, Ms. Yuko has proven herself to be an incredibly skilled magician and negotiator, as demonstrated by her lending Izuku power during the Watery fiasco and blanketing Izuku with her influence while negotiating with Plume. And that’s not even all! What about when Izuku decided to expend his magic for the first time, only to have Ms. Yuko pull him back from that strange dark shore, or the fact that she blatantly refused to tell him anything about her? And–

“Hey, Deku!”

With a violent flinch, Izuku takes in a sudden, gasping breath. Realizing that he’s attempting to strangle his pants in his iron grip, he slowly releases his abused clothing and moves on to wringing his hands tightly.

Standing in front of him on the table, Kero looks up, his features painted with worry. “You were murmuring up a storm there, Deku. Are you okay?”

That’s a good question.

“I am confused and very much shocked,” Izuku answers after his breathing has returned to normal and he doesn’t feel like he’ll pass out after speaking a sentence. He can’t find it in himself to lie. “I just – I didn’t know there was anybody who knew that name.”

At that, Yorihiko laughs and laughs, grabbing at his stomach. He even smacks his hand on the table a few times for extra measure. Before it becomes really insulting, the god settles down, wiping a stray tear from his golden eyes. “Goodness! I suppose you’re a fledgling magician for a reason. I don’t think there’s any magus that hasn’t heard of Ms. Yuko.”

Kero clearly disagrees, because he frowns and turns to face the small god. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard that name,” he grumbles. After a moment, he looks toward Izuku with a raised eyebrow. “And how do you know about this Ms. Yuko if I’ve never heard of her?”

This is bad. God, this is so bad. This is the epitome of being stuck between a rock and a hard place, and frankly, Izuku very much wishes he could pick up the rock and smash his own head in, because the world is ending.

Unfortunately, Yorihiko apparently wants to hear the reason too, which is just wonderful, because that means nobody’s going to say anything that Izuku can use to springboard an excuse from. But that would be miserable too, because then Izuku would be lying to both Kero and Yorihiko. And if
he tells the truth, then whatever consequences Izuku knows with certainty are lying in wait to screw
him over will pounce, dig their claws in, and make his life a living hell.

A stinging pain startles Izuku out of his thoughts. Looking down at his hands, he realizes that he’s
dug his fingernails so firmly into his skin that he’s bleeding. Perhaps mutilating his own hands isn’t
the best way to deal with this situation.

Looking up at the curious god and guardian that stand before him, Izuku pinches the bridge of his
nose and shuts his eyes tightly. His life is a living hell already, so what more could possibly go
wrong?

“I hear Ms. Yuko’s voice in my head,” Izuku says. “She gives me advice and lends me power on
occasion. I only know her name because –” God, should he be saying this? Is this a two roads
diverged sort of situation? Will the universe change after this? “Because I met with Kinomoto Sakura
in a dream a few months back, and she told me.”

The god whistles, his golden eyes wide. He leans forward with a new interest, hands tucked
underneath his chin. “My! No wonder you felt so familiar. You inherited spatial magic from Ms.
Yuko!” With a reverent sigh, Yorihiko looks upward at something unseen, eyes glassy. “I can’t
believe such an incredible magus passed her boundless power onto a simple human instead of her
actual successor.”

“Wait a minute,” Kero interrupts, eyes wide for a different reason. His shocked expression is enough
to drive a blade of guilt through Izuku’s gut. “You met with Sakura? She spoke to you directly?”
Then, after a moment of conflicted deliberation, Kero stares at the table beneath him. “She couldn’t,
of course, because she’s gone. It must’ve just been a vision induced by the magic surrounding the
cards. Yeah, that must be it.”

Izuku opens his mouth to reply, and then quickly slams his jaw shut. That... sounds reasonable, but
something tells Izuku that Kero’s wrong. But he has no right to take away whatever coping
mechanism Kero’s using to keep his mind off Sakura’s passing, and he has no intention to ever do
so.

“That makes sense,” is the reply Izuku decides on, looking down at his hands and doing best to
ignore the whispers of liar, you’re a filthy liar, just you wait. He says no more after that.

Yorihiko fixes Izuku with a strange gaze, and for a moment, Izuku fears that the god has seen
through him. Thankfully, Yorihiko relaxes, cupping his cheeks in his hands. “Regardless of
whatever circumstances befell your predecessors, you’re an absolute marvel, you know?”

“Um,” Izuku replies intelligently, finding himself unable to look away from the god’s golden eyes.

Leaning across the table, Yorihiko taps a finger on Izuku’s chest. “You’re a strange magician. All the
magic that you can use doesn’t even naturally belong to you.” After a thoughtful pause, the god
frowns. “You’re... for lack of a better term, a projector.”

“A projector,” Izuku echoes.

“You’re like a projector,” Yorihiko repeats. “By yourself, you can’t do anything. All magicians are
born with some innate magic, be it powerful or weak.” The god’s eyes narrow as he continues. “But
you’re an empty slate. All you are is a projector, born without any magical potential, yet somehow, a
piece has been carved out of you, allocated specifically to hold magic, as if something – maybe even
someone – expected you to be able to wield magic one day even before you were born.” With a
vicious smile, Yorihiko claps his hands together and laughs. “And if that isn’t fascinating, I don’t
That’s terrifying, is what Izuku wants to say. Izuku didn’t come here to have his worldview entirely revamped, but as always, life works in mysterious and downright cruel ways.

Before Izuku can curl up into a small ball and cradle himself on the marble floor, Kero steps forward, eyebrows furrowed. “That – I mean, that makes sense, right? The next successor is chosen by the current cardcaptor. Sakura chose Deku while she was alive, so it makes sense that Deku would’ve been born with the potential to use magic.”

Yorihiko sighs and shakes his head, resting his cheek on the back of his hand. “What about your spatial magic, then? Do you really plan to tell me that the Witch of Dimensions just carved out–”

A strange chain of emotions flicker across the god’s face, beginning with confusion, transitioning into shock, and ending with cautious realization.

“There’s no way,” Yorihiko mutters to himself, eyes wide. An aura of kaleidoscopic colours begins to form around him, flaking off like shattering stained glass. “But it would explain everything. Perhaps... well, the Witch certainly did have flair for the dramatic, and if she were to grant one last wish...”

Fixing Izuku with a startlingly glassy gaze, Yorihiko trails off, his body still. It’s clear that the god has come to some sort of revelation that seems rather Earth-shattering, so what is it?

“I see,” is all the god says, composing himself. That’s wonderful, except for the fact that Izuku now feels five times as nauseous as before.

“Uh, quick question.” Kero edges forward slowly, as if he’s not sure what to make of the situation. Izuku doesn’t know either. “What exactly do you see?”

With a dismissive wave, Yorihiko stands, smoothing out the folds in his golden kimono. “It’s nothing much. Besides, if you don’t know now, you’re bound to find out later.”

The sheer Watanuki-ness of that one sentence is enough to make Izuku breathe deeply through his nose and tell himself that no, punching a god is a very bad idea, he’ll smite you and you will let down everyone you know and love, do not punch the tiny god.

Kero’s facial expression shows that he’s hearing at least part of Izuku’s internal conflict, because the plush quickly makes a cutting motion when Yorihiko’s back is turned, mouthing No, no, no.

Fine. Fine. It’s clear that nobody who has answers wants to give them to Izuku. That’s fine, because Izuku knows that he’ll trip over them down the road eventually, so he’ll get them, just not in the way he wants.

The inhalation he takes is so loud that Yorihiko throws him a confused look. “Goodness, cardcaptor. Are you alright? You’re looking quite red when you were so pale just a moment ago.”

“I’m fine,” Izuku answers through gritted teeth. “I’m just a little tired.” He wisely leaves out the I have had a very stressful few months and I would love some straightforward answers because everyone knows more than me, and I am tempted to throw myself through a window because that’s not the most appropriate thing to say, but it’s certainly very tempting.

Yorihiko frowns, then waves his hand. A full set of cups and an ornately decorated kettle blink into existence on the table, alongside a box of tea that Izuku distinctly remembers carrying here. “That won’t do! I still have more to ask you.” Another wave of his hand and all the cups are filled with a
fruity tea blend. "Drink up. Caffeine keeps humans energized, doesn’t it?"

It sure does. As a mess of a human being fueled solely by anxiety, self-imposed community service, and energy drinks, Izuku is very familiar with the power of caffeine.

And so, after deciding that this train wreck is entirely out of his control, Izuku picks up a cup and downs the tea like he would a shot. Kero stares while he does this.

“Please, continue,” Izuku says, because he’s a masochist or something.

“Gladly.” With a sharp snap of his fingers, Yorihiko gestures toward one of the many doors that surround them. Within the scratched, wooden frame, a rippling image of a classroom blurs into existence alongside the high-pitched laughter of children.

Izuku stares vacantly. “It’s a classroom. With children.”

“A classroom with children who happen to be very sensitive toward magic,” Yorihiko corrects.

That’s... nice.

As if sensing Izuku’s confusion, the god smiles pleasantly. “Putting it simply, there’s a community centre not far from my shrine. Children are fostered from their earliest days within my territory.” Yorihiko pops a cherry into his mouth before continuing. “It’s only natural that they would grow up to be a bit more magically inclined than the rest of the population.”

Which also implies that the entirety of this community can probably sense something off with Izuku, but that thought is too awful to process for the time being, so Izuku slots it carefully in the shelf of Things I Should Remember But Not Overthink.

“I’d like to ask a favour of you,” Yorihiko says, his eyes glimmering with a different shine than before, almost like the god knows something Izuku doesn’t (which he probably does). “Would you, a fledgling magician, tell tales of magic and spirits to those children as my vassal?”

“Sure,” Izuku replies on reflex. Then his brain catches up to his mouth. “Wait, what?”

Kero’s face is in his hands by the time Izuku looks at him. “You... you agreed to tell folktales at a community centre as Yorihiko’s unpaid intern.”

With an offended huff, the small god places his hands on his hips, a misplaced, childish pout on his features. “How rude! Besides, you won’t leave empty-handed. I’ll teach you the basics of creating boundaries.”

Izuku rubs at his temples. “Boundaries, you say.”

Yorihiko offers a splitting grin. In one smooth motion, the god raises two fingers above his head and sweeps downward beside him. Kero lets out an undignified shriek as a line of white slashes itself into the domain, racing into the distance. Blinding white light rises from the boundary line, reaching up and into the sky above until it can be seen no further.

“A boundary,” Yorihiko chirps, rolling his sleeve back down. The smile he flashes is almost as blinding as the boundary itself. “Impenetrable or incorporeal to those of your choosing; an incredibly powerful strand of spatial magic in which I can say I have Watanuki thoroughly beaten!” The god raises his fist in the air as if he counts that as a victory, and all things considered, Izuku thinks he’s very much in the right. “Passing my magic onto the first magician to appear in this world in hundreds of years will be my claim to fame!”
Kero pauses, putting down the slice of magicked melon he’s currently devouring. “But you’re a god. Aren’t you already a pretty big deal?”

“Not when the world around you has forgotten your name entirely and only a handful of people visit your temple,” Yorihiko answers, surprisingly flippant. He doesn’t elaborate and instead dispels the boundary with a wave of his hand.

And there it is again – a magical being speaking of the utter lack of magicians in the world, only this time, an actual god is lamenting over it.

Izuku doesn’t know whether he feels disappointed or relieved. It’s probably an uncomfortable mix of both.

“But there’s no point looking back on the past!” Yorihiko’s eyes shine with an emotion that Izuku’s beginning to be able to decipher, and he gives a smile that seems much less one-dimensional. “Time only moves in one direction, and though there are certainly ways to subvert it, going against the natural laws of the universe is something I’m not particularly fond of.” The god shrugs, as if saying, what can you do?

“Perhaps this world no longer needs me, but I believe I need it. The world has its own marvels. Why not make the best of the wonders that already surround us?”

For the first time since meeting, Yorihiko actually sounds his implied age. If that isn’t one of the most meaningful things Izuku’s heard, he doesn’t know what it is.

If a god is telling him, Being needed shouldn’t be your reason to live, it’s a beautiful world out there, so carpe diem, then it’s probably good advice.

And so, after taking in both Yorihiko’s words and an unnecessarily long but satisfying breath, Izuku look Yorihiko in the eye and says, “I’ll do it. The storytelling and the training. I’ll... I’ll do it.”

Yorihiko stares silently, his face blank. Then he bursts into ravenous laughter, leaning against the table as his body shakes. Even Kero cracks a smile, though he covers it with a cough. “I mean, you already agreed, so...”

“Yes, but I’m doing it after actually thinking,” Izuku explains helplessly. “Saying yes to requests is – is – it’s just reflex for me.”

“Oh, I know,” Yorihiko cackles, wheezing in between bursts of laughter to take in oxygen. “You’re similar to Ms. Yuko in many ways. If she became the Witch of Dimensions, then goodness, I can’t wait to watch your development!”

While Izuku and Kero freeze, evidently processing this Witch of Dimensions bomb that has just been dropped on them, Yorihiko composes himself, letting out a satisfied sigh.

“In all honesty, it’s going to be very interesting, working with you,” the god admits, his voice quieter than usual; a change so tiny and yet so jarring. It catches Izuku’s attention immediately. “It’s been five centuries since I last had a human vassal, let alone a magician, under my name.” With an outstretched opal hand, Yorihiko grins. “Let’s work together in this new era you’ve ushered in, Deku!”

Izuku takes his hand, because this is his life now.

***

In the past few months, Izuku has seen his fair share of strange happenings.

A bird monster, a violent water spirit, an eldritch shadow, a semi-sentient sword – all troublesome
and difficult to deal with, certainly, but all within the scope of the horrible monsters Izuku’s mind is capable of thinking up.

Never has Izuku thought that he’d have so much trouble with a tree.

“I’ve never seen Wood so energetic before,” Kero says, surprise accentuating his voice. Grabbing yet another marshmallow from the bag that rests beside him, the plush leans over Wood’s newly captured form with wide eyes, his voice garbled. “You might not know, but that was actually sort of impressive!”

Shimmying out of his outfit, Izuku turns to stare at Kero flatly. “There are so many adjectives I would’ve used to describe that disaster. ‘Impressive’ isn’t the first one I’d think of.”

But, considering everything, capturing Wood... wasn’t actually that bad, which is a very welcome change to breaking into a museum or getting trapped inside a time loop.

Gentle cards are always less of a headache to deal with. Sure, Wood may have temporarily turned a few streets into some sort of distorted forest, but it’s not like it decided to drown a handful of civilians or terrorize all of downtown.

Plus, he got to meet Kamui Woods. That was pretty cool, up until the hero realized that Izuku wasn’t a cosplayer with an incredible heroic sense, but in fact an infamous vigilante with a supposed flair for the dramatic.

Things went downhill very quickly after that.

“Well, that’s another card down!” Kero grins one of those shockingly optimistic grins of his, floating over and landing on the top of Izuku’s head. “And it only took fifteen minutes to seal. That means we have plenty of time to get to the community centre!”

Right. Izuku now has yet another volunteering job as a – a teaching assistant? Maybe? – at Yorihiko’s community centre as per the conditions of the agreement Izuku is now thinking maybe wasn’t a great idea.

It doesn’t take long for Izuku to get down to the centre. One good thing that’s come out of his cardcaptor duties is that he feels much better in terms of magic expenditure than when he first started, with the combined package of combat, sealing, and escape inflicting no more an irritating headache.

When Izuku arrives at his designated classroom, the supervisor – a young woman called Maru – smiles brightly and beckons him in. “You must be Midoriya! Thank you for offering to volunteer here. Our neighbourhood’s quiet, so it’s difficult to recruit some help.”

“It’s nice to be here,” Izuku says curtly, wringing his hands. Oh no. This is even more awkward than he expected. It’s rare that for Izuku to go out of his way to volunteer somewhere; after all, life has a way of throwing him into situations where people ask for his help, and of course, the answer is always yes, of course, no problem.

Technically, a god did ask him to come here, but never has Izuku felt so uncomfortable explaining why he wanted to volunteer at a youths’ after-school literature club.

(Then again, Izuku did throw himself into Latin years ago, so really, who’s he to judge?)

After Izuku shuffles into the classroom, Maru claps her hands. “Alright, everybody! Today we have a helper joining us. He’s a very intelligent student, and – well, why don’t you introduce yourself, Midoriya?”
Twelve sets of eyes turn toward Izuku, and wow, that’s incredible nerve-wracking.

“I’m Midoriya Izuku.” Brushing his unruly hair out of his face, Izuku throws on his best smile and raises his head. “I – I work at the Musutafu University Archives as a classics researcher. I, um, look forward to working with you.”

A polite, possibly even enthusiastic applause follows his introduction. Izuku lets out a breath of relief.

(Is it embarrassing to be scared of people his own age? After all, they’re all just kids, right?
But Kacchan’s the same age as them, and he... well. He’s who he is.
Perhaps children have an innate ability to be cruel.)

“Midoriya will be helping around the classroom, so don’t hesitate to ask him any questions.” Maru then tells the class to return to their discussions, pushing Izuku forward with a guiding hand. She says something about running a few errands and leaves the classroom.

Izuku stands at the front of the class, unsure of how he should proceed. Should... should he slide into one of the conversations and spread stories of ghosts and ghouls and fairies, magic is real, all hail Yorihiko?

Kero jabs Izuku’s side from inside the bag. “Maybe get to know them a bit better before preaching the supernatural to them.”

The extent to which Kero can read Izuku’s mind is sort of terrifying, but the advice is good.

Shuffling over to one of the tables, Izuku tries to inconspicuously pull up a chair and begin eavesdropping on the surprisingly heated conversation. He clearly isn’t inconspicuous enough, because one of the boys turns around with such vigor that Izuku almost leaves the classroom entirely.

The boy pounds his hand on the table, his eyes burning. “You’ve studied literature, right?”

“Uh. Some. Yes,” Izuku answers, feeling confident he’s just confirmed that these children are terrifying. If there’s one thing he’s learned from his time at the University Archives, it’s that disagreements in creative interpretation spawn the bloodiest of the bloodbaths.

One of the girls snorts loudly, shoving a bookmark into place with more force than necessary. “Stop bothering the newcomer. Just because you have a completely uneducated opinion doesn’t mean–”

“Me?” With a sharp bark of laughter, the boy slams his book on the table, a sneer written all over his features. “Are you hearing yourself? Romeo and Juliet is the most basic of Shakespeare’s works! You’re just projecting your own feelings onto it!”

“Oh, how very intelligent of you, trying to pull the discussion away from the actual play.” Leaning back in her chair, the girl rolls her eyes. “Sure, let’s do it your way and examine the play without historical, political, and economic context! That way, we’ll definitely find the deeper implications!”

With a frustrated sigh, the boy crosses his arms. “That’s not what I’m saying! Obviously the environment affected the writing, but you’re spending too much time looking outside of the play when all the content is in the writing!”

Alright then.
So far, Izuku has learned that a) these children are terrifyingly intelligent, and b) any arguments where the parties aren’t willing to consider other opinions are the same regardless of age, gender, or education level, because if adults can act like children, then children can act like adults, so everyone’s on the same, pissed off, go-rot-in-hell playing field.

What a wonderful world it is.

Kero peeks his head out nervously, his eyes wide. The children are too focused on murdering each other with their eyes to notice him. “This... uh, this is kind of horrifying. Any ideas?”

“I hate conflict,” Izuku whispers miserably.

“Yeah, but maybe you should do something before one of them starts strangling the other.”

Kero has a point. Besides, since when did Izuku start having any sense of self-preservation?

“Guys,” Izuku yells, slapping his hands on the table. All heads turn toward him.

Praying that his smile isn’t too shaky, Izuku folds his hands and tries to look like he has any semblance of what he’s doing with his life. “Um, let’s tone it down a bit. Besides, all of you bring some good arguments to the table.”

The glares that swivel to face him say otherwise.

“You can’t possibly be siding with this idiot,” the two ringleaders say at the same time, then proceed to look terribly offended at the other, which would be funny if it wasn’t also the most blatant lead up to a beatdown Izuku’s ever seen.

Children truly are monsters, aren’t they?

Come now. You can talk down an information broker and the police, but you’re freezing up in front of children?

Ah, Ms. Yuko. The unpredictable, supposedly ultra-powerful Witch of Dimensions who happens to inhabit a corner of Izuku’s mind.

Children are different, Izuku tries to relay back, breathing through his nose deeply. Besides, I’m not Deku here. I – I’m just Midoriya Izuku.

Ms. Yuko laughs. A fox is still a fox regardless of its name. Why don’t you use your pacifism to calm the storm?

I’m a vigilante, answers Izuku bluntly. Pacifism isn’t really the game associated with my trade.

Then use your words, Ms. Yuko drawls. Izuku can hear the smile in her voice. Besides magic, every pinch you’ve been in has been resolved by making use of your eloquent thoughts. Make yourself a force to be reckoned with, someone to be respected! Then, in a tone more mischievous than Izuku would’ve liked: If they respect you, they’ll listen to you.

Why does every person in Izuku’s life sound like Watanuki? Is this a trend now?

Unfortunately, the people in Izuku’s life also happen to offer excellent advice, and Ms. Yuko isn’t an exception. Maybe if Izuku asserts his own opinion, these children will respect him and listen to him when he begins preaching Yorihiko’s dogma.

Izuku clears his throat and slaps his hands on the table again. The slapping is apparently akin to
tapping glass to start a toast, because the conversation simmers down and the others turn to face him once more.

“You’re all being awfully rude to each other.” Throwing on his best Watanuki smile, Izuku folds his hands under his chin. “Listen to you – yelling, screaming, shouting. Have you stopped to think that nothing productive will ever get done if you all refuse to listen to one another?”

As expected, a wave of angry protest rises up. The members begin accusing him of siding with the opposite side, of not examining the play correctly, etc, etc.

“I don’t even know what you’re arguing about,” Izuku shouts over the chaos, “But I’m fairly sure it’s to do with if the resulting tragedy of Romeo and Juliet and if the protagonists brought it on themselves.”

A chorus of *Yeah, how’d you know* and *So what’s your opinion* bounce around the table.

“Let’s talk,” Izuku interjects, cocking his head. “And then maybe we’ll find a middle ground.

*Romeo and Juliet* – a surprisingly complex play, despite what most of society thinks. It’s not just a stupid romance or a cautionary tale, though it actually was based on other works – no, not now, we can talk about that later. Your argument basically revolves around one question: were Romeo and Juliet at fault, and did they bring along the tragedy?

“On one hand, we have the *yes, it was their fault, they were foolish* that’s a completely fair statement to make, all things considered. The play lasts five days – five days! They met, fell in love, shared some, hmm, passionate moments, eloped, and died in less than a week! If that isn’t irresponsible, nothing is. You could also argue that the deaths of some of the supporting characters, such as Tybalt, Mercutio, and Paris, could have all been avoided if Romeo and Juliet weren’t so foolish. Were Romeo and Juliet truly in love, or were they just desperate for affection and fell into lust instead? You could very well argue for the latter.

“And on the other hand, we have the *no, it wasn’t their fault, they were star-crossed from the very beginning* that’s also an entirely grounded argument. The first lines of the play address Romeo and Juliet as being star-crossed, and what’s to say the environment around them wasn’t to blame? Two children of powerful, fighting households would never be able to live a happy life together. Have you thought about the social norms and responsibilities they both had to uphold? And what about Friar Lawrence, a clear enabler who could’ve put a stop to the tragedy before it even happened? It’s easy to see the resulting tragedy as a chain of bad luck that befell Romeo and Juliet.

“Both these arguments are reasonable and well-supported.” Taking a moment to breath, Izuku drops his hands to the table delicately. “It’s easy to see it both ways, so why are you arguing with each other when you could be building each other up, offering new insight instead of being hung up on the old?”

Silence falls over the table. For a moment, Izuku thinks he’s massively screwed up and made himself into a pompous, self-righteous literary critic.

The girl’s the one to break the silence. With a reddened face, she coughs into her hand. “Maybe... maybe we should talk about something else for now.”

Murmurs of agreement pass over the table as the others slip bookmarks into their copies of the play.

Okay. That wasn’t exactly the response Izuku had hoped for, but it’s nowhere near as bad as it could be. At the very least, by presenting himself as an unabashed voice of reason, Izuku can give them a
standard to compare themselves to the next time an argument starts.

(Not all arguments have to escalate to a decisive conclusion. Thanks to a certain childhood friend, Izuku has learned that sometimes, the best way to bring an end to an argument is to back out and leave the topic entirely.)

For a moment, an awkward silence falls over the table. Most of the children are eyeing Izuku out of the corners of their eyes, shifting slightly in their seats.

And hang on, isn’t this a great opportunity?

“Then let’s talk about something a little simpler,” Izuku suggests, keeping his voice as light and as enthusiastic as possible. “Are we all okay with that?”

The girl shrugs. “Simple stuff is a good break from the usual.”

The boy nods in agreement. “It’s nice to take a break sometimes.”

Oh, thank god. It’s only been five minutes, and these children are already beginning to adopt Izuku’s Drop It Like It’s Hot policy, which is promising for future conflicts, but also immensely worrying because it means they’re already beginning to see Izuku as a reasonable person, which he absolute isn’t.

But that can all wait. For now, Yorihiko’s favour comes first.

Closing his eyes, Izuku lets the gentle crooning of his moon magic flow through his body and lap at his mind. Magic is an amazing, terrifying phenomenon, and if a few more people believe, won’t that be interesting?

“Allow me to tell you about a world that exists in tangent to ours, overlapping in the most mysterious of ways, bringing a supernatural sort of splendor to our own dimension.” Something calm and knowing rushes forward from the depths of Izuku’s mind, unfamiliar yet familiar in the strangest way. “Honoured guests, allow me to share with you the world of magic.”

If it’s a story they want, it’s a story they’ll get, and oh, Izuku has so many stories to tell.

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“You did a great job.” Maru hums to herself as she stacks away the books, tucking them all into one of the many shelves that line the room. “None of our volunteers last long, but I think you can do it.”

After witnessing the scale of the arguments that occur in this classroom, Izuku has a feeling he knows why none of them lasted. “W-well, I like reading. And I like thinking about what I’ve read.” Then, a little thoughtful, he adds on, “I’ve... never met a group of people who love literature as much.”

The supervisor laughs. “Our community is the oldest in Musutafu, you know?”

Izuku perks up. That’s new information. “Is it?”

“By a full millenium,” Maru confirms, smiling proudly. “The only reason Musutafu is here is because our ancestors were here first. They built up the foundation for the city you see around you, but...” Trailing off, Maru heaves a deep sigh and her hands hang idle. “Well, our community’s always been one to embrace our history, to celebrate it. That’s part of the reason why literature is so important to us. But it’s hard to do that in the age of heroics!”
The laugh that she tags on is one of the most insincere and bitter Izuku’s ever heard, which is saying something, given his unusual company.

“It’s not that progress isn’t good. It’s just –” Maru waves her hand around, as if she’s searching for her next words.

Izuku speaks before he knows it. “People are forgetting from whence they came, and the overwhelming face of progress is drowning out our history and culture.”

With a stunned expression, Maru blinks and nods slowly. “That’s exactly it. I’m glad you understand.”

This conversation is answering some of Izuku’s many questions. Why Yorihiko’s shrine is located in such a quiet neighbourhood, why he cares so much about this neighbourhood, why he suggested that Izuku immerse himself a little into the community – magic is always connected to age, and if this is truly the oldest neighbourhood in Musutafu, then perhaps there’s more to it than meets the eye.

Maru sighs one last time, then shakes her head and grins, the edges of her eyes crinkling. “Regardless, I’m actually pretty impressed! You handled that argument very well, you know.”

“I’ve seen children argue,” Izuku says monotonously. “Except it was over board games, and I think I can say that no matter the subject matter, children’s arguments are terrifying.”

Maru chuckles. “That’s a good way of putting it. But what can you really expect?” Leaning on one of the bookshelves, the supervisor glances out the window and toward the nearby waterfront. “They’re just kids. They haven’t gone through life yet, and despite their intelligence, they’re not mature enough to back down when they take a stance.” Then, after a moment: “You’re still a kid, too. I have to say, you don’t sound much like one!”

Izuku desperately wishes that he could scream into a pillow.

Is – is he really that off-putting? He’s always been a bit mature for his age, but with everything that’s been going on recently, it makes sense for him to take things a bit more seriously, right?

“And that story you told was amazing, too!” Maru leans, interesting glimmering in her eyes. “Even in our community, not a lot of people still tell the stories you told – stories of spirits and fairies, I mean. You’re pretty well-versed in folklore, huh? Again, pretty mature!”

Izuku decides not to tell Maru that his knowledge of folklore only extends as far as the things he’s seen and heard from the supernatural beings that stalk him.

Pulling out a chair, Maru sits. Izuku follows suit. “Well, maturity is what we’re trying to teach. Literature and politics spawn the most arguments in the known universe.” Maru shrugs, as if to say, that’s just how it is. “By letting the kids form their own opinions, we’re teaching them to think for themselves. By letting them argue, we’re teaching them to consider other opinions. What they choose to do after that is all up to themselves.”

Maru turns to Izuku, her eyes shining.

“It’d be a shame if we let children with such incredible potential lose that potential because they don’t have people who’re willing to listen, right?”

Izuku really is surrounded by amazing people, isn’t he?

After helping out with cleaning, Izuku leaves the community centre feeling very strange. Kero
clearly notices, because he ducks into the hood of Izuku’s jacket when nobody’s looking and peers over Izuku’s shoulder. “That was an interesting experience, huh?”

“Yeah,” Izuku responds quietly, feeling as if his thoughts are helium balloons, floating aimlessly in his head, bumping and tangling into one big mess. “I – it – hmm. Maybe I should do this more often. Come here, I mean.”

Kero nods, then sighs. “As much as Yorihiko pisses me off, I can’t help but feel that he’s trying to tell us something.” Furrowing his brows, the plush grumbles something along the lines of everyone’s so vague, I’m the Guardian of the Cards and I don’t know anything, etc, etc.

At least Izuku’s not alone in his suffering. If even Kero was hiding things from him, then fuck, nothing would be real. But alas, here they are, just two very confused people surrounded by smartasses.

As Izuku makes his way home, a few spirits begin to trail after him. It seems that the spirits have grown somewhat used to his presence now; the excited mumbling have been replaced by casual conversation instead.

Wait. This is a pretty good opportunity to get even more answers, isn’t it?

“Excuse me,” Izuku says, after he’s confirmed that there’s nobody around. “Sorry, but could I ask a few questions?”

For a moment, the crowd goes quiet. Then excited whispers begin to spread until the familiar face of a drowned child hops out. She sways to the side, the gray skin around her lips stretching as she beams. “Sure! Ask away, master magician!”

Time for twenty-one questions. “What is Yorihiko to you?”

“The almighty god of safe travel and doors, and one of the most respected among all gods!”

“All gods? How many gods are there in Musutafu?”

“There used to be a lot, but there aren’t nearly as many now. The ones that still remain are barely corporeal and mostly just – how would a human understand it? I guess they’re more of a memory or a thought more than actual deities. The only one that really exists is Yorihiko.”

“And – and how long ago was it when the gods were still all well?”

“Oh, that’s a lot older than I am... but the others are saying that it’s been at least seven centuries? Wow, that’s a long time!”

“Then when was the last time humans actually interacted with spirits?”

“More or less the same time. Without gods, belief wanes, and because of that, humans sort of... moved on. No belief means no sight. And then quirks started to appear, and humans forgot about us. We’re really more of urban legends than actual spirits now.”

“And is having belief good? It seems like you’re all fine even though humans can’t – don’t see you.”

“It’s not like spirits were casually walking around the streets back in the day. It was more like subtle coexistence, where humans respected us and gave us offerings. You know, like seeing something out of your eye but knowing better than to poke at it. Like the Europeans! They really know how to treat their fairies.”
“What? Wait, why’s Europe better off than Japan?”

“I guess they were always a little more supernaturally inclined? A lot of them have some spirit blood in them, however tiny that portion might be. Plus, there’s a lot of violence, bloodshed, and drama in European history. Maybe that’s it?”

“I... I guess that explains why the fairies sound so confident. Do they? I can’t really tell.”

“I mean, fairies and spirits are different. Spirits like us sort of rely on human belief to be at our most powerful, whereas fairies have never been interested in humans. They just hole up in their magical little world and occasionally snack on humans! How boring is that?”

“Very boring. So boring. Um, now, can I ask one more question?”

“Of course! What is it?”

“...Do you know of the Witch of Dimensions?”

For a moment, silence falls over the crowd. The occasional mumble floats by, but nothing decisive comes up. In the end, the drowned child frowns and turns back to face Izuku. “Sorry, but we’ve never heard of a Witch of Dimensions. Maybe they were before our time?”

Not one spirit in this crowd, who answered all of Izuku’s questions about the distant past, was alive during Ms. Yuko’s time. Is the only one old enough to answer Izuku’s questions about Ms. Yuko Yorihiko, a literal god?

Maybe Watanuki as well. Didn’t Yorihiko say something about Watanuki not being mortal?

Great. If Izuku wants any answers, he’ll have to somehow pry them out of the two strangest and most obscure beings he knows. And there’s no way Izuku’s doing that, so he’ll have to find the answers himself.

Well, there’s me, you know.

Perhaps Izuku should begin getting into the habit of remembering that the Witch of Dimensions herself lives in his mind. Then again, it’s not like she’d give any answers, and frankly, her behaviour is similar to Watanuki’s in an uncannily infuriating way.

“I’ll find out what I need to know myself,” Izuku says aloud to nobody in particular. Kero turns and throws him a confused glance, but remains silent.

The crowd dissipates shortly after. Izuku waves goodbye to the spirits, and they wave back enthusiastically.

Then Izuku turns to Kero with the most deadpan expression he can muster. “The answers were right in front of us,” he says.

“Uh-huh.”

“Why didn’t I think of asking sooner? It makes sense that – that spirits would know something, right?”

“Uh-huh.”

Izuku smacks a fist against his forehead, cursing himself for his stupidity. “God, I’m an idiot, I’m so bad, this is so bad. What did we even just learn?”
That spirits are old, gods are old, this city is old, but everybody we know is older, and nothing is real.”

Izuku stares at Kero with dead eyes. Kero stares back with eyes equally as lifeless.

“Let’s go home and think about this when we need to,” Izuku suggests.

Kero heaves a deep sigh, running a hand down his face. “Let’s.”

It’s nice to have someone who’s just as confused as Izuku is, because fuck all of this.

Unsurprisingly, it barely takes a week before the next Sakura Card decides to show itself.

With a long-suffering sigh, Kero stares at the scene on the television. “You just have the worst luck, huh?”

Izuku smacks his head against the wall quietly a few times before deciding that he should probably get suited up.

“Here’s the rundown.” Kero smacks the screen as the camera zooms in on what seems to be on a giant ice koi, who looks like it’s having a grand time freezing downtown Musutafu over in thick sheets of ice. “This is Freeze, a real crafty card. It’s definitely smarter than Watery and basically has the same firepower, so... yeah. Lots of fun.”

With empty eyes, Izuku faces Kero. “I’m going to die.”

“Uh-huh,” Kero answers nonchalantly. He then floats up to hover above Izuku’s shoulder, eyes still watching the news report. “So, how do you feel about going back into the line of fire after getting arrested?”

With a heavy sigh, Izuku adjusts his utility belt, careful not to disrupt Mei’s smoke bombs from hell. “I feel just as great as you’d expect, which is not great at all, and – hang on, is that Endeavor?”

Standing boldly in front of the ice koi is the Number Two hero himself, ablaze with brilliant flames as always. The camera zooms in on him, and wow, he’s not a very happy guy, is he?

“That man’s on fire.” Kero blinks. “His beard – his beard is fire.”

“I changed my mind,” Izuku says, feeling a rapid wave of nausea sweep over him. “I’m going to die, that’s the Number Two hero, I can’t believe they brought in Endeavor–”

A horrible, intrusive thought digs its way out of Izuku’s lips.

“Is this a trap?”

Kero’s head swivels to look Izuku in the eye with a surprisingly sharp glare. “A trap?”

“Think about it!” Throwing his hands in the air, Izuku begins pacing around the living room, one hand at his mouth and the other around his pendant. “I just got arrested, which is bad, but then I staged a successful jailbreak. I made myself a threat! Then the transcript of the interrogation was leaked, which means that everybody knows what I said! From what I’m hearing, people are really unhappy with the police, either because they have some sort of misplaced justice and, for some reason, have decided to start preaching vigilantism using my name, or because they think I’m a villain who needs to be detained ASAP. Either way, the police must be under serious pressure,
which means they’re going to be more focused on capturing me than ever! Why else would they pull in Endeavor? They must be—"

“Hey!”

Kero’s shrill voice pierces through the haze of panic clouding Izuku’s mind, startling him out of his thoughts.

When Izuku turns to face Kero, the plush’s eyes are blown wide disbelievingly. “Or, consider this: maybe they got Fire Beard in because, you know, fire counteracts ice.”

Oh. Ohhh. Yes, that does make sense, doesn’t it?

A blush blooms to life all over Izuku’s face, and in a valiant attempt to not throw himself out the window, Izuku buries his face into one of the pillows on the couch. “Maybe it’s a bit of both,” he suggests pathetically, trying to quell the waves of embarrassment under the feeling of impending doom.

“Maybe,” Kero agrees, which Izuku appreciates greatly. “But even if this turns out to be a trap, we have to go. It’s our job!”

Pushing himself up from the couch, Izuku glances at the screen. There’s Endeavor in his burning glory, hurling fireballs at Freeze, who dodges them with surprising grace, summoning walls of ice to protect itself from anything it can’t dodge.

And there’s another hero there as well, which is strange, because Izuku remembers Endeavor firmly stating that he works better alone in an interview a while back.

Upon closer examination, Izuku sucks in another deep breath. It seems the quote fight fire with fire also applies to ice, because that’s Absolute Zero, the one hero Izuku hoped never to see again, sliding along the frozen roads, melting the ice pillars that block the way with a simple touch.

Kero apparently notices as well, because he makes a small noise of surprise. “I guess we’re meeting with an old friend today. Weird, huh?”

Izuku pushes down the urge to smother his face into the pillow again. “Yeah. Sure. I love meeting people that I’ve mind-controlled.”

But the clock is ticking, and despite the pair’s attacks, Freeze doesn’t look any closer to being taken down than it did fifteen minutes ago.

“Let’s go out there and show them how it’s done!” Pumping his fist into the air, Kero grins, his eyes alive with a strange combination of mischief, excitement, and pride. “We’ll show them what a real hero looks like!”

A real hero, huh?

Well. It’s not like there’s anything better to offer.

And so, internally and eternally screaming, Izuku takes to the skies, sending a prayer to Yorihiko, desperately hoping that he’ll be able to return home as quickly as possible so he can help Ms. Kino repair her old bike.

***
Hitoshi likes to think he isn’t a particularly greedy person.

He floats through life for the most part, doing his best to keep his head above the water. And with a quirk like his, it’s a huge fucking challenge sometimes. But what can you do, with a society as fixated on flashy quirks and superficial heroics as the one Hitoshi as the pleasure of living in?

It’s stupid to cry over others, and it’s even more foolish to stop moving forward because you don’t have what others have. Sure, maybe he wants what others have, but it’s not like anybody’s going to give him exactly what he wants on a pretty little platter.

So no, Hitoshi doesn’t think he’s a greedy person.

But he’d be talking out of his ass if he said he wasn’t a petty person.

“I’ll be sticking with Deku,” Hitoshi declares flatly, finding a bitter sort of amusement in the shocked expressions both parties have on their faces.

Before him, two very people notable stand: Absolute Zero, who looks like her mind has just melted, and Deku, who, hilariously, looks even more shocked.

“You can’t be serious!” Absolute Zero stares disbelieving at Hitoshi, then throws a venomous look at Deku. Deku flinches, then pauses, and then raises his head and puffs his chest out. “Are you choosing to become his accomplice?”

Before Hitoshi can give his reply, the hero spins spin on her heel and throws up a tall wall of ice, deflecting a blast of sheer cold that the ice koi spits at them. Hitoshi swears he sees Absolute Zero send a smug look in Deku’s direction. Oh, heroes and their false sense of superiority.

Deku follows suit, either out of obligation or just to be petty, lifting a card into the air. “Wood, heed my call! Under the name of your new master, Deku, shield us from harm!”

The next blast of ice meets an enormous, thick net of gnarled branches. Though the branches are frozen over and crystallized almost immediately, Deku doesn’t falter, throwing up another card. “Sword, let’s go!”

With the piercing sound of shattering glass, Deku’s staff flakes off into the form of his ever-so-iconic blade, its wings shining brightly. And, in a very Deku-like fashion, the vigilante draws his arm back, closes his eyes, breathes in, and then steps forward, thrusting his blade at the frozen branches before him.

An incredible blast of wind erupts backward as the sheer force of the very much non-contact attack shatters the branches into tiny, crystalline fragments.

Deku lifts yet another card into the air as the sword flashes back into the form of a staff. “Windy, take the shards and target Freeze!”

Wind bursts forth from the card, surging upward and above the buildings. A luminescent green lady – not a lady in green, a literal green lady – sweeps down to the ground, the shards of wood rising to trail after her. As she rushes toward the ice koi, her body fades into green wind, and as it passes through the monster, the shards lodge themselves deep within the serpent’s body with a series of loud cracks.

And, to finish, Deku sweeps his hand down and yells, “Now, Wood!”

Enormous branches shatter forth from inside the koi’s body, entangling it within a wooden cage. The
monster struggles, letting out ear-piercing shrieks, only to worsen the cracks on its body. It thuds onto the ground in a flurry of ice and leaves, thoroughly restrained.

Turning back to Hitoshi, Deku staggers a little before finding his balance. “I can’t keep it down for long,” the vigilante wheezes, as if he’s out of breath. “So please, let’s work together!”

Hitoshi is, admittedly, a little impressed. Getting a first-hand experience of watching the infamous Deku himself in action really puts things into perspective. That is, it really puts the absolute uselessness of superficial heroes into perspective.

(The fact that Deku, who’s rapidly gaining traction as a so-called people’s vigilante, is more useful than the Number Two hero himself is a riot.)

Throwing the fakest smile he can muster at Absolute Zero, Hitoshi steps forward to stand at Deku’s side. “Anyway, I’m choosing the option that I think will be safest for me. Right now, between you and Deku, I think it’s clear who’s more capable of keeping me safe.” Turning to the vigilante, Hitoshi throws a prompting look.

Interestingly, Deku seems preoccupied talking to someone through an earpiece. “Okay. Okay, I know. That’s what I’m trying to do, but Endeavor won’t listen, and–”

Deku visibly startles when he realizes that both Hitoshi and Absolute Zero’s eyes are on him, fumbling and nearly dropping his staff. It’s sort of endearing. He really is a kid, huh?

Clutching his staff like a lifeline, the vigilante nods sharply, pushing up his visor when it slips downward. “I – Yes. Coming with me – that’s the safest option for everyone.”

Spoken like a true vigilante.

“Let’s get going, then.” Hitoshi nudges Deku with his arm and only now realizes that, holy shit, is he actually taller than one of the most infamous vigilantes in vigilante history?

Absolute Zero opens her mouth to say something, reaching out with a frantic look on her face.

That’s pretty much the last thing Hitoshi sees as he feels Deku’s arm snake around his waist and the ground drop out from underneath him.

And despite everything, Hitoshi can’t help but smile a bit. He sure as hell didn’t expect to run into a villain, a pro hero, and a vigilante all in one day, but hell, if it’s always this hilarious, then it’s worth at least being one of the three parties, right?

(It’s nice, hearing the words, Please help me, I think your quirk can help keep everyone safe.

They’re not hard words to say, and yet Hitoshi has never once heard them in his life.

It’s strange that Deku knows about his quirk. It’s even stranger that, out of so many trapped civilians, Deku chose to pull Hitoshi out of the ice before desperately pleading to Endeavor to go help the civilians and let him take care of the monster.

It isn’t strange that Endeavor answered with a resounding No, but hell, that’s not what heroes are supposed to act like.

It’s strange and yet not strange at all that Deku’s the only one acting like a real hero.

And the fact that a vigilante’s the first one to ever tell Hitoshi that his quirk is worth something...
well, isn’t that a wonderful, strange little thing?

But, despite everything, it still means something.)

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“I’m so sorry for kidnapping you,” is the first thing that Izuku blurts out as he bows deeply. Shinsou stares at him, raising an eyebrow. God, why are his expressions so hard to decipher? With a shrug, he shoves his hands into his pockets. “I mean, I did ask you to, if that means anything.”

For a civilian who’s just been thrown headfirst into a hero versus supposed-villain fight, Shinsou’s impressively calm. In fact, if Izuku’s reading his face correctly, he seems... a little happier than usual?

“So, Deku,” Shinsou drawls, looking over the ledge of the building they’re currently hiding atop. “You said you needed my help, so here I am.”

Izuku nods, stepping forward. “I – I really appreciate your assistance. It means a lot to me.” Hell yeah it does, especially when Shinsou’s the only person who’ll even listen to Deku.

“I get why the heroes won’t cooperate with you,” Shinsou says monotonously, eyes trailing after Endeavor’s blazing, furious form. “But why me? The entire rescuing-me-from-ice is appreciated, but then you pull me right back in?”

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“Shinsou? He’s trapped in the ice?”

“That’s right, guinea pig! I know your first priority is taking down this little ice fish, but you’re going to want to grab Shinsou Hitoshi as you go.”

“I... I want to, but Endeavor–”

“That’s exactly it! Endeavor’s the reason you can’t work the way you usually do, right? Let me tell you this: Shinsou Hitoshi has a very useful quirk that can solve all our problems. What do we need to do right now?”

“We – we need to seal Freeze, obviously. But there are civilians trapped within the ice, and I’m not in a position to be able to – to save them and take down Freeze. So if I handle Freeze, Absolute Zero and Endeavor can focus on rescuing the civilians.”

“Right, right! But Endeavor won’t listen to you!”

“He won’t.”

“That’s the source of all our problems, then. So, how about we get Endeavor out of the way with a little brainwashing?”

“A little what?”

“Shinsou Hitoshi’s quirk is called Brainwashing. Pretty straightforward, right? If we get him to help us, we’ll save the day!”

“But... that...”

“Think about it for a bit, guinea pig. But you better make your decision quick, because we don’t
have much time!”

“I can’t do it. I can’t drag someone else into my mess!”

“You might be doing Brainwash Boy a favour, you know.”

“What?”

“The police were really thorough with his file, so there was a lot of info about him. Doesn’t seem like he has the best social life, which really isn’t that surprising, you know, given his quirk and all.”

“Just – just because his quirk is brainwashing? But that’s–”

“You’re too kind for your own good, Deku. Who knows? If you end up dragging him into your mess, maybe he’ll realize his quirk can be something really cool!”

***

Taking a deep breath, Izuku looks down at his feet. What he’s about to do is going to break every single one of the careful morals he’s set for himself, but when a figure as imposing as the Number Two hero stands before him...

“Your quirk is brainwashing.” Izuku looks Shinsou in the eye as he speaks. “I need you to please tell Endeavor to go rescue to the civilians.”

A wave of nausea slams into Izuku the moment the words leave his mouth, but for some reason, Izuku can’t find it in himself to take them back.

Sure, there’s the fact that Endeavor is, quite literally, of no use against Freeze. As powerful as the Number Two hero is, Freeze is simply too cunning. No amount of heat or flames can keep Freeze down, especially not when it has an entire block’s length of ice to retreat to at will.

(And, even more so, there’s an aura of pride and heat and violent victory that pulsates from Endeavor in waves, as if he’s a god of war, and Izuku can’t help but feel choked under that burning gaze and those condescending eyes.

That’s not what a hero’s supposed to feel like.

Not at all.)

The words leave a bitter taste in Izuku’s mouth. What’s he doing, dragging Shinsou into this mess? What right does he have, demanding ridiculous favours from someone whose quirk is already viewed in a negative light?

Is he destroying Shinsou by asking this?

*Or are you building him up?*

For a moment, Shinsou’s eyes widen. Izuku valiantly retains eye contact up until Shinsou’s lips fall into a tight line.

“So you want to use my quirk against the heroes.” Shinsou’s voice is flat and cold, his eyes equally so. The Lifestrings dangling behind and above him pull taught as his body tenses and his hands clench into fists.

Izuku opens his mouth to refute it, to pretty it up a little, to say that they’re doing the right thing. But
he’s always been terrible at lying, and there’s no way he’s going to lie to someone who can see right through him.

(Those eyes are tired and world-weary. Those eyes see more than others.)

“I’m asking you to use your quirk against the heroes,” Izuku confirms.

But when Shinsou opens his mouth to speak, Izuku raises his hand, cutting him off.

“I – I know this sounds bad. I know it looks really bad, especially since I’m a vigilante, asking you to help me break the law. But…” Wringing his hands, Izuku clenches his jaw, and then relaxes. He takes breath in, and then releases it.

There are so many thoughts in his mind, colliding and bouncing off each other. They’re a disorganized mess, a jumble of words and sentences that Izuku wants to blurt out all at once. But that’s not it. That’s not right.

What sort of words does Izuku need to convey his thoughts to Shinsou?

_Simple. Short. Blunt. Don’t lie, or you’ll hurt him. Do you want to be just another fake hero, or do you want to show him that his quirk can be worth something?_

“But I think your quirk is what’ll be the deciding factor of this fight. Heroes – they aren’t always right. Their actions are sometimes more detrimental than they are helpful. And in this case, Endeavor is more useful digging civilians out of the ice than he is fighting Freeze.”

Lifting his eyes to meet Shinsou’s, Izuku lifts his head and says what he knows is right.

“Everything a hero does should be for the people. I may not be a hero, but I want to do everything I can to protect the people.” Adding a shaky smile, Izuku clutches his staff in front of his chest. “Can you trust me, even after all this?”

For a moment, Shinsou stares at Izuku, his eyes wide and his mouth slightly parted. Then, quietly, he averts his eyes and turns to the side, lifting his hand to his neck. “You’re really a hell of a vigilante, you know?”

Izuku laughs nervously, shifting in place. “I sure am.”

With a deep sigh, Shinsou throws one last glance at Endeavor’s form before turning back to face Izuku.

“I’ll trust you,” he says, and Izuku feels happier than he’s been in a long time. Shinsou puts on that lopsided grin of his, teeth barred. “Should be fun, teaching those heroes a lesson. So, what’s the game plan?”

Reaching into his pocket, Izuku draws out Windy’s card and holds it out to Shinsou. After a moment of hesitation, Shinsou slowly accepts the card.

“It’s going to be difficult, so I need you to please trust me.” A rush of silver and moonlight laps over the edges of Izuku’s mind, twining around his arms and legs, rushing through his veins. The magic circle Izuku has grown so used to bursts to life beneath his feet, sending a beam of pink and silver light up and into the heavens above.

Kero bursts out from one of the larger pockets of Izuku’s belt, his eyes wide. Shinsou startles, his eyes wide and flickering between the circle, Kero, and Izuku, his lips slightly parted as he stares. A
sweeping sort of awe falls over his purple eyes, like a child seeing their heroes for the first time.

With outstretched arms, Kero flitters around Izuku frantically. “Hey, wait! I know we need his help, but do you even know what you’re doing right now?”

“Shinsou Hitoshi,” Izuku says, closing his eyes. Kero’s words float meaninglessly in his mind, devoured by the hundreds of thousands of symbols and runes that fill his mind, humming with old energy and secrets from long ago. “I, Deku, the Master of Cards, hereby grant the blessing of Windy upon you. May you serve under the moon and sweep past all foes who may wish harm upon you.”

Pointing the Sealing Staff at Shinsou, Izuku opens his eyes and taps the card in Shinsou’s outstretched hand. Though Shinsou’s eyes are wide, he stands tall. “Until Freeze returns its form confined, Windy, protect Shinsou. His words are mine until we part.” Lifting the staff to the sky, Izuku takes in a deep breath, his limbs so much lighter than before, his entire body an unshackled vessel for magic. “**Bestow!**”

A burst of green wind bursts past Shinsou’s, rising high, high into the sky, leaving behind the faint trail of bells and laughter and undying perseverance before diving down into Shinsou’s hand in the form of a card once more.

Shinsou stares at Windy for a moment, then looks up at Izuku, then to Kero, and finally back down at Windy. “Did you just lend me one of your cards?”

Nodding numbly, Izuku nearly trips over his own feet before catching himself. He’s always thought that lending his magic to others should’ve been possible, but he never ended up putting it into use. Up until now, that is. “I did. You – you should be able to command Windy until this is all over.”

Kero huffs something unintelligible under his breath, brows furrowed. “But you’ll probably be able to see a lot of stuff from now on, so don’t go crazy or anything, kid.”

Wait, what?

Before Izuku can contemplate throwing himself off the roof, Shinsou looks up with the softest expression that Izuku’s ever seen on him. The tension in that was so obvious in his shoulders slowly seeps away as he gives Izuku a small nod. “I... thanks. For trusting me, I guess.”

Swallowing down the lump of anxiety resting in his throat, Izuku nods. Trust is a silent, mutual agreement. “Thanks for trusting me, too.”

There’s a moment of silence in which Izuku and Shinsou look down at their feet. And, as expected, it’s broken abruptly by Kero shouting, “Oh, that looks bad!”

Izuku’s perched on the edge of the roof before he knows it. Looking down, he sees Absolute Zero, encased in Freeze’s serpentine form, struggling to free herself. Endeavor, having assessed the situation, draws back his attacks, forced to focus his flames around Freeze than directly at it.

“Let’s go,” Izuku says, his voice firm. “Let’s save the day, then go home and sleep for six years.”

Despite everything, Shinsou laughs, lifting himself to join Izuku on edge. “Isn’t that a mood.”

In the midst of the chaos, Izuku and Shinsou throw themselves into the fray.
short scream for clear card arc, if you're excited throw your fucking hands UP, look at my children, look at the art, god i'm excited for more. in other news:

lots of dialogue in this chapter. people who know more than izuku are being thrown into his life and they're just laughing. all of them. they're laughing, izuku. how do you feel - oh he's crying. that's fair.

part of the reason izuku didn't seek information earlier was mostly because of his convincing himself that nobody would tell him anything useful (thanks watanuki) and partially because it didn't really click that he could reach out to others until maru gave him some useful info. poor bby is so confused, everybody pray for him.

some of you might be confused as to why watanuki's not really teaching izuku. don't worry. he is. just in a very roundabout fashion. man, the person who taught watanuki must have been a real asshole, huh?

i told you shinsou would be back. i told you. will i make him into an important character? probably. do izuku's actions have implications further down the line? definitely.

the bestowing power izuku has is something that i've been considering for a while now. one of the differences between ccs and heroaca is that sakura fights mostly by herself with the help of a few other individuals, whereas heroaca is a story of izuku becoming a hero by accepting an incredible group of people into his life. in essence, the bestowing ability is a demonstration of izuku's desire to raise others up by imparting a piece of himself onto them.

once again, thanks for reading, and sorry for the wait!
Chapter Summary

The conclusion of a battle. A new ally, a media storm, and a question without answer.

Chapter Notes

izuku: this is too dangerous, i can't drag anybody else into this, this isn't a burden i should force onto others

shinsou: hi

izuku:

izuku: well,

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hitoshi doesn’t think he’s a greedy person.

Sure, he wants things that he’ll probably never have, but so does everyone. But he’s not stupid enough to cry over things out of his control.

(Hitoshi knows want better than anything in this world, because it’s all he’s done his entire life.

A comprehensive list of things Hitoshi wanted when he was younger and more naive:

- An awesome quirk, so he could be a hero, obviously
- A group of equally as awesome friends, so he’d have people to count on and fight alongside
- To go to UA’s Heroics Department
- To become the greatest hero of all time, or maybe just a really cool hero

A comprehensive list of things Hitoshi wants now:

- Enough sleep
- People to stop bothering him
- To go to UA’s Heroics Department
- To become a great hero to prove to everyone who told him he couldn’t that he’s better than everything they tried to make him into

Some things have changed, and some haven’t.)

But there’s something so light and free about holding one of Deku’s famed cards in his hand. Hitoshi feels lighter than he has in so many years, like he has no burdens, no chains binding him down, no idiots holding his head down under society’s expectations for him, nobody telling him that his quirk is only good for villainy.
Beside him, Deku leaps off the building, a card raised high above his head. “Fly, help me out!”

Wings sprout from the end of Deku’s staff. The vigilante circles up to Shinsou, sitting atop his staff, which further emphasizes the fact that Deku’s really just a glorified magical girl.

“Carpe diem?” Deku asks, his voice a little shy. Hitoshi can’t see the vigilante’s entire face because of the visor covering it, but he’s pretty sure Deku’s blushing.

Snorting, Hitoshi holds Windy’s card above his head, mimicking Deku’s words. “Windy, help me out!”

The card melts into green wind and Windy’s sleek, feminine form hovers above Shinsou, her eyes flickering between her master and her loanee.

Deku shakes his head. After a moment of hesitation, Windy lowers herself to hover at Shinsou’s side, offering a slight nod.

Whatever the hell these cards are, they’re goddamn loyal.

Offering Deku one last glance, Shinsou hops off the edge of the building. For a moment, his stomach drops out from underneath him as the force of gravity hurls him toward the ground in a second of weightlessness.

It would really suck if Deku’s cards decided not to do anything.

Then Windy scoops Shinsou’s falling form in a surprisingly gentle embrace, pillowing him down to the icy pavement in a flurry of ribbon-like strands of wind. Deku flies down a moment later, the weird bear plush following above his shoulder.

“Scared me for a second,” the vigilante mutters, pushing his visor up. He breathes out through his mouth. “But it’s fine. We’re fine.”

The bear clearly isn’t impressed. Turning to Shinsou with scrutinizing eyes, he crosses his arms, chin held high. Despite his tiny form, there’s something incredibly off-putting about him. “You know what to do from here on, kid?”

Huh. This bear must be some sort of familiar or pet. Deku’s becoming more and more of a magical girl with every passing second.

“Let me guess,” Hitoshi drawls, rolling his eyes. He’s a sarcastic asshole all the time, and he won’t be any different around a vigilante. “Get Endeavour to get out of the way and rescue the civilians instead."

Deku nods sharply. “I’ll cover you. Once you do what you need to do, get to safety. Windy’ll escort you then.”

A rush of adrenaline courses through Hitoshi, driving a shiver up his spine, which is a feeling that he’s never felt before. But hell, it’s awesome.

Being needed – being a hero – wouldn’t anyone be excited to be part of something bigger?

“Alright.” Clearing his throat, Hitoshi steps forward, taking slow, careful steps upon the thick sheet of ice that’s layered over the entirety of the street.

Almost instantly, Freeze notices him, letting out an awful screech. The koi lunges forward, barrelling
past Endeavor with shocking speed. A trail of jagged icicles rises from the icy terrain below them.

Oh, shit.

For a moment, Hitoshi is frozen in place. All rational thought leaves his mind, and something deep and primal and scared takes over his limbs, locking them into terrified paralysis.

This is the sort of danger that Deku willingly throws himself into. This is what Deku chooses to do – to stare down fear itself in the face if it means protecting the people.

“Shield, protect him!”

A silver bubble flickers into existence around Hitoshi. Freeze dives headfirst into the bubble, sending visible vibrations through the barrier in a burst of ice shards and freezing gales. And yet the barrier holds strong.

Hitoshi only now realizes that his hands are shaking. But when he looks up at Deku, the vigilante stands tall and proud, firm determination on his face.

“You absolute coward, Freeze!” Deku’s voice seems ten times louder as he challenges the monster, his words echoing off the frosted walls of the surrounding towers. “Why challenge these heroes when you can fight me? Or are you that scared?”

Deku’s taunt works like a charm. In an instant, Freeze turns toward the vigilante, letting loose a long, hair-rising screech, darting after the green-clad vigilante.

Weaving past the monster with trained grace, Deku rises high into the air, drawing away Freeze with him. “Keep going!” Despite the vigilante’s apparent meekness, his voice doesn’t falter once. “You can do it, Shinsou!”

And hell, if Deku, the infamous vigilante who fights for the people and nobody else, has chosen to rely on Hitoshi, then he’d have to be some awful sort of asshole to let Deku down.

As expected, Endeavor is back on his feet, a new sort of anger painted all over his features. His body language screams something of violence and jealousy, and it makes Hitoshi want to sneer and spit in his face.

But he has a job to do.

“Hey, Endeavor, sir!” Breaking into a careful run, Hitoshi makes his way to the pro hero’s side, careful to keep Windy’s card tucked in his pocket.

Endeavor turns to face him, irritation blooming over his features. Wow. What a considerate guy.

“Get to safety, boy.” With a literal burning glare, he looks toward Deku and Freeze. “There are more pressing concerns to address.”

What a bitch. What a straight bitch. It’s never the people come first with Endeavor; no, it’s the villain comes first.

Endeavor isn’t a hero. In fact, it’s shameful to compare him to All Might. Because while one’s the pillar of peace, the undeniable Number One hero, the other’s just an overpowered brawler who feeds off this quirk-obsessed society, fighting the fight for the sake of climbing up to that unreachable position above him.
(Disgusting.)

But it doesn’t matter. It’s just like Endeavor said: there are more pressing concerns to address.

If Endeavor tries to escape the brainwashing, Hitoshi doesn’t notice, because the hero’s body locks up like a statue before him, and god, Hitoshi has never felt more satisfied.

Because he’s a petty asshole, Hitoshi takes his time to confirm that his brainwashing has taken effect, making a show out of blinking confusedly (fake) and waving his hand in front of Endeavor’s face with the most insincere worry he can muster. “Hey, you okay? Everything good?”

Endeavor doesn’t respond, but his hand twitches. It’s fucking hilarious.

Clearing his throat, Hitoshi sweeps his arm toward the towers of ice that line the faces of the buildings. “There are a lot of civilians stuck in the ice,” he says, keeping his voice as monotone as possible. If the police question him, he’ll just say his quirk activated by accident from stress or some bullshit like that. “Please, you’ve got to help them. Leave this to Deku.”

For a moment, the hero’s hands twitch, and Hitoshi flinches toward his pocket.

Then Endeavor takes off toward the civilians, though at a pace much slower than Hitoshi’d like. Asshole.

“Might want to speed it up,” Hitoshi shouts, biting back a bubble of laughter when the hero breaks into a full-on sprint ala Ella Enchanted.

And hang on, does this make Hitoshi a vigilante, too?

For a second, Hitoshi considers the thought. He did just choose to help Deku in breaking the law, which isn’t promising. He also used his quirk on a pro hero to help said vigilante, which adds on another slather of vigilantism.

And now, when Hitoshi turns toward the battle instead of away from it, that’s just the crème de la crème of this wonderful, fucked-up cake that is breaking the law because heroes in this day and age can’t even compare to a kid who just wants to do good.

(To be honest, Hitoshi isn’t much better.

He wants to be a hero, of course, but who doesn’t?

Why does he want to be a hero?

For what reason? For what purpose? Is it to fulfill his childhood dreams, or to prove everyone wrong? Is it for himself, or is it for others?

It’s a complicated question. Right now, Hitoshi doesn’t have an answer.

But the answer to that question doesn’t matter.

Because right now, Deku’s out there, fighting alone to protect everyone while the people society names heroes call him a vigilante, a villain, someone to be looked down upon.

If you really were heroes, you’d be fighting alongside Deku, not against him.

If you really were heroes, you’d be able to see that this vigilante is more of a hero than you’ll ever be.
If you really were heroes, then why the hell aren’t you acting like it?

Fuck you. Fuck all of you.

I’m going to be a hero, and I’ll put you all to shame. I’m going to become a hero that lifts people up instead of pushing them down.

I’m going to become a great fucking hero, and there’s nothing anyone can do to stop me.

Deku’s right. Heroes fight for the people, not just because it’s the right thing to do, but because there’s nothing else to do.

A hero who doesn’t win is still a hero, but a hero who doesn’t put others before themselves isn’t a hero at all.

Hitoshi doesn’t know what spurs him on to walk toward Deku, then run, and then sprint. Even without command, Windy bursts to life alongside him, a trail of emerald wind that surrounds his body, almost as if the card itself is willing him forward, telling him, go.

His shoes pound against the ice and cold whips past his cheeks, numbing his hands, his face, his body. And yet Hitoshi doesn’t feel the cold at all. All he knows is that the only person who’s told him his quirk can be worth something is fighting against the entire world, yelling No, I won’t sit back and watch, I won’t leave everyone to die, I won’t ever give up.

Fighting against the world is hard. It’s tiring. It’s exhausting, and it’s soul-crushing. Hitoshi knows this better than anyone.

The least he can do is do his best to lift up others that are like him, especially when they’ve already given him a purpose.

“Deku!”

At the call of his name, Deku’s head swivels around, and though half his face is hidden, Hitoshi can tell that the vigilante’s eyes are blown wide. “Shinsou – wait, what’s wrong? Did Endeavor–”

The sentence is cut off by Freeze, who summons a chain of icy pillars from the side of the building. One of them catches Deku directly in the side, and the tiny vigilante is knocked across the street and into a wall of ice. The sound of his body colliding with ice is one that Hitoshi knows he isn’t going to forget easily, and the little cry of pain that’s forced out of his lips even less so.

“H-hey, Deku!” Is he okay? Is he conscious? Did Hitoshi just massively screw up by distracting him from the fight?

Thankfully, the vigilante struggles to his feet moments later, one arm clenched around his ribs. He wheezes something inaudible, and his staff shatters into a gleaming blade. “I’m okay! Just – just a bit surprised, is all.”

Taking a shaky, deep breath, Deku relaxes, his form shifting into something sleek and practiced, as if he’s been practicing swordplay his entire life. Despite the attack he just took, his entire aura exudes confidence. Freeze clearly notices, because it draws back into the ice, wary.

“It’s okay, Shinsou. Where’s Endeavor?” Deku’s voice is even and calm.

Catching up to stand at the vigilante’s side, Hitoshi quirks a smile, all teeth. “He’s preoccupied, which leaves us free to take down this demon fish.”
Deku nods, then freezes. The irony is hilarious. “We’?”

Hitoshi snorts, gesturing at the wind spirit-fairy thing that hovers beside him. “You loaned me your precious Wind Waker, right? That makes me at least partially responsible for looking after you, especially since Windy here would murder me if I just ditched you.”

“I... I don’t think Windy would do that.”

“Sure,” is all Hitoshi says. Then, standing straight and locking the vigilante in place with a firm stare: “I’m staying. I’m not going to leave. Arguing with me is pointless, so let’s cut to the chase. How do we take down this icy son of a bitch?”

For a moment, Deku stands there, his grip tightening around the hilt of his sword. His jaw is clenched tight, and he takes in a deep breath.

“Alright.” Relenting, Deku nods at Hitoshi, and then Windy. “I can work with this.”

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Why is Izuku’s life such a mess?

He must’ve been born under an unlucky star. That’s the only explanation to why his ribs are probably cracked, why Kero’s fluttering around him like he’s about to die, and why Shinsou, for some unknown, ridiculous reason, is standing next to him as an accomplice.

*An accomplice.* Oh god, this day is turning out to be the biggest shitshow Izuku’s ever seen.

“Your supporter there sounds really helpful,” Shinsou comments, his eyes scanning Freeze’s still form. “She sounds like a maniac, though.”

“Tell Brainwash Boy I can hear him,” Mei chirps through the Dekucom.

“She can hear you,” Izuku relays. “Also, yes, she is very much a maniac.”

Mei cackles, her fingers flying over her keyboard with series of *clack, clack, clacks.* “You know me so well, guinea pig!”

With a lopsided grin, Shinsou cocks an eyebrow. “So what do I call her? ‘Maniac’? That’s not a bad name.”

There’s no way Izuku’s going to parade around with a helper who’s literally named Maniac.

“Supporter is fine,” he says hastily. “Supporter. Yeah, Supporter. That’s got a nice ring to it.”

It’s only then that Izuku realizes he’s just given Mei a vigilante alias. Great.

Luckily, Shinsou chooses to change the topic to something more relevant. “As we were saying, the only way the beat the fish – Freeze – is to shatter it?”

Izuku jumps onto the change and runs away with it. “T-that’s right! Freeze – well, all of the cards are hard to handle, since magic’s the only effective way to deal with them, and even more so because I’m the only one who can seal them away. If we can shatter Freeze, it won’t be able to reform quickly enough, so I can take advantage of that and seal it.”

When Izuku turns to look at Kero, the plush’s face is in his hands.
It takes a second for Izuku’s brain to catch up to his mouth. When it does, he wants to punch himself in the face.

Shinsou’s expression is a mix of confusion, surprise, and contemplation. After a moment, he nods slowly, crossing his arms. “None of what you just said contradicts what you told the police, so I’m pretty sure you’re telling the truth.”

So Shinsou has read the transcripts. That’s great. Izuku laments the fact that they aren’t standing on top of a building right now, because he really wants to die this very moment.

At least Shinsou still trusts him, which is absolutely unbelievable, especially considering Izuku just spilled and confirmed half his secrets.

(Not all, definitely not all, Izuku’s been racking up secrets like trading cards – oh, wait.)

“How are we doing for time?” Izuku asks Mei, ready to be done with this as soon as possible.

Mei hums, and Izuku can see her leaning forward into her monitor. “We should be okay! The police are actually busy with some sort of top-secret raid today, so they’ll be very distracted.” She then laughs boisterously, because she’s like that.

Okay. Okay, okay. That’s good, because that means the officials will be slow to arrive. Even if they do decide to jump in their cars and speed down, Izuku has the spirits on his side, and they’re scarily good at keeping humans at bay. Izuku has no idea how they do it, and he really doesn’t want to know.

Despite how horrible the situation is, the odds are in their favour. Freeze is powerful and tricky, but Izuku has his cards, his magic, and his allies.

Everything will surely be alright.

“I have a plan,” Izuku says, pointing the tip of his blade at Freeze’s still form. The koi narrows its eyes but hangs back, still wary. “Our endgame plan is to shatter Freeze. Normally, I’d try cracking it open from the inside like I did using Wood, but we can’t do that anymore – at least, not while Absolute Zero’s stuck there.”

Shinsou hums in agreement. It’s a miracle that Izuku knows somebody as rational (or crazy? It’s one of the two) and as calm as Shinsou. “Even Endeavor had the decency to pull back, and that man’s a fighting machine. We’d better be careful.”

“And Freeze knows how we’ll use Wood,” Kero adds. “It won’t fall for our tricks so easily next time.”

That’s right. Freeze is the black sheep of the Sakura Card family; the one that sits back and actually plans the chaos it wants to cause instead of charging in with no rhyme or reason. It’s clear that the card understands strategy to an extent that the others don’t, which is a change Izuku can say with certainty he isn’t a fan of.

(Because it’s starting to feel like they’re not fighting against a card, but a villain.)

Beside him, Shinsou lets out a long huff of breath. It’s difficult to tell if he’s actually scared or just putting on a front, but either way, it’s clear that he can act in the face of danger. That’s amazing. “As far as I know, my quirk only works on people. Plus, they have to respond verbally to me for me to actually be able to hijack them.” Sliding his hands into his pockets, Shinsou looks off to the side. “I can’t really do anything.”
What?

Can’t do anything? Can’t do anything?

“Listen,” Izuku says, grabbing Shinsou’s arm. An unfamiliar emotion bubbles beneath his skin, an awful mix of jealousy, disbelief, and anger. “You don’t get to say that. You – you are never allowed to say that.”

Shinsou’s expression drops icy flat. He wrenches his arm out from Izuku’s grasp. “Say what?” he demands.

“You’re telling me that you’re useless because you can’t – you can’t use your quirk.”

Izuku shouldn’t be saying this. He barely even knows Shinsou. And yet he can’t just ignore him, leave him to build up his life around his quirk, to go on thinking that his quirk is all that he is. Because it’s not. It’s not. Izuku learned that years ago, when he refused to let his quirklessness become who he was, when he jumped headfirst into the world, ready to experience everything, when he began meeting people and seeing them for who they were rather than what their quirks did for them.

“I don’t care if you can’t use your quirk,” Izuku declares, his grip on Sword tightening. “I don’t care because it doesn’t matter to me.”

“You can’t just–”

“Listen.” The tip of Sword’s blade scratches along the ground, gouging a deep slash into the ice beneath them. “Your quirk is amazing. You can do so much good with it, and it’s obvious that you want to do good with it.”

(Choosing to stay and offer his help rather than escaping isn’t just a decision. It’s a reflex. Wanting to help, jumping into the fray, saying yes, I’ll do it, because there’s nothing else to do – that’s the essence of being a hero.)

Shinsou flushes, a rush of scarlet rising to his cheeks, before hastily covering his face with his palm. “I – that’s none of your business.”

“I don’t care if you can’t use your quirk,” Izuku repeats, voice unwavering. “I don’t care because it doesn’t matter to me.”

“You can’t just–”

“Listen.” The tip of Sword’s blade scratches along the ground, gouging a deep slash into the ice beneath them. “Your quirk is amazing. You can do so much good with it, and it’s obvious that you want to do good with it.”

(Choosing to stay and offer his help rather than escaping isn’t just a decision. It’s a reflex. Wanting to help, jumping into the fray, saying yes, I’ll do it, because there’s nothing else to do – that’s the essence of being a hero.)

Shinsou flushes, a rush of scarlet rising to his cheeks, before hastily covering his face with his palm. “I – that’s none of your business.”

“Your quirk is amazing,” Izuku repeats, voice unswerving. “But to say you can’t do anything because you can’t use your quirk is wrong. A quirk doesn’t decide your actions. You do. And you chose – you chose to come running back instead of away, and–” Izuku’s voice hitches, catching on something uncomfortable and strange and so, so thankful. “And you chose to put your trust in me, and I just–”

There’s so much that Izuku wants to say to Shinsou. There’s so much he could say regarding quirks, society, what being a hero really means–

(Thank you so much for trusting me. Thank you for choosing to fight with me rather than against me.)

“You are not your quirk.”

This is the one truth Izuku knows better than anything else.

“You don’t grow into your quirk. You grow with it. As long as you lift others up, it doesn’t matter
what your quirk is, because you’ll always be a hero.”

To his side, Kero lets out a small laugh, crossing his arms with an incredibly wide grin. Mei says something along the lines of “Oh-ho, truly inspiring words” before returning to radio silence.

Shinsou stands before him, his eyes wide and his body lax. It’s almost identical to the awe he showed when Izuku demonstrated his magic, but instead of eyes swept over with wonder, a painful sort of disbelief stares back at Izuku.

Has – has nobody told Shinsou this before? Has nobody ever looked at his amazing quirk and thought of one single good thing that could come from it?

(What sort of society do they live in if children are branded for life from the day they turn four?)

“I just wanted you to know that,” Izuku says, pushing his visor up. He needs to talk to Shinsou more, get to know him, see what went so wrong to make them so different when they have such similar circumstances. “Just know that I really value your presence here, and it’s your heroic spirit that I really admire about you.”

Kero nods approvingly, hovering down to whack at Shinsou’s unruly hair. When Shinsou goes to bat him away, Kero smiles. “Besides, Windy’s yours until we’re done with Freeze. Even at the most basic level, you’re our support! Don’t forget that, kid!”

Everything that needs to be said has been said. Izuku desperately hopes he’s gotten his message across.

“What an incredible speech,” Mei says over the comm, a smile in her voice. “I’ll make sure I get a real good recording to post so everyone can see your morals up front!”

Oh, what?

Before Izuku can even begin to think of the implications of that sentence, Shinsou bursts into laughter, his shoulders shaking as he laughs, laughs, and laughs.

“You’re a goddamn idiot,” he finally says, rubbing at his eyes. “Stopping to give me a pep talk in the middle of a fight. What are you, my coach?”

It’s Izuku’s turn to blush. He pulls his hood down as far as possible, wishing that he could curl into a tiny ball and go to sleep.

Maybe this could’ve waited until after, but nooo, he had to get excited and run his mouth. “I – I’d like to think that I’m an accidental vigilante, and – and that’s about it.”

Despite everything, Shinsou rests his hand on Izuku’s shoulder for a moment before coughing into his fist. That one moment gives Izuku life. “So, about Freeze...”

Right. The elephant in the room is literally staring them down from across the street, and they haven’t even touched it.

But it’s okay, because Izuku isn’t fighting alone.

Kero has always been at his side, acting as the mountain of support that never moves, never lets up. Mei is his literal Supporter, acting as both mission control and a sanity check. And now there’s Shinsou, the calm, level-headed civilian with a sharp mind and a big heart.
“I’m going to need all of you to help. This is how we’ll take Freeze down...”

***

go go gadget @philosoapopera
Due to popular demand, I now have a created a twitter account! Good afternoon, everyone!!!

go go gadget @philosoapopera
This may seem sudden, but i’ll be streaming something very exciting in a moment. If you have any interest in Deku whatsoever, do yourself a favour and watch it!!!

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
@AYUMI Hey uh yeah just wanted to say ARE YOU SEEING THIS???

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
Replying to @thebiggestofall
OH I CERTAINLY AM, DON’T WORRY

kitchen nuggets @givetheboynugs
holy shit holy shit holy shit holy shi t

fritty pits @peachfuzzies
i knew Deku was at least half decent at swordplay but this is straight out of an anime, oh my god, are you seeing his moves he is a n i n j a

mimiqueue @disguiseismvp
all i’m seeing on my feed is something about Deku and a sword and a purple dude? I’m so confused wtf

I, too, am crying @ittybittycrybaby
OHHH MY GOD DID YOU SEE THAT?? DID YOU FUCKING SEE THAT WHAT WAS THAT

the only valid mood is food @excalibuhr
i... i never thought that i would see the day where a vigilante, his familiar, and his accomplice pull something straight out of d gray man... i am shook on so many levels

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
ALRIGHT Y’ALL, LET’S GIVE A ROUND OF APPLAUSE TO OUR BOY FOR SEALING AWAY YET ANOTHER MONSTER, I’M SO PROUD OF HIM

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
For everybody out there who’s confused, let me recap what just happened, since the fate of the video is unknown as of yet:

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
@philosoapopera, the Reddit user who leaked information regarding the Deku case, has officially made their debut on Twitter! Hilariously enough, their third tweet happened to be a livestream of Deku’s latest escapade.

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
This is crazy by itself, but Deku really kicked his game up a notch this time. Let me set the stage:
Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
Deku, our favourite vigilante, was taken into police custody and interrogated about a month and a half ago. He escaped, and @philosoapopera leaked the transcript of the interrogation a bit later.

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
Between then and now, Deku’s showed himself three times:

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
His first appearance after his arrest was when he broke into the Musutafu History Museum and reportedly stole a pair of scales. His intentions behind this are unknown, but given his actions so far, the scales were probably a card.

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
His second appearance was during the annual Musutafu Christmas Parade, in which he recreated a Fantasmic show and then wished everyone a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year. He was probably feeling festive.

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
His third appearance was about a week ago, where he intervened in a situation that had a few blocks of downtown turned into a forest. Although Kamui Woods pursued him, he escaped with a new card.

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
And, just now, Deku and an unnamed individual (as of yet) took down an ice monster in a very badass way. I’m sure many will agree with me on this.

Toshiro Ayumi @AYUMI
For now, I’ll refer you all to @thebiggestofall, who’s made a thread detailing this monumental fight!

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
At this point, we all known Deku’s more than capable of handling these fake villains, but BOY was today a treat. I’ll keep this as straightforward as possible, so let’s begin!!

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Endeavor and Ab0 are on the scene first. Try to take down the villain b/c it’s still causing lots of trouble. Police strangely absent? Some there, but most trapped in villain’s ice attacks.

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Heroes’ attacks ineffective for the most part. Things are looking bad. Then Deku drops in from the sky, cuts a civilian (the infamous accomplice, who’ll be known as Purple) from the ice. Deku tries to talk to Endeavor, mostly ignored.

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Shit is really starting to hit the fan. Then Ab0 gets caught by villain and Endeavor goes to help civilians. Deku takes a bad hit, but seems okay. It’s Deku + Purple vs. villain now. Here’s where it gets awesome, so strap up!!

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
First half of the fight’s basically Deku demonstrating why he’s a competent fighter. Jumping all over the place, weaving past attacks, etc, etc. Really hacking at it w/ his sword, though.

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Seems like Purple a) has some sort of wind quirk or b) was lent it by Deku? Either way, Purple plays...
support, moving Deku out of the way from really quick attacks. Deku’s protecting Purple in turn w/ a barrier of some sort.

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Awesome fight so far, but it’s about to get even better:

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Deku jumps up crazy high, like CRAZY FUCKING HIGH. Uses the side of a building to shoot off and stab his sword into villain’s body. This is particularly awesome, considering that the jump broke windows, what the fuck??

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Deku jumps up even higher this time w/o his sword. Purple uses wind to propel him down. Deku pulls some ninja shit and flips in midair. Lands directly on hilt of his sword, which drives the damn thing in so hard the villain shatters. Deku seals villain into card.

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
Deku, Purple, and familiar take a moment to collect themselves and talk. Endeavor comes charging back in, so Deku and familiar book it.

TheBigBoy @thebiggestofall
And that, ladies and gentlemen, has been your weekly Deku Report. I’ll see you next week, when Deku pulls some more crazy shit. This boy is a goddamn icon, what a hero.

***

[20:19] u spin me right round baby:
you, my friend, are one mad motherfucker

[20:22] Izuku:
it’s been a long day

[20:33] u spin me right round baby:
it’s been a long life
also u realize you u a spare baton you can use to smack shit right
can’t u fly and stab things at the same time

[20:35] Izuku:
FU C K

[20:39] u spin me right round baby:
luv u bby

[20:44] Izuku:
god i’m so stupid
in other news
do u mind if i add u to a group chat i’m thinking of making

[20:45] u spin me right round baby:
don’t ask just do
but it’s weird for u to actually make a group chat
what’s this about
[20:47] Izuku:
remember that vigilantism thing

[20:47] u spin me right round baby:
bit hard to forget but yeah

[20:48] Izuku:
i have made some uh.
friends
they um. know some things

[20:49] u spin me right round baby:
OHHH MY GODDDD
I CAN’T BELIEVE THIS DAY HAS FINALLY COME

[20:49] Izuku:
WHY ARE U SO EXCITED

[20:50] u spin me right round baby:
izuku bby i love u and i will support this lifestyle
when this chat is created add me immediately

[20:53] Izuku:
originally i wanted u to be my reality check
but now i’m thinking that’s not a good idea
this whole thing is a v bad idea
i shouldn’t get u involved anyway wtf am i thinking
i’ve dragged a lot of people into my mess and if anything happens i’ll die

[20:56] u spin me right round baby:
oh sweetheart ur so pure
u have such a big heart
but let me remind u that i rly don’t need protecting ok
having a retired pro hero as an aunt has its perks
meaning if anyone messes w me i’ll split their head open

[21:00] Izuku:
...Zing is v scary

[21:00] u spin me right round baby:
she is

[21:01] Izuku:
i don’t know this still seems like a bad idea

[21:01] u spin me right round baby:
i have all of zing’s login info for hero exclusive forums

[21:19] u spin me right round baby:
izuku are u ok
i’ve been seeing “izuku is typing” for the past 10 mins

[21:20] Izuku:
i’m ok
just asking one of my friends what she thinks

[21:20] u spin me right round baby:
and??????

[21:22] Izuku:
she says it’s ok
in a much more roundabout way but she approves

[21:22] u spin me right round baby:
excellent
i know i won’t be much help w ur actual escapades but i’ll do my best!!

[21:23] Izuku:
don’t say that
u have done so much for me
i really appreciate that u um. kept quiet

[21:24] u spin me right round baby:
no prob man
we socially anxious wrecks need to stick together
and don’t thank me then u have to thank half the city

[21:27] Izuku:
what

[21:27] u spin me right round baby:
don’t worry about it
anyway should be fun getting to know ur friends!!

[21:29] Izuku:
i still need to talk to the last person about all of this
so give it a bit

[21:29] u spin me right round baby:
yeah sounds good
u need anything else?

[21:30] Izuku:
um
do u happen to know how to tell if ur ribs are cracked

[21:32] u spin me right round baby:
stay there don’t move
i’m breaking into ur apartment

[21:32] Izuku:
pls don’t make a scene my mom’s in

[21:33] u spin me right round baby:
u know what nvm
i’m not just the one w the subscription accounts
i'm the fucking medic

[21:34] Izuku:
that... actually sounds reasonable
in that case pls help me doctor

[21:35] u spin me right round baby:
i can make justified medic jokes now
i’m living my best life

[21:35] Izuku:
doctor my ribs

[21:35] u spin me right round baby:
right right
keep ur chest iced for now i’ll be there soon

[21:38] u spin me right round baby:
god this is so surreal
@zing thanks for teaching me all this i can’t believe i’m using it

***

Interview with Shinsou Hitoshi, Civilian Involved in Deku’s Vigilante Activities

Togami Natsuki, amateur journalist

NAT SUKI: Do you mind if I ask you a few questions?

SHINSOU: You’re the only person I’ll probably even talk to, so yeah, you’d better ask some.

NAT SUKI: Thank you. Then, if it’s not too rude, what’s your name?

SHINSOU: Shinsou Hitoshi. And before you ask, no, I’m not a vigilante. I’m literally in a jacket and sweatpants. Did you see Deku? Does it look like I have a purple jumpsuit?

NAT SUKI: No, of course not. But it did look like you spoke a lot to each other. What were you talking about?

SHINSOU: It was a pep talk. He told me what to do, and that was it.

NAT SUKI: If that’s the case, then why not just leave it to the heroes? Absolute Zero and Endeavor were on the scene as well.

SHINSOU: Absolute Zero was busy being a human popsicle and Endeavor was melting civilians out of ice. So far, Deku’s been batting a thousand when it comes to keeping civilians safe, so following his instructions guaranteed my safety. I did what I could.

NAT SUKI: What did Deku do, exactly? Was the wind part of your quirk?

SHINSOU: No, my quirk’s – he lent it to me. The wind thing. Said it would keep me safe, and it did.

NAT SUKI: And did Deku say anything regarding his own quirk? Did he either confirm or deny his
previous statements?

SHINSOU: What, about how he’s quirkless? Yeah, he said everything he mentioned in the transcript. Something about magic and sealing cards. And – oh, looks like the cops have finally arrived. If you have any more questions, you’d better ask them, because I probably won’t be available for a while.

NATSUKI: I understand. In that case, what do you think of Deku?

SHINSOU: Well, that’s not a hard question to answer, is it? I think he’s who he is. That’s it.

NATSUKI: And what’s that?

SHINSOU: A goddamn hero, obviously. What else?

[Police intervene and take Shinsou Hitoshi in for questioning.]

Shinsou was unlikely to be lying; there would have been very little time to forge a story. His actions were most likely spurred on by a sense of heroism or anxiety.

He mentioned something about magic, which apparently is the source of Deku’s abilities. As strange as this may sound, it explains why Deku’s abilities don’t resemble any known quirks.

Should reread the transcripts and examine the footage more closely.

Who is Deku, really?

***

“Surprisingly enough, you don’t have any cracked or broken ribs. God, Izuku, what the hell are you made of?”

“You’re asking me? I could’ve sworn something was broken earlier today. Breathing hurt.”

“Your chest is pretty bruised, but you seem okay otherwise. Maybe this fancy magic thing of yours gives you some nifty healing powers or something.”

“Oh god, please don’t say something like that. It’s bad enough as it is.”

“You wouldn’t need to think about it if you stopped getting hurt.”

“I won’t promise anything.”

***

The sun is up above in the sky, offering a bit of warmth to the early February morning. Everything is nice and orderly – no spontaneous favours, no overly curious spirits, and most importantly, no magical cards–

“I thought you wanted me to fix a bike,” Izuku says miserably.

“This is a bike,” Ms. Kino laughs, wiping her grease-stained hands on an old towel. “What were you expecting?”

– So honestly, it could be much worse.
Izuku stares at the motorcycle before him. The giant wrench in his hand feels awfully out of place. “Something without an engine.”

So far, Izuku’s day has been a colossal disaster. Helping Ms. Kino fix her supposed bike was supposed to be a calm, quiet way to relax – after all, Izuku’s more than familiar with the ins and outs of bike repair.

Izuku doesn’t even own a bike. He does, however, know many, many people with diverse talents. If they want to pass down their tricks to Izuku, then who’s he to refuse? (It’s not like he can, anyway.)

“This is a bad idea,” Izuku mumbles, kneeling down beside Ms. Kino as she fiddles with – with something. There are way too many parts in the engine. “I’ve never even fixed anything with an engine. I’m going to blow it up.”

Ms. Kino cocks an eyebrow. “Don’t be silly. I’ve been messing with this old boy for decades, and I’ve never managed to blow anything up!”

*There’s always a first time for everything*, is what Izuku wants to say. He wisely decides to store that thought for another day and shifts the tool box a little closer to his person. “I guess it can’t hurt to try.”

Ms. Kino beams. Despite her old age, something about her seems rejuvenated, as if she’s a child once more. Her green eyes sparkle with fond amusement as she hands Izuku a pair of gloves. Izuku’s always thought she was just another kind woman, but there’s a certain glimmer in her eye that promises something more mischievous, more curious, more mysterious.

(It’s nowhere near Watanuki’s state of knowing, but it’s there nonetheless.)

“Suit up, then. It’s time to introduce you to Hermes.”

***

“You’re doing great. Have you done something like this before?”

“Um, I’ve repaired smaller things, like clocks and radios and bikes – as in, recreational bikes.”

“Ah, no wonder. It seems like you have a talent for fixing things, don’t you?”

“N-not particularly. I just like, um, helping others. It really takes you across the city.”

“That certainly explains why you’re running all over the place so much. You’re the city’s golden boy!”

“What? No, no, I just – I get into a lot of weird situations, and one thing leads to another, and – my life is very chaotic.”

“Well, don’t we all need a little chaos in our lives? It makes our days interesting and different, keeps us on our toes. And I’d know that better than anyone, given that I travelled my entire childhood!”

“You did?”

“That’s right. You could say I was a nomad of sorts. It’s a very romantic story, really. Those were certainly the days – riding for days at a time, seeing the world for what it really was – those were the days.”
“When you say ‘riding’...”

“Oh my good friend here, Hermes.”

“Did you, uh, happen to get Hermes during your travels? Because that’s a very fitting name.”

“No, but it worked out quite nicely! Hermes, the god of boundaries and travel, leading around a young teenager across the world. It was certainly a life-changing experience. I’m not one for paganism, but it’s always nice to imagine that someone’s watching over you as you tour the world, isn’t it?”

“Ha. I, ah, can’t say I’m a huge fan of gods and the like. All-knowing beings have a tendency to piss me off. I just really hate – I mean, if gods existed, then they’d know everything but refuse to tell us anything. That’s not something I appreciate.”

“Is that so? That’s a shame. I’ve had you delivering flowers to a god’s shrine for a while now, you know.”

“I know. I, um, found out a little while ago.”

“Did you? Well, they call him an unnamed god, but it’s foolish to think that gods are left with no name. I imagine he’s just one of many forgotten gods in this day and age. I know he’s a supposed god of doors and safe passage, which is certainly promising, especially to an old traveller like me.”

“...Yorihiko. That’s his name. It’s Yorihiko.”

“‘Yorihiko’, you say? It certainly rolls off the tongue. It’s like you to know the strangest things, but then again, you’re a Latin prodigy! Myths and folklore must be what your life revolves around.”

“No kidding.”

“Personally, I’m one for believing that there are strange happenings all around us. Society these days is terribly focused on quirks, heroes, and the like to a point where we tend to forget that there’s so much more outside of our own little bubble. I’d know; my entire youth consisted of breaking that bubble! It seems like you’re doing the same.”

“Life has a way of hitting me where I expect it the least. I... sort of fall into the blow, I guess? I try to make the best of everything that happens. And a lot happens.”

“You’re much luckier than me! I had to run all over the world in search of adventure, but it seems like adventure comes running to you.”

“I’d run away if I could.”

“Well, we’re all running away from what’s pursuing us, aren’t we?”

“Huh? What? That’s – that – I don’t–”

“Don’t think to hard about it. I’ve done my fair share of running. In fact, the beginning and ending of my journey both happened because I was running away.”

“From what?”

“As cheesy as it may sound, I was running from my fate. As a child, I ran away from home, and as an adult, I ran away from my troubles. And I did get away, though not without help.”
“I... I guess we all need people to help us. Not everything can be resolved by turning back and fighting your pursuers.”

“Especially when they’re incorporeal! It’s nice to see that you understand what I’m saying. You remind me of someone who helped me out greatly in the past, actually.”

“I do?”

“It’s hard to explain. There’s something about your helping everyone that feels familiar, and that’s a trait not many have. The fact that you can’t refuse a request only reinforces that.”

“It’s a bad habit that I desperately wish I could control.”

“And, not to sound strange, but... you have an aura of sorts that feels very familiar. It’s like a feeling, or a tingling energy. I’m sorry if I’m not making much sense.”

“Wait, wait, hang on. Um, I apologize if I’m being rude, but who exactly do I remind you of?”

“Oh, you wouldn’t know her. In fact, I never did get her name. All I know was that she ran a shop of sorts. She was a beautiful woman; long black hair, a slender figure, and whatnot.”

“A shop. A shop. Where is this shop?”

“Somewhere far away, yet right next door.”

“Please don’t do this to me.”

“Ha! I was just joking. I’d love to tell you, but that’s what she told me. It was a beautiful shop, though. Who knows? Maybe one day, if you play your cards right, you’ll end up there too.”

“Yeah. Maybe. Oh my god.”

“Hmm? Sorry, I didn’t catch that last part.”

“Nothing! I was – I was just wondering how to take this part out – yeah, that small screw thing.”

“Oh, I’d better show you. Here, it’s like this...”

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[19:45] Izuku:
I wish you’d tell me something. Anything.

[19:47] Watanuki:
Well, good evening to you too.

[19:47] Izuku:
I can feel the life draining out of me.

[19:48] Watanuki:
Don’t be like that! It’s good to learn on your own. Besides, I’m pointing you toward the answers, aren’t I?

[19:49] Izuku:
THE ONLY REASON I’M GETTING ANSWERS IS BECAUSE I REALIZED I CAN ASK FOR THEM
Of course.
But no matter what either of us did, you would’ve arrived at the same answers.
The path would’ve been different, but the destination would’ve been the same.
It’s hitsuzen, you know?

Just say “inevitable”.
If you start sounding more cryptic than you already do I’ll die.

Is that a challenge?

No need to get so riled up.
Besides, you have more important things to take care of, don’t you?

You have a lot on your plate all the time, of course.
But you’d best prepare yourself.
If you thought the battles you’ve experienced so far have been difficult, you’re in for a treat.

Please tell me.

Why would I do that? You need to seek out the answers for yourself!

I hate you so much
If I die to whatever bs is coming my way I will be very upset
I need you to know this so I’ll be breaking into your house tomorrow

You can just say you have questions for me.

I HATE YOU SO, SO MUCH

Izuku’s head feels like it’s splitting in half and it’s not even seven yet.

“You just sleep in,” Kero grumbles, rolling himself into a tight clothing burrito. “You have a free
weekend for once. That’s like, I don’t know, a blue moon or something.”

Despite the horrendous pounding in his head, Izuku forces himself out of bed and proceeds to throw as much cold water on his face as humanly possible. Apparently he takes too long, because Kero joins him a bit later, an unimpressed expression on his plush features.

It’s been a busy month.

Tugging on his clothes with more force than necessary, Izuku grudgingly packs his bag and grabs his skateboard. “I have so many unanswered questions, and I’ll strangle the answers out of Watanuki if I need to.”

First Yorihiko, then the spirits, and now Ms. Kino? Two’s a coincidence, but three’s a pattern.

Yorihiko was the first to say something strange about Izuku’s magic, and hoo boy did he say a lot. The spirits only added to the mystery that is Ms. Yuko, and Ms. Kino’s latest comments leave way too much up to the imagination.

So far, Izuku has come to one of two conclusions: Ms. Yuko is yet another one of Watanuki’s many supernatural associates, or she’s something even more powerful, which is...
Well. It’s a thought.

It doesn’t take long for Izuku to make his way to the empty lot upon which Watanuki’s shop stands. Instead of hovering by his shoulder as usual, Kero mingles with the crowd of spirits trailing behind Izuku, flitting around and asking questions.

It’s nice to know that they’re both desperate for answers.

“Well, I’ll see you later.” Offering a small wave, Kero makes himself comfortable on the fencepost, looking incredibly world-weary. “If this Watanuki guy keeps being a cryptic, sock him the face. That oughta do it.”

“Oh, I will,” Izuku promises, entirely serious.

Turning to face the empty plot of land, Izuku takes a deep breath in, imagines the very fabric of space folding open before him, and steps forward.

Something catches his foot immediately after he steps past the barrier, and Izuku goes sprawling to the ground in a pathetic clutter of limbs and anxiety.

“I hate you so much,” Izuku says miserably, deciding that the floor is his home now.

Watanuki leans down with a raised eyebrow. His arms are crossed, and there’s a jokingly serious expression on his face that does a great job of pissing Izuku off. “Now, don’t be like that. What if you were a thief? I have a lot of valuables in my store, you know.”

Izuku takes a moment to marvel at how quickly Watanuki went from Mysterious All-Knowing Magician Master to Smug Asshole Who I’d Like to Murder so quickly.

Maybe Izuku’s just been frustrated lately. After all, he’s been getting so many bits and pieces to the enormous puzzle that is his magic. And then there’s Watanuki, who points him in an obscenely vague direction and says it’s for his education. Watanuki is a roadblock of sorts; the chest that won’t open no matter how many times you go at it with a lockpick.

Watanuki stares. “Are you going to get up?”
“No,” Izuku answers resolutely.

Maru and Moro are quick to take advantage of his apathy, squealing and pouncing on his unsuspecting form. They proceed to attack him with tickles, and hey, that’s not fair, what the fuck.

Eventually, Izuku manages to throw off the two demon children. They scurry to Watanuki’s side, wide grins on their unnaturally similar features. “He got up,” they sing-song in unison.

Izuku knows very well that Kacchan isn’t the best role model – after all, how could one person have so much rage?

“You exist solely for the purpose of making my life a living nightmare,” Izuku says, voice flat and sharp like a blade.

Maybe Kacchan’s onto something.

Watanuki simply shrugs and beckons for Izuku to follow, his lips quirked upward. “You’d be surprised,” he answers, which is equally infuriating as it is terrifying, because at this point, Izuku knows very well that Watanuki never lies; his words are always the truth, just in a more roundabout fashion.

And so Izuku trails after the Shopkeeper, praying desperately that today is the day he gets the answers he’s been seeking.

“You look well, considering everything.” Making himself comfortable at the table Izuku remembers from his first visit, Watanuki gestures toward the other chair. “You’re curious, aren’t you? Why don’t we see if I can help you a little?” The magician then proceeds to put on a beaming smile.

Yeah, no, that doesn’t get any less irritating.

Pulling the chair out from the table, Izuku seats himself, drops his Sakura Cards onto the table, and mumbles a quiet *Release* under his breath.

Izuku pauses to place the Sealing Staff on his lap before looking Watanuki in the eye. “I want to ask you a few things. I don’t know how much you know, and I don’t think you’re going to tell me anything close to what I want.”

One very handy thing Ms. Yuko has taught him is that if he wants to be taken seriously by those who hold leverage over him, he has to make himself a threat. It’s unlikely that someone like Watanuki will ever see Izuku as dangerous, but the confidence boost, no matter how fake, is still helpful.

“Everyone around me, even those who have never wielded magic once in their lives, know more than me.” Izuku clenches his hands, a deep pit of *I must know* thrumming at the base of his stomach. “As – as a magician myself, that’s unacceptable.”

*(Knowledge is power. The more you know, the more threatening you are. As long as you know more, you win.)*

Watanuki hums in agreement. “Skipping the pleasantries just like that, hmm?”

Maru and Moro giggle as they move a platter of madeleines and a pot of tea onto the table. Watanuki nods his quiet thanks, pouring himself a cup of the unfamiliar-smelling tea. Izuku, as always, pours himself a cup and downs it as quickly as possible. His expression doesn’t change once.
Watanuki blinks. “That was impressive.”

“I try,” Izuku snarks. “Can I ask my questions now?”

Folding his hands beneath his chin, Watanuki smiles something smooth and unnerving and all-knowing, his heterochromic eyes glinting strangely. The paper lanterns that light the room glow with an otherworldly aura, burning all shades of red, blue, and ghostly white.

For a second, when Izuku looks around, all he sees are Watanuki’s mismatched eyes, burning with a flame older than human imagination, flickering in the wind but never yielding to it.

And then Izuku blinks again and the eyes are paper lanterns once more. Across from the table, Watanuki waits, his rubious lips curled upward.

(It’s terrifying, of course, but what else is new?)

Izuku stares at his hands. Then he reaches for a madeleine and shoves the entire thing into his mouth.

The Shopkeeper notices Izuku’s discomfort immediately. “Now that I have your attention, let’s continue,” he laughs, the tension in the room draining instantly. “Ask away. But be aware – as knowledgeable as I am, there’s still so much I don’t know.”

“I don’t care.” With one hand, Izuku brushes crumbs off his lips, and with the other, he grips his staff tightly. “Anything will do. As long as you give me the pieces, I’ll put the puzzle together.” “That’s a good way of doing it,” Watanuki says.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku leans back against the chair, eyes closed.

This is it. This is his chance. If he asks the right questions, he can get the right answers.

“Are there any magicians other than me in my world?”

Watanuki shrugs comically. “Quite possibly. Who knows?”

Izuku lets out a huff of breath.

No. No, that’s not what he wants. But Watanuki doesn’t lie; that’s clear enough. Which means it’s not Watanuki who’s in the wrong, but Izuku himself.

He’s not asking his questions correctly.

Drawing upon the gentle crooning that laps at the corners of his mind, Izuku relaxes, pushing the tension, the anxiety, the confusion down underneath the currents of his thoughts with an iron grip. There’s no doubt that Watanuki is powerful and mysterious, but someone even more so dwells in the deepest recesses of Izuku’s mind, smiling, her voice like silver bells across the blackened landscape. She waits patiently as she’s done for so long, entangled within a cage of strings that barely holds her there, the last embers of her supposed eternal life. and there she dangles, calm and collected, because nothing can faze her. no, it’s been too long.

the expiry date has long passed, but what does time and logic mean in the face of the entire universe and beyond, stretching on and on and on for all of eternity and some more?

what’s your wish? what will you pay for it?

it’s not her place anymore, but that doesn’t mean that her legacy is lost.
And there resides one more, sleeping deep within Izuku’s soul, blanketed safely by the light and the desire to **help, to save, to be more than just another cardcaptor**. She sleeps, tired and world-weary, her friends long gone and her time long passed. But she can rest easy knowing that her duty is done and that her successor is someone she knows will create grand waves in the dark, stormy ocean that is the universe.

**And it doesn’t mean that her legacy is lost, either.**

Izuku’s power may not be his own, but he’ll be damned if he doesn’t make himself worthy of wielding the gifts such incredible people bestowed upon him.

Clenching his hand into a tight fist, Izuku looks Watanuki in the eye and hardens his resolve.

“I have a right to know because there are villains in my world who threaten the peace that our heroes have so delicately cultivated. If there truly are any magicians besides me, I need to know what their intentions are and if my appearance will draw them into the public eye.” The words pour out of Izuku, more articulate and decisive than they’ve ever been. “Shopkeeper, tell me this: are there any other magicians in my world?”

Silence. Watanuki stares Izuku down, his expression carefully blank, like paint scraped off an old canvas and slathered anew with white. “Your question is a costly one,” he says, the tone of his voice airy and heavy all at once.

“I’ll pay it back accordingly,” Izuku promises. He will. He **will**, just – no, no, now’s not the time to get sidetracked. Tomorrow’s problems are for tomorrow’s Izuku. “Everything. I’ll pay back everything in exact change, no less, no more. As long as I get something that answers my question, I’m satisfied.”

This feels awfully familiar to bargaining with a certain information broker, but on a scale incomprehensible greater.

Casually swinging one leg over the other, Watanuki shifts his posture to one more befitting of the Shopkeeper; he who tends to the Wish-Granting Shop, eternally stagnant, an anchor – no, a gravestone he willingly placed upon his shoulders like a proud mantle, look at him, look closely, and you’ll see what he once was.

“Nicely said.” The veil of blankness lifts off Watanuki’s features, and he grins. Now that’s an expression Izuku recognizes. “I’m impressed, Deku. For that, allow me give you what you’d consider a straightforward answer – and what I’d consider cheating, of course.”

That’s music to Izuku’s ears. A straightforward answer from the notorious cryptid of the Wish-Granting Shop himself? It’s a wish come true, all irony intended.

With a smile, a tilt of the head, and an aura of what Izuku can only describe as sarcastic happiness, Watanuki says, “No.”

That’s... that’s an answer, alright. Yup. That’s certainly an answer.

So why is it so unfulfilling?

Watanuki clearly notices Izuku’s frustration, because the Shopkeeper rests his chin on the back of his hand, amusement colouring his features. “It’s nowhere as informative if you try to squeeze the answers out of someone else, is it?”

Fuck. He’s right.
All this time, Izuku has been uncovering clues by himself, slowly but surely. The answers to his questions are sure to exist, but it’s the lead up, the chase, that gives meaning to those answers.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, Izuku tries his best to ignore the headache creeping in at his temples. “I get it. The answer won’t make any sense unless I understand everything before it.”

“I knew you were a smart cookie,” Watanuki chirps.

Okay. That’s okay. Izuku now knows how to ask questions, and what questions he should ask to extract even a hint of meaning from Watanuki’s answer.

*You already know have a few pieces of the puzzle. Why not try building around those?*

That’s a good idea. Thinking back on the most recent, mind-blowing conversations he had, Izuku scours for a question to work backward from. And hey, there’s one.

“When I spoke to the spirits, they told me that humans were able to interact with them centuries back. That implies that humans had enough belief in the supernatural to warrant such things. Where did that ability go?”

Watanuki hums, lifting his teacup to his lips. His reply is mostly monotone but longer than the previous one, which means Izuku’s on the right track. “To history, really. Belief fades with time if it isn’t made into reality.”

“But there are still people who seem like they could believe;” Izuku pushes, thinking of Maru’s unwavering love for a fading culture and Ms. Kino’s open-minded and adventurous nature. “If they were tipped in the right direction, logically, they should be able to see spirits. Is my hypothesis correct?”

For a moment, Watanuki pauses, his mismatched eyes averted upward. It’s difficult to tell if he’s trying to formulate a response or just unsure.

“Since you’ve met with Yorihiko, I’m sure you’ve learned that there are indeed people in your world who are sensitive to magic and therefore more open-minded. It’s nothing surprising; after all, humans adapt to their surroundings and their mentalities shift as well. Those nurtured by magic will grow to hold more magical potential.”

Oh, wow. That’s the longest answer yet. There must be more that Izuku can dig out if he keeps the streak going.

There it is again – a mention of potential, of which Izuku’s recently learned he has none. Interesting. “So it’s possible for others to become magicians?”

“It’s possible,” Watanuki answers. He then sighs, shaking his head. “But magic has been lost from human ability for centuries in your world. Trying to teach someone magic would be like trying to teach a human to breath underwater.”

“We can’t,” Izuku says. “We can’t, so we invented air tanks and submarines.”

Watanuki simply laughs. “That’s my point, Deku.”

Lifting his open palm in front of his lips, the Shopkeeper blows a breath of air. Tendrils of blue billow past Izuku and expand to cover all surfaces of the dimly-lit room, and when Izuku blinks next, he opens his eyes to find himself underwater, sinking beneath the ocean waves.
Even though Izuku knows it isn’t real, it feels so incredibly real. His movements are sluggish, all sound is muffled, and light shines down from above the surface.

Izuku goes to speak and proceeds to breath in a mouthful of salty ocean water.

For a split second, panic races through Izuku’s body, locking his limbs into a state of useless confusion, and his mind screams, *drowning, you’re drowning, do something, you idiot!*

But that’s not right. All this is just a product of Watanuki’s magic. It’s not real, and it’s foolish to think a simple illusion could do anything to harm his well-being, especially in comparison to the monsters that have actually threatened his life.

That one realization frees Izuku from the underwater simulator he quickly realizes he trapped himself into. With the flattest tone he can muster, Izuku turns to Watanuki and throws on an insincere smile. “Ha ha, very funny. You really got me there.”

“No, I didn’t,” Watanuki says. With a simple wave of his hand, the illusion disappears, and the paper lanterns float back into existence, dropping the room into flame-lit lighting once more. “You realized that it was just an illusion, and therefore, there was nothing to fear.”

“Anyone would.”

Watanuki clicks his tongue and folds his hands over each other. “You’d be surprised. I’ve played the same trick on normal humans, and I must say, the level of stress they demonstrated was noticeably higher than yours.”

That’s probably Watanuki-speak for *I messed with some normal people who have no understanding of magic and they flipped out.*

“Humans are rational creatures,” Watanuki explains. “They say, *I can’t fly, so I’ll build something that can fly for me.* They say, *I can’t survive underwater, so I’ll build something that can last underwater for me.* It’s a logical process, isn’t it? Here’s a problem, so let’s find an answer.”

Izuku makes a sound of agreement, nodding his head slowly. Where is this going?

“But here’s the thing. Spirits, fairies, gods, and all supernatural beings – they aren’t logical.”

Ah. Yes, that’s a good segway.

“When a spirit thinks, *I can’t fly,* they don’t find an alternative. They either fly or they don’t.” Lifting his palm again, Watanuki grins as a swirling sphere of purple magic collects above his hand. “It’s this irrational, stubborn nature that allows supernatural beings to use magic.”

It’s stupid. It’s ridiculous. It makes sense.

“They can use magic because it’s the only thing they can use,” Izuku says to no one in particular, feeling the gears slowly slot together and begin turning. The pieces are falling together slowly but surely, painting an image that Izuku can actually decipher. “Then – then the humans who can use magic—”

“–Are unique cases,” Watanuki finishes. “Surrounded by irrationality your entire life, thinking outside the box, believing that there’s something out there when it’s the most foolish assumption to make – it’s that stubbornness, that drive, and that irrationality that sparks the first embers of magical potential.” The Shopkeeper leans forward, eyes glowing like embers in the shadows of the room. “The ones with the most potential are those who choose to fight against the world.”
Those who choose to fight against the world.

Isn’t that just about everyone Izuku knows?

(Izuku knows that he has a negative score for self-preservation. He’s known that for some time, and he highly doubts that number will ever go up. It’s his disregard for his own safety and wellbeing mixed with his absolute mess of a life that sends him running across the city, throwing himself into the lives of people he barely even knows.

Each of those people are different in too many ways to count. It’s that individuality that makes everyone unique, makes each and every person memorable in their own right.

But, underneath it all, Izuku knows that there must be something linking them all together. There has to be a reason why every single one of his friends and associates are so kind to him, why they’re so supportive, why they’re willing to accept Izuku into his their lives.

There has to be a reason why everyone around him seems to know he’s Deku, and yet they still support him unconditionally.)

A single cog is kicked into place in Izuku’s mind, and the entire system beings moving, slowly spinning and turning and clicking.

“The spirit of rebellion is what connects all magi.”

Across from him, lounging in his chair like a king upon his throne, Watanuki nods quietly against the back of his hand. Approval lights up his watchful eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku looks up toward the ceiling and leans back in his chair. His mind feels like putty; smashed and battered into something entirely unrecognizable. Everything in his head is a jumble of questions, clashing against each other to birth even more scattered thoughts.

Izuku reaches over and pours himself a cup of tea. Maybe some caffeine will help.

“Oh, and another thing,” Watanuki adds airily. “Powerful magi can jumpstart a human’s magical potential by bestowing their own magic onto them.”

Hmm. That’s interesting because it implies that Izuku could spawn a few magicians if he wanted to, but of course he doesn’t. The world is saturated with enough chaos and confusion as it is, and throwing magic into the equation is akin to tossing a stick of dynamite onto a pile of precariously balanced debris and praying for the best. That sort of burden is best left to someone who’s been screwed over by life since the very beginning, like Izuku.

Watanuki stares at Izuku. He coughs into his hand, as if he’s expecting some sort of reaction–

“God, what did he do?“

The entire bestowing thing he pulled was a spur-of-the-moment decision, the first cart to be derailed
in the train wreck that is sealing the Sakura Cards. It was the only way to ensure Shinsou’s protection, and if Izuku lost a bit of leverage during the fight, what did it even matter?

“Can hear your thoughts,” sighs Watanuki, leaning over to slap Izuku on the head. “Goodness, you’re easily riled up. It would do you well to de-stress on occasion.”

“I get stressed de-stressing.”

“That sounds very much like you.”

“Okay, no.” Placing both hands on the table, Izuku takes a deep breath, holds it, and then releases it. “Did I – did I make someone into a magician? Will they be like me?”

Watanuki snorts, somehow managing to make an eyeroll look elegant and composed. “It isn’t easy to go from Common Civilian to Fledgling Magician. Since you bestowed Windy’s blessing upon this new associate of yours, it’s very likely that he’ll be able to see a portion of what you see.”

Izuku feels the tension seep from his body. Oh, thank god. That’s so much better than what Izuku expected.

“And he’ll probably demonstrate an incredible affinity for wind magic, which, now that I think of it, would look very much like a quirk in your world, wouldn’t it?” For some horrible, unknown reason, the Shopkeeper beams, crossing his arms and nodding as if he’s proud of himself. “That ought to be interesting!”

It would be equally embarrassing and inappropriate to start screaming into the void right then and there, so Izuku opts for sitting there and wondering how his life became such a mess instead.

The man sitting so casually across from him says nothing more, and Izuku knows that’s as much information that he’ll get in terms of dealing with the crisis he’s made for himself.

But there’s still one question that Izuku needs to ask Watanuki, so Izuku packs his anxiety into a tight bundle and tosses it as far back into his mind as possible.

“I have one more question.” The tea in Izuku’s cup is lukewarm and does nothing to help calm his nerves.

Clicking his tongue, Watanuki leans back, displeasure obvious on his ageless features. “The price is already very high, Deku.” With the ghostly white lanterns burning behind him, the Shopkeeper’s shadow seems to stretch on forever. The shine that gives life to his eyes has disappeared entirely, replaced with a dispassionate sort of warning.

It takes Izuku two tries to force his mouth to move the way he wants. “I’ll pay it back. I will. But this is a question that I need to ask.”

“As long as you’re aware,” Watanuki says, a new sort of flatness to his voice that makes him sound like the Shopkeeper he truly is. He sweeps his hand outward. “Ask, and I shall answer.”

So dramatic.

It’s been a while, hasn’t it?

“I ask this because I’ve been told by the god of doors and safe passage, Yorihiko, that my existence is an anomaly.” Looking down at his calloused hands, Izuku brings the Sealing Staff into his grasp. “Just as how I lack a quirk, I have no magical potential whatsoever.”
For the very first time, Izuku watches as surprise – genuine surprise – blooms on Watanuki’s face. And yet the Shopkeeper says nothing, instead gesturing for Izuku to continue.

“Before I was born, something inside me was allocated for the sole purpose of wielding magic. Two people were responsible for this change. I believe that Kinomoto Sakura was one of them, which is why I stand as the current Master of Cards. And the second...”

This should be entertaining.

“I believe that the second is a woman called Ms. Yuko.”

Silence. Slowly, Izuku raises his eyes to meet Watanuki’s.

Oh. So he really doesn’t know everything.

The Shopkeeper sits lax, his lips slightly parted and his eyes wide behind his glasses. His mouth opens and closes a few times as if he doesn’t know what to say.

(A chance.)

“Who is she?” Izuku demands, shifting forward. “Who is Ms. Yuko?”

“Wait.” Watanuki’s tone is more aggressive than Izuku’s ever heard from him. The man furrows his brows, one hand cupping his chin. Then his mismatched glare turns to stare down Izuku down, pinning him down in an invisible chokehold. “Where did you hear that name?”

Swallowing down the lump in his throat, Izuku sits tall. He won’t be pushed around. “Kinomoto Sakura was the first to mention her name. Yorihiko was the second.”

“The previous cardcaptor and a god that transcends space-time,” murmurs Watanuki. “Of course. It could only be them, couldn’t it?”

Placing a hand on his cards, Izuku lifts his chin. Confidence, confidence. “You haven’t answered my question. Who is Ms. Yuko?”

Watanuki shakes his head. Something conflicted and entirely human flickers past his eyes. “You can’t pay the price.”

What? What?

“I can,” Izuku half-yells, standing and gripping his staff in front of his chest. He’s so close. He’s so close, this is the last piece he needs–

“Neither of us can pay the price.”

Watanuki’s voice is empty and hollow. There’s no sadness, no frustration – just blank acceptance.

He’s right, Ms. Yuko says. This isn’t something Watanuki can give away, and it isn’t something you can repay.

Izuku wants to argue. He wants to refute the mysterious man sitting before him and the even more mysterious woman whispering in his ear. If the price is already high, why not kick it up a little higher? What’s wrong with that? Why won’t Watanuki speak a word about Ms. Yuko? Why won’t Ms. Yuko herself explain anything?

it’s okay
you’ll be okay

the longest answers take the most time to solve

regardless of whether you get the answers today or tomorrow there is always more to do

you know so much already so why not move on for now

in the end everything will surely be alright.

That’s definitely not Ms. Yuko.

(But it’s good advice nonetheless.)

Forcing himself to take a series of long, slow breaths, Izuku slides his cards back into his pocket and dismisses his staff.

Watanuki stares.

“I get it,” Izuku says. “I’ll leave. That’s enough for now.”

It’s frustrating, but it is how it is.

“Looks like we both have something to think over.” It’s difficult to tell if Watanuki’s actually making a joke or being completely serious. “About Ms. Yuko—” The man purses his lips, then sighs. “Yorihiko wouldn’t lie. Your magic has always seemed familiar to me, and now I know there’s a reason for that.”

Izuku freezes in mid-step. This is revolutionary; a life-changing realization. “We’re... we’re both confused.”

Now that’s an expression Izuku’s familiar with. “I wouldn’t go that far,” Watanuki huffs, pouting.

“We’re both confused,” Izuku repeats, the words slipping off his tongue. “Oh my god. It’s a miracle.”

“Now you’re just being rude.”

A wicked smile breaks onto Izuku’s face as Watanuki escorts him out with a shoo, shoo motion. “I’m never going to let you forget this.”

There are so many possibilities. This is his leverage, his ticket to victory, his reality check, because even the all-knowing Shopkeeper doesn’t know why Izuku’s such a fuck-up.

(In hindsight, that’s not a cause for celebration, but it’s a confidence boost and a half.)

“You’re awfully happy for someone who I’m going to work like a pack mule,” Watanuki taunts, the corners of his lips curling up.

Izuku snorts, making his way toward the fence. “Joke’s on you; I’m always worked like a pack mule!”

Hey. You want something that’ll really get a reaction out of our precious little Shopkeeper?

Despite the incredible mystery surrounding her, Ms. Yuko can be pretty awesome.
Ms. Yuko laughs, a cascade of bells chiming in harmony. Then move aside, and let me work my magic.

Purple bleeds into Izuku’s vision as a trail of butterflies bursts from his skin, floating up, up, and up into the endless blackness above. The gears that lie untouched and rusted in the deepest parts of Izuku’s mind slot together, twisting the dormant magic that runs through his veins into something unimaginably old and powerful.

Something slips into the vessel of blood and bone that Izuku calls his body, crawling in from the deepest parts of mind and matter.

Watanuki visibly startles. His eyes narrow, and he steps forward. “Those butterflies...”

“Say, Watanuki,” Izuku-not-Izuku sing-songs, shifting into a stance more befitting of his person. With one hand on his hip and the other dangling by his side, Izuku-not-Izuku smiles something otherworldly and ethereal. “I’m well aware that I’m not quite of age, but you must have some fine drinks in that wonderful shop of yours, no? Why not share some with me?”

There’s no doubt that Watanuki notices something off. That’s to be expected; if a magician with a title as prominent as his was unable to detect a change in magic, it would shame the entire legacy of the Wish-Granting Shop.

“I’ll allow many things, but I can’t condone underage drinking.” Leaning against the doorframe, the Shopkeeper stares directly into Izuku-not-Izuku’s eyes. “Besides, I can’t have you getting into the habit of begging favours from me.”

There it is.

“A habit, you say?” Izuku-not-Izuku hums, smile unfaltering. “My, that would be bad. It’s good you pointed out such a detail.”

“Of course,” Watanuki answers smoothly, his tone melodious and even. “After all, a habit—”

“–Is a burden. In order to be rid of it, one must be conscious of it, and if one does not wish to be rid of it or simply does not care, then it cannot be rid of.” Izuku-not-Izuku cocks his head and spreads his hands performatively. “Isn’t that right, Shopkeeper?”

Watanuki stares, his lips parted and eyes wide as dish plates. Something slips out from Izuku’s body and retreats back into his mind, laughing all the way.

Oh, look at his jaw drop. No matter what facade he puts up, he’ll always be green in comparison.

Izuku blinks rapidly. Now he feels very awkward and out of place, especially under Watanuki’s shocked gaze.

Now’s the time to turn tail and run, Ms. Yuko cackles. She’s definitely a lot more devious that she lets on. He can’t leave this place, whereas you’re free to break in and out as you please.

Inching toward the fence, Izuku smiles hesitantly and waves. “Well, it’s been great. Thanks for having me. Text me when you need anything.”

“Wait,” Watanuki calls, his arm outstretched as if he’s chasing the answers to some unknown question. His eyes are impossible wide, and the confusion on his features really paints him in a new
light. “You – how did you–”

“Ms. Yuko talks to me sometimes. I think she lives in my head.”

“What–”

“Bye Watanuki have a nice day see you later!”

With one firm step, Izuku shatters past the barrier surrounding the Wish-Granting Shop and feels dirt, rubble, and grass beneath his soles once more.

Kero notices his reappearance immediately, floating over from his conversation with the spirits. “So, did you sock him in the face?”

“No, but I think I dropped a bomb on him when I left,” Izuku says, feeling quite proud of himself.

With a smug smile, Kero nods approvingly. “That’ll do. Now come on, we’ve got an empty weekend and we’re gonna spend it doing some de-stressing.”

“I really don’t need–”

“No. Nope. Your opinion is entirely invalid.”

“Hey, wait–”

“We’re getting cheesecake.”

“But–”

“We’re getting cheesecake.”

***

The difference between taunting one of the most powerful magicians in existence and blankly poking at an impressively jiggly cheesecake is enough to give Izuku whiplash.

It’s good that they’re at a relatively small cafe, because Kero’s abandoned all sense of secrecy and has apparently decided that singing accolades about the cafe’s sweets is the best way to spend a free weekend.

Izuku sighs as Kero waves the waitress over and orders yet another serving. “You’re going to eat me out of my wallet.”

“You and I both know you have more money than you know what to do with,” Kero fires back, his voice garbled from the cheesecake he’s currently destroying. “And you don’t even spend any of it! Why not use it on good things, like–” The plush pauses for a moment, then waves his fork in the air triumphantly. “Like food! You can never go wrong with food.”

“I do, and I would more often, but...”

Kero nods. “Yeah, yeah. Half the time you get your meals for free because you’re the city’s golden boy.”

That’s not wrong, but there has to be a better way of saying it.

“We should do this more often. It’s a real nice change from being stressed all the time, huh?” The
plush beams, crumbs dusted over his cheeks.

Izuku laughs. Oh, if only that could be true. “I’m stressed all the time. It’s – it’s sort of the default for me.”

“You’re gonna run yourself dry eventually,” Kero sighs, placing his fork on the plate. “You’ve got a big heart and a lot of kindness to give away.”

“And I can’t seem to refuse requests,” Izuku adds.

Kero hums a simple noise of agreement before picking the strawberry off his cheesecake and inhaling way more than should be physically possible for a creature of his size. He seems more relaxed than he has since – huh. Since the beginning of all this, probably.

It’s sort of nice, taking some time off. It’s impossible for Izuku to escape the chaos that is his life, but at the very least, he can kick that roaring dumpster fire away from him a little and deal with putting it out later.

And so, for the afternoon, Izuku sits and slowly picks his way through cheesecake and shaved ice. The city outside bustles with an energy Izuku is intimately familiar with, and watching it all happen through a barrier of tinted glass imparts a strange feeling, almost as if he’s watching the shaken bits of snow globe glitter dance, settle, and flitter once more.

*This is how life is supposed to work. Not that you would know that.*

Izuku leans into the plush cushions of the seat. Ms. Yuko’s been very talkative lately. *Well, I’m sorry if my life is too much of a mess for you to keep up with.*

A chain of bells – a laugh. *Your life is tame in comparison to those who’ve existed before you. Trust me; I’d know.*

God, that’s a horrible thought. Those with lives more eventful than Izuku’s must be few and far between. On particularly bad days, Izuku finds himself waiting for the sweet embrace of death. He can’t imagine how bad it would be for those who have it worse off.

For a minute, Izuku stares out into the world and realizes how much things have changed in such a short amount of time.

The Izuku from a few months ago would’ve felt useless and stagnant simply by taking time off to rest – after all, there’s always so much to do, so many people who need help, and if he doesn’t make use of what little he has, is there truly a reason for existing in the world?

It took a few unlikely friends and a god to teach him that, yes, there’s always a reason to move forward, because even if you sit and watch the world turn, tomorrow is on the horizon line. And if you’ve made it this far, don’t you want to see what happens next?

*It’s an incredibly vast world out there,* Ms. Yuko says, her voice silky smooth, like a layer of cashmere wrapping itself around Izuku’s being. *The fact that you’re able to experience it in its fullest is a gift.*

*And a burden.*

*A burden indeed,* Ms. Yuko agrees. *Which is why you should learn how to take rest days. Goodness, cardcaptor, take a break before you run yourself off a cliff.*
Great. So literally everyone is telling Izuku that he needs to calm the fuck down, which really says something about his work ethic and undying sense of obligation. Like, the mysterious magical resident in Izuku’s head who usually keeps communication to a minimum is bothering him about it.

“Maybe we should go for yakisoba next time,” Izuku says quietly, twirling the straw of his milkshake around the rim of the glass.

Kero perks up with shocking speed, leaning onto his plate. His eyes sparkle with excitement, and a little trail of drool slips from his mouth. “Really? You’re being serious?”

Hesitantly, Izuku nods. Maybe it’s time to make a few changes to his self-destructive lifestyle. Just a few tiny tweaks, though. “Uh. Yeah. Maybe – I guess every other week? Anyway, we can just. Go out in the city without any big plans and just spend some money on things.” Izuku shrugs awkwardly. “Treat yourself, I guess?”


Oh.

Oh.

He’s been working Kero to the bone since the very beginning, hasn’t he?

Of course Kero would be exhausted. Izuku’s used to the endless onslaught of tasks and favours he imposes onto himself, but the others, it’s an ordeal, a challenge, a task that’s draining as much as it is endless.

Shit. Shit. What sort of person is he if all he’s doing is dragging others down with him?

Looking down at his hands, Izuku lets out a shaky breath.

“I’m sorry.”

For a moment, Kero frowns, confused. Then, a split second later, his expression softens and he waves his hand dismissively. “Nah, it’s fine. It’s more for your own good than anyone else’s. This is a big step forward!” With a splitting grin, Kero stands, holding the fork at his side like a weapon. “It’s great that you’ve decided to go ahead with this on your own!”

“Actually, a lot of people were bothering me about it,” Izuku mumbles, wringing his hands. Is... Kero not mad?

“Taking others’ words to heart is a hard thing to do.” Waddling over to sit at Izuku’s side, Kero places a plush hand on Izuku’s arm, smile unfaltering. “You’re a good kid, Izuku. You want to do so much good, and you’ve already done a lot for the world. But the world’s always going to be a mess, and there’s always going to be more to do.”

Kero locks eyes with Izuku. The Guardian’s eyes are shiny and proud.

“I think we can let the world turn on its own for a bit every so often, right?”

Izuku takes a deep breath, averting his eyes upward toward something unseen.

(He’s truly surrounded by amazing people, isn’t he?)

“Yeah. Yeah, I think so.”
It doesn’t take long for Izuku to come to the conclusion that he really needs to set an upper limit for how much Kero’s allowed to eat, because even if it’s every two weeks, holy fuck, that’s a lot of food in such a tiny body, and that’s also a lot of money.

How is it that Kero can eat like – like a fucking lion?

What the fuck.

***

[17:27] Izuku:
Hi! This is Midoriya Izuku.
We met a while back. I’m not sure if you still remember me.

[17:28] Shinsou:
I remember you.
You gave me a box of cookies. At our first meeting.

[17:34] Izuku:
Ha ha, that’s just what I’m like!
Anyway, not to bother you or anything, but do you mind if we meet up sometime?
If it’s okay with you.

[17:37] Shinsou:
I don’t have anything better to do.
Why?

[17:38] Izuku:
I have some things I need to discuss with you.
It’s sort of important?
And it’s probably better to do it in person.

[17:40] Shinsou:
Yeah, whatever.
If you want to talk, let’s talk.

[17:44] Izuku:
Thanks!
Anytime is okay with me, so you can choose the time and the place.

[17:50] Shinsou:
In that case, we can meet up at Triple Cup this Thursday at noon.

[17:55] Izuku:
Sounds good.
See you then!

Chapter End Notes
and the mysterious finally start unraveling. How many voices are there in Izuku's head? Honestly at this point he doesn't care, he just wants to sleep, can everyone just leave him alone for a few hours.

Another dialogue-heavy chapter with lots of confusion and suffering on Izuku's part (but what else is new). He's still screaming into the void, but so is Kero, so that's a plus.

If you can't tell, Shinsou's definitely going to be playing an important role. For those of you asking, I sort of imagine him as a Syaoran sort of character, just altered to fit the world of Heroaca.

Watanuki: Am I talking to Ms. Yuko or Deku?

Izuku-not-Izuku: You're talking to a bomb ass bitch. Pass the wine.

Watanuki: Okay but who is it
throw down

Chapter Summary

A confrontation with a new ally, a situation that can't be ignored, and the formation of a Disaster Team.

Chapter Notes

izuku: one of my favourite heroes is present mic
satoshi: oh yeah he's pretty cool. he has his own talk show and everything
izuku: no i mean i really look up to him. i too would like to be able to vocalize my internal screaming as he does one day
satoshi:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So, what’re you going to say to him?”

“My game plan is to pray that he doesn’t freak out when he sees the giant parade of spirits following me around, and... yeah. That’s it.”

“That’s... it. That’s as far as you’ve planned.”

“I have cookies, too!”

“So we’re going with the cookies again?”

Throwing his hands in the air, Izuku paces around his room. If his gait is more panicked than usual, Kero doesn’t comment. “I don’t know! If he notices something off – and I’m sure he will – then he’ll definitely figure out who I am!”

Kero shrugs helplessly, though it’s obvious he doesn’t feel very helpless. That’s unfair. Why doesn’t he care more? This is a disaster. They have a full-fledged disaster on their hands. “I mean, we’re explaining everything to him anyway, so it doesn’t matter.”

Apparently Kero doesn’t realize that the very thought of sitting across from Shinsou and spilling everything Izuku’s been trying so hard to hide makes Izuku want to crawl back into bed and sleep for the next month and a half.

“Oh, I think it does,” Izuku refutes, eyes wide, trying to explain hs turmoil as simply as possible. “Because Shinsou’s going to realize that I dragged him into a world that he’d be much better off not knowing of, and he’s going to freak out when I tell him that, whoops, I accidentally made you into a magician, guess you’re stuck with me now!”
For emphasis, Izuku tags on a burst of hysterical laughter at the end. Kero raises an eyebrow, which really says a lot about how much he’s grown immune to Izuku’s fits of anxiety.

*You’re panicking*, Ms. Yuko hums at the back of Izuku’s head. Her tone is amused, as if she’s watching this mess and enjoying it. How very helpful. *Hilariously enough, the more you think, the less you figure out!*

Izuku really wishes that somebody would say something helpful. Instead, Kero looks toward the ceiling contemplatively while Ms. Yuko offers her bell-like laugh. Izuku, meanwhile, desperately wishes that Satoshi and Mei were here. They’re excellent at bringing Izuku’s panic gauge down to an acceptable level.

Actually, no. It would have to be Satoshi or Mei, because the thought of a fell demon posing as a mad scientist (scary) and a mere mortal with the terrifying ability of enabling (equally as scary) teaming up throws Izuku into a cold sweat. He’s not quite ready for the world to end in a glorious blaze of maniacal laughter and fire.

*You’re distracting yourself from the situation at hand*, Ms. Yuko sing-songs, jarring Izuku out of his thoughts. *Come on, now. Back at it.*

The thing about having an entity in Izuku’s head is that its voice overpowers the voice of Izuku’s own self-doubt and anxiety. That’s an impressive feat in and of itself, but the fact that said entity has her life in better shape than Izuku’s while possessing no real life of her own (to Izuku’s knowledge) really puts things into perspective.

And it’s not a great picture.

“Shinsou seems like a nice—” Kero cuts off mid-sentence, his little nose wrinkling. “Well. Shinsou seems like a very honest person. At the very least, he won’t lie to you.”

Which can also be phrased as *he won’t sugarcoat anything*. Izuku isn’t sure how to take that.

With a defeated sigh, Izuku packs the box of cookies into his bag, careful not to disrupt the fine packaging. The ribbon and shiny wrapping might be a bit much, but Izuku’s hoping that it’ll demonstrate just how apologetic he is.

Because it’s only eleven in the afternoon, which leaves so much potential for the day to get even worse, a familiar, tiny green figure knocks on Izuku’s window in a rhythmic pattern of *tap, tap, tap.*

For a moment, Kero stares blankly, his face devoid of all emotion save for the occasional eye twitch. Then he floats over, slides the window open with an audible heave, and lets Sylvie in.

Great. Everything is just great.

“I am very close to having a meltdown,” Izuku informs the fairy, his voice a little hysterical.

“I’m curious about this new magician,” Sylvie says at the exact same time, crossing her arms and settling down upon Izuku’s desk.

Both parties take a moment to process the other’s words. While Izuku’s expression grows increasingly distressed, Sylvie’s flattens out, which is just so cruel, why is the world so unfair.

Thankfully, Kero chooses to intervene, his hands raised placatingly. He looks very, very tired. “Wait a sec. You mentioned something about a new magician. How do you know about that?”
A chill runs down Izuku’s spine, driving some of the hysteria away and replacing it with careful curiosity.

(Izuku’s learned a lot from speaking with fairies, spirits, and beings that know all too much.

Curiosity is good. It’s what drives growth, progress, and the pursuit of knowledge. The more you know, the more powerful you feel.

Izuku has spent many nights wracking his brain for answers, waking up early in the morning for his hack-and-slash job with Sasha, only to realize that he hadn’t really slept at all.

Not having the answers hurts. It’s one of the most painful and frustrating feelings in existence, because when world puts down thousands of questions before you and you find that you have no answers at all, then what do you really know?

And, even more frustrating: what happens when everyone around you has all the answers?)

Sylvie snorts, then flips her hair over one shoulder, leaving a trail of sparkly green with her every movement. “Do you really think we wouldn’t notice the birth of a new magician, much less a wind magician?” She rolls her eyes, as if saying, you idiot. “Everyone back in Faerie is eager to claim one of our own.”

Despite the haze of panic clouding over his mind, Izuku frowns, pulling the chair out from his desk and settling down before Sylvie. A soft crooning settles over him, and he crosses one leg over the other, resting his chin on the back of his hand.

(When did it become so easy?

When did it become so natural?)

Kero stays quiet, but hovers a bit closer to Izuku’s shoulder. Sylvie’s eyes grow wider, but her gaze becomes colder. Izuku matches the look with one even more frigid.

“That’s an interesting choice of words you used.” His words are smooth and melodious, a chain of bells ringing and resonating through a vast field of green.

Izuku smiles, and something about the room twists, cold and ugly, dragging the shadows of the afternoon soon into pillars of inky blackness, taking everything corporeal and squeezing until it’s all wrong, wrong, wrong.

Sylvie’s eyes flicker around the room quickly, a new hesitance in her gaze. Izuku casually examines his nails.

“It sounds like your kind have some sort of interest in my acquaintance,” he says, tone light yet saturated with meaning. And rightly so – it’s so very amusing that some petty fairies think they have ownership over any human they find interest in. “That’s interesting, because – what was it? – Ah, yes. ‘Claim one of your own’, you say?”

Leaning forward, Izuku offers a smile, all sharp edges and caustic sting.

(What sort of fool would challenge him?)

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but that sounds like a threat, doesn’t it?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Kero’s eyebrows shoot up, though more out of surprise than shock.
Before him, Sylvie stiffens, her shoulders tight with tension. A draft billows into the room from an somewhere unknown, swirling quietly like the beginnings of a tumultuous storm.

With a click of his tongue, Izuku snaps his fingers. A haze of white flashes before his eyes, and with it, trails of green wind snap into existence around the room, curling and poking at Izuku, only to be driven away by the luminous silver glow that radiates from his body.

“Wind magic,” Izuku hums to himself, reaching out toward the wisps of green.

He’s had plenty of time to get used to how wind magic works – after all, Windy was the very first Sakura Card to fall into his possession, and even after all this time and plenty of new cards, Izuku knows that Windy will always catch him if he falls.

The wind is free. It’s flexible. It’s never stagnant; always flowing, always seeking out new lands, embracing the unknown and moving forward.

So it’s only logical that Izuku’s spatial magic is its antithesis.

A gentle brush with his fingertips is enough to lock the wisps in place. Something very old and very powerful bleeds from his touch, dancing up and through the strands of wind, replacing gentle green with kaleidoscopic darkness. In an instant, the ribbons transform into a warped imitation of the magic it was before, twisted and gnarled and shattering away like glass.

“Careful now,” Izuku warns, lips thinning into a flat line. He rests his hand lightly on the table carefully. “You wouldn’t want to, ah, accidentally disappear from existence, would you?”

Silence. Kero lets out a tired sigh just above his shoulder. The amount of growth the guardian’s made in terms of accepting – well, everything – is impressive, given Izuku’s tendency to fluctuate between caring too much and not caring at all.

In contrast, Sylvie eyes the crumbling wisps around her, hands clenched tightly around her arms. Her green-tinted lips are pursed together tightly, and she looks away as she speaks. “You’ve... changed.”

Izuku laughs, light and airy and threatening all the same. “Not as much as you might expect.”

There’s a certain stillness in the room that only adds to the tension. Tiny particles of dust hang stagnant among the tall shadows that the all-too-still sun casts upon the floor. Every movement and word seems to take longer to finish, as if trudging through an invisible membrane of sorts. In the small space of Izuku’s room, the world is wrong, an imitation too pristine and too sharp to be real.

Kero takes the unnerving silence as an opportunity to chime in with his own opinion.

“So if you two are done flexing your magical muscles, I’d be happy to head down and meet our new friend.” Gesturing toward the clock, Kero heaves a deep, world-weary sigh. He rubs his temples, shutting his eyes. “This is a headache and a half. Can’t you fairies just leave us alone?”

Sylvie’s head swivels to glare at Kero. “Don’t demand things you don’t understand,” she hisses, the acid bite back in her unfittingly gentle voice.

Kero stares vacantly, then turns to Izuku. “No, but really. We have twenty minutes to get to Triple Cup. We should leave.”

Right.

Something old and unknown drains from Izuku’s fingertips and rushes back beneath his skin, and
with it, the veil of calm is torn from his mind. The uncanny stillness of the room collapses in on itself, taking the shadows, the shattering wind, and the halted time and ripping it off into a single sphere of swirling, nebulous ink.

And with a single moment, the remnants of Izuku’s magic blink out of existence.

Izuku takes a deep breath.

The familiar buzz of anxiety humms once more at the base of his scalp, a subdued white noise that pokes at him incessantly, whispering a continuous mantra of gogogo.

(But it still pounds, a pulsating beat that sends shivers down his spine, a thump thump thump that needs to be free, needs to be set free, you’re a magician, aren’t you, and something of a hero too, why why why won’t you become who you’re meant to be?

Coward coward coward. You’re a coward.

are you going to let it all happen again?

will it end the same way?)

With a shaky breath, Izuku presses the palms of his hands to his eyes. His thoughts have been awfully intrusive lately, which probably has something to do with his increasing familiarity with spatial magic, but that’s far too complicated to think of right now, so Izuku bundles it all up into a tight package and throws it somewhere deep in his mind.

It’s ironic, really, to think that Izuku’s telling people not to lose themselves to their quirks when he’s at risk to losing himself to his magic.

“Okay,” he says, mostly to himself. Breathe in, breathe out. Everything’s fine. “Okay. Yeah. I need to get going if I don’t want to be late.”

As Izuku moves to grab his belongings and set out to meet Shinsou, Sylvie clears her throat.

Kero’s head droops and his eye twitches, but he turns anyway. “We’re a little busy here.” The plush’s voice is sharp and flat like a blade.

“I’m going too,” Sylvie says, leaving little room for argument. In one smooth motion, she pushes off the desk and makes herself comfortable by hovering above the shoulder that Kero’s not occupying. Her green eyes glow with confidence, and when Izuku turns to raise an inquisitive brow, she snorts and crosses her arms.

That’s impressive, given how Izuku threatened to blip her out of existence if need be. Also, that confidence is ridiculous. Izuku would very much like to know where Sylvie gets it.

“Fine,” Izuku relents, dragging a hand over his face. Sylvie’s persistence is incredible, and Izuku really doesn’t want to push the bounds of his magic any further than he already has. With a warning glance, he reaches up for his pendant. “But you’d do well to keep my words in mind. I suggest you avoid any tricks unless you’d like backlash.”

Raising her head, Sylvie scoffs. “Whatever you say, Deku.” The fairy directs her gaze out the window and to the bustling streets below. “You’re his patron, anyway. I don’t think anyone would be foolish enough to challenge a claim that’s already there.”

Oh, what?
Before Izuku can ponder over the implications of that sentence, Kero coughs into his hand. “Uh, let’s go, maybe?”

Izuku stands there for a moment before throwing his bag over one shoulder, sliding his baton into a fitting pocket, and slapping himself firmly on the cheeks with both hands.

Sylvie grins. Kero stares.

“I’m praying to the only god I know for sure exists that this trip doesn’t end in flames,” Izuku tells the miniscule creatures that hover above his shoulders.

And so Izuku leaves his apartment, feeling that the world is very unfair and that his life is one hell of a burning trainwreck.

It doesn’t take long at all for a steady trail of spirits to bleed into existence behind Izuku.

Surprisingly enough, Sylvie seems rather unbothered by them, though she does hiss at a few that get a bit too close to her. That’s fun, given that behind those pretty, green-tinted lips of hers are two sets of razor-sharp teeth that are way too large for her apparent size. So that’s great.

“Hey!”

Pushing through the crowd, the drowned child spirit stumbles out and makes herself comfortable by Izuku’s side. She smiles, and her grey, dead skin stretches taunt.

“You’re going to see the new one, aren’t you?” The spirit holds her head high, as if she’s proud of her knowledge.

There’s really nothing Izuku can say now that every single magical being apparently knows about his making Shinsou into a magician. “I am,” he answers hesitantly, unable to muster the courage to speak any louder.

It turns out he doesn’t need to, because the drowned child laughs joyously and turns back to the crowd. “He is!” she yells – almost screeches – and wow, that’s not helpful at all.

A wave of not-so-quiet whispers sweeps over the crowd, sending the spirits into a hushed frenzy of so it’s true and two in such a short time and this is only the beginning!

Izuku wishes that spirits had a better understanding of social norms, because he really could’ve lived an easier life if only they spoke a little quieter. There’s no need to throw more firewood onto the blazing mess of mysteries that has somehow become normal. Somewhat.

It’s clear that Sylvie lacks the patience Izuku has, because after half a minute of enduring the cacophony of unholy whispers, she spins around, green eyes swirling. “Quiet down, you rowdy lot, or so help me, I’ll cut you up and throw you to the four winds!”

The murmurs die down surprisingly quickly after that. Sylvie huffs, then turns to Izuku.

“You’d do well to choose your company wisely,” she says, haughty. “You’ve made yourself familiar with both myself and Adara. I can guarantee we’re far more interesting than them.” Sylvie gestures toward the crowd with a firm glare, and Izuku can feel the acid of her tone on his own tongue.

“Magicians learn from those they surround themselves by. We of Faerie offer much better company than those residing in the human realm.”
Izuku fixes Sylvie with a blank stare. “I think I’ll choose my own friends.”

Sylvie scoffs, but says no more.

And so Izuku makes his way down the busy streets, occasionally throwing a look over his shoulder to see Kero conversing casually with a few of the more corporeal spirits. That’s good. Izuku can handle confronting gods and all-knowing magicians because they look down on him. Kero can talk to spirits who look to Izuku as some sort of god. That sort of crushing expectation is way too much to handle.

“Hey, magician,” the drowned child calls, tugging on Izuku’s pants. Izuku looks down to meet a pair of wide, glassy eyes. “Is this the first of many? Will you be imparting your power onto even more humans?”

That’s an interesting question.

(The answer is a very simple and a very blunt no. There’s no need to drag others into – into this mess of a world. Especially not when the people of this world have lived their entire lives surrounded by quirks and heroes.

It’s better for them to live happily in ignorance. It really is.

So he lies.)

Swallowing the anxiety lodged in his throat, Izuku puts on a thin smile. “I... haven’t decided yet,” is what he chooses to say.

The sheer happiness on the spirit’s face is enough to make Izuku look away. A wave of guilt rises up from within him, and he blocks it out as best as he can – which is to say, not very well at all.

Thankfully, the trip to Triple Cup comes to an end soon afterward. It’s only when Izuku’s rounding the corner to the cafe that he pauses for a moment, turning around to face the parade of spirits that happens to be much larger than the group he left his apartment with, what the hell, that’s more than he’s ever seen in one place.

The yuki-onna wave at him from the crowd, smiles razor-sharp but well-meaning. The stag spirit’s there too, weaving smoothly through the crowd, the chime of its coins breaking through the murmurs.

Sylvie stiffens as the stag approaches. “Earthly One,” she says, flat and curt.

“Tempestuous One,” the stag answers, equally as monotonously.

It’s a short exchange if Izuku’s ever heard one. And yet something about those two titles – Earthly One and Tempestuous One – feels strange, almost heavy, as if the words themselves are weighed down with an unknown worth.

While the rest of the spirits shuffle back to give the stag a wide berth, the drowned child clings tightly to Izuku’s pants, eyes wide. Sylvie throws a dirty look at her, and the spirit jumps, sliding behind Izuku’s leg.

“It seems the the fey have some interest in the new magician.” The stag’s tone is too blank to really identify any emotion, but the narrowing of its beady eyes is enough to tell that it’s not overly pleased.
If Sylvie catches on, she doesn’t comment or she just doesn’t care. “We’ll do what we want,” she says, tendrils of wind intertwining with the emerald strands of her hair. As small as the fairy is, it’s undeniable that Sylvie’s magic is incredibly old and powerful, far beyond the scope of human understanding.

But the stag’s is equally so. “The magician will say otherwise.” Turning to Izuku, the spirit cocks its head, coins hanging from taut crimson strings. “Am I correct, Deku?”

All eyes turn toward Izuku, and for a split second, he wonders how rude it would be if he just took off in the other direction and never came back.

It turns out he doesn’t need to, because Kero steps in, hands raised placatingly. “We already had a talk with Syl – the Tempestuous One.” Oh, that’s a nice save. “But what we agreed on applies to everyone. Nobody touches him. The newbie is Deku’s to deal with, since Deku’s his patron.”

The stag seems satisfied with the answer. “As it should be.”

Sylvie seems disgruntled, but that’s nothing new. “Until the fledgling starts making choices by himself,” she says, which doesn’t sound foreboding at all.

With that sorted out, Kero makes a valiant attempt to convince Sylvie and the spirits to leave and do their own thing, but as expected, they’re all excited to see two “manipulators of the great flow of things; practically astral phenomena!” have a conversation. Izuku thinks they need to get some hobbies.

And so, Izuku decides that if he’s going to share all his secrets with Shinsou, he might as well go all out.

(It’s been a long morning, and his gauge for No Fucks Given is steadily filling.)

The first thing Shinsou does when he sees Izuku is stare. Then he looks down to the drowned child, up to Sylvie, and out the window just in time to witness the stag making itself comfortable next to their table.

Izuku is very much regretting his choice to wake up this morning.

Because life hates him, Kero chooses to clamber out of his usual pocket within the bag, making himself known atop Izuku’s shoulder.

“Well, let’s talk,” the plush says, gesturing to the seat across from Shinsou. “Good thing we’re pretty much alone here, right?”

Izuku quietly wills for a meteorite to land on his head, killing him instantly.

There’s no backing out now, especially since he’s already made eye contact. It would be even more awkward to shuffle backward out the door and pretend nothing ever happened.

As Izuku passes by the counter, the barista peeks up, looks at Izuku, looks at Kero, nods, and proceeds to return back to his work. That’s... sort of worrying.

Sliding into the seat across from Shinsou definitely makes the list of things that are way more difficult than they should be. When the waiter comes over and asks for Izuku’s order, Izuku trips over his words four times before conceding and pointing to one of the dainty cakes and the most caffeinated drink he can find.
The waiter asks Kero for his order. The plush pauses for a moment, then makes it so Izuku won’t be able to buy anything for the next week.

“Man, I can see why this cafe’s your favourite!” As usual, Kero breaks the silence, a wide grin on his features. “Did you see their cake menu? And, uh, their drinks were pretty impressive. I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything with so much caffeine.”

Shinsou doesn’t look like he’s blinked once. “Yes,” is all he says in response, voice devoid of any emotion.

Izuku goes to smack his head against the window, but decides that pulling something like that would destroy the image the spirits collectively have of him, and he needs that entirely inaccurate facade of calm. Fairies like messing with him enough; he doesn’t need spirits harassing him as well.

Plastering on a paper-thin smile, Izuku unzips his bag and pulls out the box of cookies. Placing them on the table as gingerly as possible, he clears his throat, effectively dragging Shinsou’s attention from Kero to himself.

“I have cookies,” Izuku says, about an octave higher than he’d like.

Shinsou blinks. He goes to accept the box, sliding it slowly toward himself. “...Thanks. Again.”

For a moment, both Izuku and Shinsou sit in silence. The unspoken questions are so obvious that Izuku can hear them – just one long chain of what the fuck radiating from Shinsou’s still form.

“Let me ask you a question.”

Izuku jolts, sitting straight up. He barely avoids smacking his knees into the table. “Y-yes?”

With furrowed brows, Shinsou gestures weakly at Sylvie, who yawns from where she’s lounging on the sofa chair. “Do you see a tiny floating green thing just above your shoulder?”

Well, that’s one thing confirmed: Shinsou can indeed see Sylvie. That also means he can see the bemused look the stag’s giving him and the cloudy-eyed awe that the drowned child’s directing full force at him.

Great.

“I... can,” is all Izuku says.

Shinsou heaves a deep sigh, dropping his face to his hands. Even from where Izuku’s sitting, he can see the rush of relief that paints over Shinsou’s exhausted features. “Oh, thank god. You wouldn’t believe the sort of shit I’ve been seeing over the past week.”

Izuku blinks vacantly. The waiter comes back with their orders, placing down Izuku’s single plate and glass before moving on to shovelling off a series of large plates for Kero. That’s wonderful, but nothing sensory is being processed in the hellhole that is Izuku’s mind, so he just nods numbly and murmurs his thanks, praying that something coherent comes out of his mouth. The waiter grins, winks, then makes his way to the counter.

“I don’t suppose anyone else can see all this.” Shinsou gestures out the window, causing a chain reaction of oh, wow! and he looked at me! through the supernatural crowd. “At the very least, I sure as hell didn’t see them until recently, and I’d like to think I’m – I used to be part of the normal populus.”
The rate at which Shinsou’s accepting everything is astounding. It’s light years ahead of Izuku, who considered boarding up his windows with spirit-repellent wood after waking up in the middle of the night to a gaunt, ashen face staring at him from the outside in with an all too-wide smile.

(He later learned that the spirit was young – a ghost of a child who had died in a villain riot years ago – who didn’t understand human etiquette and had no prior interaction with magicians of any sort.

So basically the drowned child, but even younger in terms of spirit-years, or by whatever age-measuring unit spirits use.)

Kero hums an affirmative noise through his cake-stuffed cheeks. “Yeah, that’s right. As far as we know, only you two can see all of this fun stuff!” The plush waves to some of the spirits who he’s more familiar with, receiving a few excited waves in return. “Those friendly guys are spirits. The green thing’s a fairy.”

“Denizen of Faerie,” Sylvie snaps, crossing her arms.

“Whatever she said,” Kero says, ignoring Sylvie’s growl and proceeding to shove even more cake in his face.

Shinsou’s eyes shift between the spirits, Sylvie, and Kero before finally landing on Izuku. “This is very enlightening.”

What does that even mean? Is he nervous, excited, or confused? Is he feeling any emotion at all?

Izuku takes a deep breath. He holds it for a good five seconds before exhaling, grabbing his unhealthily caffeinated drink, and downing it all in one go. He’s not old enough to drown his anxiety in the ever-so-popular liquid courage, so caffeine will have to do.

Even Kero seems impressed, and that’s saying something, because he’s seen Izuku chug scalding tea time and time again. “Oh, wow. That has to be a new record.”

Slamming down the glass with more gusto than he actually possesses, Izuku dabs his lips with a napkin and stares Shinsou in the eye. “I am so, so sorry for dragging you into my mess, but we’re here now, and there’s really nothing either of us can do about it.”

Shinsou quirks up an eyebrow. “I’m assuming that this has something to do with the fact that you happen to be Deku?”

Silence. Kero coughs awkwardly.

“It was Kero, wasn’t it,” Izuku says miserably.

“You weren’t very subtle about it,” Shinsou points out, trailing off as he watches the plush inhale two slices of cake with shocking speed. “Besides, Riku was pretty vocal about your, ah, extracurriculars.”

Izuku slams down the brakes and tries his best not to choke on his own spit. “Riku knows?”

“And his friends.” The tone of voice that Shinsou’s using is far too casual and flippant for the subject matter. “His friends at the hospital, that is. There’s Takumi and two other girls. They talk about you and Deku as if you’re the same person.”

It looks like Satoshi’s right about everything, because half the city seems to know who he is. And that can’t even be considered an exaggeration, if the waiter’s knowing smile and wink are any
indication.

The waiter. This is the second time Izuku’s been in Triple Cup, and the employees here know.

(Kero’s only appeared in photos and videos as a bright yellow blob with wings. And with quirks and the like, how does everyone know?)

“Ah,” is all Izuku manages to get out. There’s a filter between his mind and his mouth that slams down whenever things stop making sense, and it’s definitely down now. “Okay. So Riku told you about me.”

Everything’s so light and airy, as if gravity has lost its grip on the world. A strange tingling tickles at the base of Izuku’s scalp, not quite irritating, but enough to send shivers down his spine. Someone says something, but it’s like the words have been strained through a sieve, only letting through the occasional consonant.

A ringing snap in front of his face drags Izuku back to reality.

“Let’s all slow down for a minute,” Shinsou says, lowering his hand. He snaps very loudly. There’s also something incredibly stable and calm about his voice that manages to drag Izuku’s panic gauge down to an acceptable level. “This is all – well. The vigilante thing is...” He trails off, expression softening as he looks past Izuku and toward something unseen. “It is what it is. Out of everything that’s happened recently, it’s the least surprising.”

Izuku can’t find himself disagreeing. Spirits and fairies easily usurp some magical girl-esque vigilante in terms of incredulity.

But now that pleasantries have been rudely shoved out of the way, Izuku sort of wants to die, because how the hell are you supposed to make conversation with someone you’ve dropped major truth bombs and pep talks on?

“Okay.” Surprisingly, Izuku’s voice doesn’t quiver once. In fact, it’s calmer than it’s been all morning.

(If he focuses, he can hear the faintest of whispers surrounding Shinsou, enveloping him in a veil of hope and perseverance and undying loyalty, humming the first verses of what Izuku knows will one day evolve into the greatest of melodies.)

Letting out a breath that he didn’t he was holding, Izuku leans back and closes his eyes. It’s too late to take back what’s been done.

(He has potential, doesn’t he?)

“Ohkay,” Izuku repeats, feeling a wave of crooning calm wash over him. The moon sings quietly within the corridors of his mind, and lustrous shadows sink into his skin. He opens his eyes, and smiles a smile that would make Watanuki proud. “Let’s talk about where we’re going from here on out.”

Hina really doesn’t know what she’s doing here.

Sure, she’s a spirit, but in comparison to the Earthly One, she’s just a single speck of dirt, a pebble in the path, someone too young and too immature to really understand what’s going on here.

And it should be that way! What’s the fun in overthinking everything? Two magicians are meeting
face-to-face right before her very eyes. That’s a huge deal! The biggest of deals!

“You shouldn’t be there,” one of the older spirits hisses through the glass in a tongue that Hina knows neither Deku nor the Tempestuous One will understand. “A child of your age knows nothing. The magician will learn nothing from you.”

Hina lifts her chin and huffs. Who says Deku won’t learn anything from her? Hina’s great at instilling fear. In fact, she’s probably better than the elders themselves! Besides, who says Deku can only hang out with people he wants to learn from? Hina’s definitely a lot more fun than those uptight geezers. “Well, too bad. Deku likes me! I’m staying right here!”

There’s a bit of murmuring amongst the elders, but they eventually leave her alone. Ha! Take that, old, crumbly spirits!

“About that grey girl next to you,” Purple says, his voice trailing off. Hina spins around immediately, plastering on the widest smile she can muster.

“Yes, magician!” Standing on top of the plush seat, Hina bows deeply, switching to the human tongue. “Anything you say, magician.”

Purple seems taken aback. That’s not too surprising, since he’s just a fledgling. That’s okay. He’ll get used to everything soon, just like Deku did. At the very least, it’s a nice break from his constant monotone expression.

“It’s difficult to understand,” Deku says, his voice melodious and even. It’s a noticeable switch from his usual tone, and everyone knows it. It sort of sounds like Yorihiko in a way, but Hina’s probably just overthinking things. “But there are many strange, unseen happenings in this world.”

With a calm smile, Deku spreads his hands and cocks his head.

“The workings of magic are complex and unpredictable. Perhaps our meeting, too, is one of pure circumstance.” With a light laugh, Deku folds his hands over each other, eyes glimmering with amusement. “Or perhaps it’s all just hitsuzen – inevitable, that is.”

Purple frowns. That’s really the only indication of emotion Hina can spot. It’s sort of funny, how this new magician seems to be on the opposite side of the emotional spectrum in comparison to how Deku normally acts. “All you’ve been talking about is magic. I’m not particularly inclined to believe you, but I can’t say that you’re lying either.”

From her place on the couch booth, the Tempestuous One snorts, folding her hands underneath her head as she reclines back.

It’s sort of insulting and straight up stupid that Purple doesn’t believe what’s right in front on him, but he’s been living in this awful, quirk-obsessed world for a while, so that’s forgivable.

“I understand,” Deku says, smiling faintly. The corners of his eyes crinkle with amusement, as if he’s saying, you don’t understand anything. Ooh, that’s definitely very much like Yorihiko. “I can’t blame you. After all, what’s not to say that this is all the work of some great quirk?”

Hina laughs, and so do the spirits who’re close enough to eavesdrop in. Purple startles, his eyes wide as his head swivels to face the crowd. The Tempestuous One cracks a smile, her razor-sharp teeth slotting together into a single plane of white. Deku’s smile widens at the edges, stretching into something a little less human and a lot more other. Really! As if humans could replicate the sheer wonder of the world of magic!
Purple clears his throat, retaining his composure somewhat. “I guess magic is the most reasonable answer. Occam’s Razor and all that.” Then, after a pause, Purple runs his hands through his unruly hair with a deep sigh. “God, I never thought I’d say something like that in my lifetime.”

Deku shrugs, though not without humour. “It is what it is.”

“And speaking of which,” Purple interjects, a single eyebrow raised. “You’re definitely not new to this... magic thing.” The boy gestures around, his eyes falling on Hina for a split second. Hina offers her brightest grin, and Purple stiffens. “So if you can use magic and see these things – spirits – and I, for some godforsaken reason, can see these spirits too, then...”

A brilliant smile blooms on Deku’s face. “I knew you were a smart cookie!”

The flat look that Purple fires back is actually pretty impressive. Hina doesn’t think she’s ever met a human with such impeccable control over their emotions, much less a magician! Not that she’s really met any other magicians, that is.

“Explain your actions to me.” There’s no room for argument in Purple’s voice as he leans forward, gaze unwavering. “You’re a vigilante who just so happens to be a bit magical. That thing with Freeze wasn’t just a normal vigilante-versus-villain fight.” Resting his chin on the back of his hand, Purple offers a wry grin. “You yourself said that these villains aren’t really villains. Explain.”

Ooh. Purple really does have potential, doesn’t he?

Here they stand: two magicians, face-to-face, smiling in the face of adversity, neither of them backing down. While Deku’s smile is knowing and sly, Purple’s is biting and dry. It’s like watching two beasts taunt each other. It’s only a matter of time before one of them lunges.

It’s weird that the boy isn’t using his quirk, though. Any spirit would recognize that weird aura of his. Obviously it’s not magic because it feels weird and hard as stone, but it’s hard to ignore the almost oppressive pressure of his quirk. Brainwashing is one of the oldest strands of magic. It’s such a shame that Purple’s brainwashing isn’t even magic!

Deku seems contemplative for a moment, his eyes slightly glazed over. He looks over his shoulder and toward the only two other humans in the shop, who are very obviously pretending to be busying themselves with their work. Their lips are curled up ever so slightly as they avert their gaze.

The Guardian sighs, dropping his fork onto the plate. He really is tiny, isn’t he? “Just go for it. If everyone knows, then we’ll just have to trust them.”

“Indeed,” Deku hums, waving a slight acknowledgement to the humans, turning to face Purple again.

In one smooth motion, Deku reaches up and pulls his pendant out from underneath his shirt. “Release,” he commands, his voice soft yet unfaltering.

And there it is – the most powerful artifact in the world, the vessel that creates, seals, and destroys, the pinnacle of magic, condensed into one short staff – Deku’s famed Sealing Staff.

Hina can’t help but let out an excited squeal as the green staff falls gently into Deku’s grasp. The spirits near the window definitely seem a whole lot more interested, pressing against the glass with wide eyes and reverent whispers. Even the Tempestuous One seems interested, adjusting her position to better examine the sleek green staff with those beady eyes of hers.
Who wouldn’t be excited? The first magician in the world in centuries, and he chooses to run around the city, flaunting an artifact of unmatched magical power!

“You saw this staff last time we fought together.” Setting the Sealing Staff on the table, Deku reaches into his pocket and pulls out his famed cards. “And these as well. I’m sure the police are working tirelessly to come to a feasible explanation as to how I have more than one quirk.”

Purple’s eyes drop down to the very first card on the pile. It’s a green lady that Hina knows Deku likes to use a lot – Windy, probably? Something like that. The most powerful thing about the cards is the fact that they don’t have real names, so even if everyone knows their so-called true name, it can’t be used against them. Only Deku can command them, which is just mind-blowing!

“You don’t have a quirk. All of this is magic, which is why the police have no idea what’s going on.” Purple pinches the bridge of his nose, shutting his eyes tightly. He seems even more tired. Hina’s dead, and she doesn’t think she’s ever looked that exhausted. “You’ve said all this before, but having it all confirmed is a bitch to process.”

Deku lets out a good-natured laugh, flipping up the Windy card between his fingers. “Oh, don’t worry. I’m just happy you’re not denying everything.”

The laugh Purple lets out is one of the most disingenuous Hina’s ever heard. “A bit hard to do that when you’ve seen everything twice, once from each perspective.”

“Agreed.” Sliding the Windy card across the table, Deku cocks his head. “But I’m sure you remember this, don’t you?”

It’s more of a statement than a question, but Purple narrows his eyes and nods anyway. After a brief moment of hesitation, he reaches for the card. “Again, a little hard to forget.”

Purple’s fingers skim the card, and green practically explodes from his body, unfurling ribbons of green dancing out like little wood spirits across the homey brown walls of the cafe.

Hina cheers and claps along with the other spirits, pumping her fists up in the air. The Tempestuous One sits up suddenly, watching with wide eyes as magic envelops the room. There it is: Purple’s wind magic, so graciously bestowed upon him by Deku himself!

Waving her hand to catch one of the many tendrils, Hina squeals with delight as the unmistakable song of the wind whispers in her ears.

Deku nods curtly. “As I expected. Your power increases noticeably in Windy’s presence.”

Eyes blown wide, Purple drops the card and flicks it back across the table like it’ll bite his fingers off. “What – what the hell–”

“It’s a Sakura Card, kid,” the Guardian drawls, his voice muffled by the sponge cake he’s currently devouring at breakneck speed. “Magical cards only the Master of Cards – the cardcaptor – can use. That’s what they are.”

“And I just so happen to be the current cardcaptor.” Deku cuts off a piece of his cake and pops it into his mouth. “To save us all time, I’ll give you the abridged version of events: the Sakura Cards are on the loose. As the one and only cardcaptor, it’s my duty to seek them out and seal them away.”

The Guardian lets out a long-suffering sigh, his wings drooping. “But things got real complicated real fast.”
“That’s a good way of putting it,” Deku says, turning to quietly hush the Tempestuous One, who’s started snickering under her breath.

“You’ve probably realized that you’ve been developing signs of a second quirk. It’s really not a quirk; it’s magic.” Waving his fork around in the air, the Guardian lifts his head, as if he’s lecturing a student. He seems pretty familiar with explaining things. “It’s wind magic, specifically under Windy, which makes Izu – Deku here your patron.”

There’s a moment of silence where Purple looks like his mind’s going to implode. That’s really not good, and Hina knows, because she’s speaking from experience.

Then, quietly: “So everything you’ve done is because you’re chasing after a deck of magical cards.”

Deku pauses. He nods. “Essentially, yes.”

“Then why did you feel the need to bring me into this?”

Purple’s eyes burn with a strange emotion Hina can’t place. It’s something passionate but cold, not quite vehemence – maybe it’s just careful suspicion? It’s almost as if he wants what he sees in front of him (magic, of course, who wouldn’t), but there’s an air of wariness to him. Does he not trust Deku? That can’t be it; after all, Deku bestowed magic upon him. There’s no way such a powerful magician would just throw around his cards like that!

Hina frowns. She isn’t sure what went down between Purple and Deku, but she really hopes they can get along.

Beside her, Deku takes in a breath. It’s really hard to tell what he’s thinking. “At the time, when we fought Freeze, it was the safest way to assure your safety while you completed your task.” The magician spreads his hands placatingly. “That’s one answer.”

Purple’s hands tighten into fists, and a visible tension rises to his shoulders. “So you used–”

“And the other answer,” Deku interrupts, cutting Purple’s caustic words short. “Is that I see something in you that I saw in myself a long time ago.”

Silence. Except this time, it’s saturated with meaning. Both the spirits and the Tempestuous One stop in their tracks, waiting.

“It’s hard, doing all of this alone.” Deku takes in another breath, but this time, it’s much shakier than before. His expression softens, and his posture falls ever so slightly. “What makes a hero? What makes a vigilante? What makes a magician? I can’t say I know how to answer those questions.”

Lifting his gaze to meet Purple’s, Deku grips the Sealing Staff with both hands.

“The other answer,” he repeats, voice firm and steadfast, “is that I think you have the potential to become your own person in the most spectacular way. And if that means becoming a magician, a hero, or a vigilante, then that path will be right for you, because no matter what, you’ll be able to break past the expectations society has put on you.”

There’s a long silence, but Hina can’t help but laugh. The Earthly One and the Tempestuous One seem awfully amused as well, so it’s totally justified!

Deku’s really one with words, isn’t he?

The Guardian grins as well. He looks toward Purple, eyes proud. “What he said.”
A myriad of emotions flickers past Purple’s face in the span of a single second. There’s confusion, shock, and maybe a little awe? It’s hard to tell, since Purple leans forward, elbows on the table, his head down and palms pressed firmly into his eyes.

“You’re goddamn crazy,” he laughs, a bit rasplier than usual. If Hina’s not imagining things, then his tone also sounds wetter than normal. “God. What’re you doing, dragging someone – someone like me into something as crazy like this?”

Deku smiles. It’s a brilliant smile, all sunshine and pride and hope for the future to come. “I’ve learned and gained a lot over the past few months, but something I’m missing is a voice of reason.”

The conversation sort of takes a dip from there. For the next fifteen minutes or so, Deku finishes off his cake while Purple nurses the iced coffee that’s probably more watered-down coffee at this point than anything else. Both of them are weirdly quiet.

Hina takes the opportunity to snatch half an unfinished cake off of one of the Guardian’s many plates. She shoves the entire thing into her mouth. Sweet and tasty and spongy. It’s really good. Maybe she should hang out with Deku and the Guardian more often, especially if they’re heading to any place with food!

Eventually, Deku stands, grabbing his belongings and tidying them. “I’ve said what I came here to say,” he states, stacking his and the Guardian’s plates into a few neat piles. Hina helps too, because it’s polite. “I hope we get the opportunity to talk to each other. It’s been fun.”

Purple pauses, then looks away. “...Yeah.”

“I’m thinking of adding you to a group chat with some of my friends who happen to be in the same boat. I don’t want to impose anything on you, but now that you’re aware of what’s going on, it’s only right to keep you updated as well.” Deku cocks his head. “Is that alright with you?”

“Your friends must be absolutely insane,” Purple says flatly. Then he grins that crooked grin of his. “Do what you want.”

Deku nods. The Guardian hops off to trail after him while the Tempestuous One pushes off the seat, hovering just above Deku’s shoulder. Hina slides out of the booth as well, ready to wave a goodbye to the new magician.

“But I have to say, the way you act is inconsistent as hell.” Purple leans back into the plush seat, amused. “I have no idea where Riku’s coming from, because I wouldn’t describe you as meek or shy at all.”

The laugh Deku lets out is audibly more shaky than before. In fact, he almost sounds like his normal self again. “Magic is one hell of a calming agent.”

Purple grins, and that’s that. Deku waves a silent goodbye to the other humans, who both look very amused. He then turns and nods to Purple, who offers a casual wave of the hand back.

As Deku leaves the shop, the others swarm around him, whispering rapid-fire questions. That’s rude! They’re not even giving him some time to think!

“Okay, everybody!” Hina places herself between the others and Deku, her hands outstretched. “Deku’s really tired. He needs time to process everything and think about the situation. Give him a few days before you hoard him!”

It takes a while, but eventually, the other spirits oblige, slowly dissipating into air and shadows. The
Tempestuous One lingers a little longer, looking as if she wants to say something, but eventually sighs, shakes her head, and vanishes in a puff of green.

Hina smiles to herself. There! That’s how you handle a crowd.

The Earthly One hangs back for a moment, his eyes sparkling with amusement. Hina blinks, then waves hesitantly. She really doesn’t know how to deal with the ancients.

Surprisingly enough, the Earthly One simply bows his head, and in an instant, he’s gone.

“Good work,” the Guardian says, offering a thumbs-up. “You really saved us a lot of trouble! I guess, uh, you can hang around for a bit longer if you want. Deku’s probably going to be out of it for a while, so... you can loiter in his room, I guess.”

His room! The cardcaptor’s room!

With a squeal, Hina hops up and down, all but prancing around the vacant magician’s form. “Sure! Of course! That sounds great!”

(To anybody else watching, they probably make a really weird party. A stuffed toy who happens to be the Guardian of the Cards, a strangely vacant Master of the Cards, and one of the youngest spirits in the region, all strolling down the city paths as if nothing else really matters.

Befriend magician: complete. That’s one thing off the bucket list!)

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[23:04] Mei:
Why hello, guinea pig!! It’s nice to hear that we have something of a team now! I imagine you’re busy running errands or driving yourself into the ground, so I’ll keep it short! We’re a vigilante squad now, right??

[23:05] Mei:
Soooo, we should be doing ☆☆☆ vigilante things!!! ☆☆☆ I’ve been doing some digging, and you won’t believe what I found! You know that super secret police investigation that I mentioned before? It’s actually a really big deal!! A huge deal!!!

[23:06] Mei:
Remember way back when you got arrested? Fun, right?? In the transcripts, the police said something about a group called Mary’s Hand. Apparently Mary’s Hand is a notorious criminal group that’s been causing lots of trouble lately. The police did a really good job keeping it a secret!

[23:07] Mei:
〜〜〜☆☆☆ UNTIL NOW, THAT IS ☆☆☆〜〜〜 Get this: Mary’s Hand is running an underground fighting ring!!! The police think it has something to do with the kidnappings that’ve been going on recently. That’s bad news!! Horrible news!! The worst news!! Since we know about it now, we can’t ignore it and call ourselves vigilantes!

[23:08] Mei:
We have a team of four now, so that’s two unforgivable reasons! You can be the captain, since I’m benevolent like that. How exciting is this???? Very!!!!
Izuku wishes that he could just sink into the ground and become food for the worms, because nothing matters anymore. The world is ending right before his eyes, and he really can’t muster up the energy to care.

“You’re being dramatic!” Kero stands atop Izuku’s head, stomping down on his temple with vigor. It doesn’t hurt enough to incite a reaction. “You saw what Mei said, right? Doesn’t she have a point?”

“Yes,” is Izuku’s muffled answer.

“So? Why aren’t we doing anything?”

“We will.”

“Uh, when?”

“As soon as I find the will to live again.”

Izuku glances up at Kero. Kero looks back with the most unimpressed look Izuku’s seen from the plush all day.

With a sigh, Kero hops off Izuku’s head, choosing to make himself comfortable on his pillow instead. “You’re stressed because we’re getting Satoshi and Shinsou involved.”

It seems like Kero understands the situation perfectly, which only adds to Izuku’s confusion, because if he knows everything that’s going on, then why isn’t he even a little panicked?

Reluctantly, Izuku pushes himself up from the bed, his blank expression unchanging. “Have you realized that I’m dragging three civilians into something so serious that the police have been investigating it for the past 18 months?”

“Uh-huh,” is all Kero answers.

“And do you realize that if I get caught, so will everyone else?”

“We’re all on the same sinking ship,” Kero offers.

Izuku would go and smack his head against the wall until the incessant ringing in his ears goes away, but his mother’s home, and she tends to get worried when he goes catatonic. So instead, Izuku takes in a deep breath, crams his face in the pillow, and screams a little.

It takes a while, but he does feel better. Eyebrow raised, Kero smirks. “Feeling better?”

There’s something about that tone of voice – ah. That’s it. “Stop acting like Watanuki.”

“I think you just have something against people who know more than you,” the plush says, which implies that Kero knows more than Izuku and may or may not be keeping information under the wraps, but that thought really doesn’t help in any way, so Izuku grabs the leash to his awful, awful imagination and pulls tight.

This is a train wreck if he’s ever seen one, but it’s his train wreck, and he’s not about to let criminals get away with – with *kidnapping*, god, what the hell?
And so Izuku picks up his phone gingerly as if it’ll bite his fingers off, praying to the only god he has even a little faith in that everything will somehow resolve itself in the end, preferably with as few explosions and mental breakdowns as possible.

The screen blinks open, and Izuku’s treated to the bombard of messages from the group chat he so carefully pretended didn’t happen.

He doesn’t remember most of the conversation. He isn’t sure if it’s because it happened at two in the morning or if he’s gotten that good at suppressing unwanted memories.

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**disaster (an act in four parts)**

*Midoriya Izuku added Shinsou Hitoshi, Hatsume Mei, and Nagiri Satoshi to the group chat.*

*Izuku renamed the chat to disaster (an act in four parts).*

*Izuku changed his nickname to izuku.*

[2:13] **izuku:**
this is a mistake but so is everything i do in life

*Satoshi changed his name to nyoom.*

[2:15] **nyoom:**
if it’s four acts i refuse to be act 3. everything goes to shit in act 3

[2:15] **izuku:**
good point
dibs on act 3

*Hitoshi changed his name to burble.*

[2:16] **burble:**
it’s nice to see that hell has fine weather this time of year

[2:17] **nyoom:**
OHHHHHH
i like u already
i’m gonna go on a limb here and say this is our new purple civilian friend

[2:19] **burble:**
what gave it away

[2:19] **nyoom:**
sarcasm. nice
that wasn’t a joke. our squad is almost complete

*Mei changed her name to hatsumeme.*

[2:20] **hatsumeme:**
Hello, everyone!! I see that we finally have a team of sorts!!!

[2:21] **nyoom:**
THERE IT IS
THE FINISHER
this is the team of my dreams
vigilante, inventor, sidekick, civilian
amazing. i’ve been blessed

[2:22] izuku:
you’ve actually been cursed but ok whatever makes u happy

[2:23] burble:
you know i would very much have liked to live in obscurity than get myself involved in whatever
this is

[2:25] izuku:
  oh
  oh no
  i’m so sorry
  this was a really bad idea
  i’ll leave

[2:27] nyoom:
YOU S T A Y
i won’t let this family fall apart

[2:28] burble:
i don’t even know who you are

[2:28] nyoom:
yet

[2:29] hatsumeme:
Yes!! You need to stay!!!
I haven’t even had the chance to experiment with your magic!!

[2:30] burble:
do you have to end every sentence with exclamation marks

[2:30] hatsumeme:
Don’t question me.

[2:32] burble:
alright then

[2:34] izuku:
this is the most dysfunctional group i’ve ever seen
guys if u ever want to leave go ahead and do it
it’s not ur fault if u find this all too overwhelming

[2:37] nyoom:
izuku bby i luv u and would die for u
u have such a big heart and ur so kind and i love u for it

[2:40] burble:
apparently i can use magic now which is exceedingly worrying
besides i don’t take and tell
i’m not that petty

[2:41] hatsumeme:
So about those experiments???

[2:41] nyoom:
what a unique character

[2:42] hatsumeme:
I am a gift
You will appreciate me

[2:42] nyoom:
i like u
u fit the role perfectly

[2:43] izuku:
GUYS PLEASE
we need to talk about. all of this

[2:45] burble:
yes please do i have no idea what’s going on

[2:46] nyoom:
vigilantism is the new hot thing thanks to our good friend deku

[2:47] burble:
wow thanks

[2:47] nyoom:
i’m so helpful

[2:49] izuku:
GUYS
THIS IS SERIOUS
i have no idea what i’m doing, mei’s somehow mission control, satoshi’s the civilian informant and
doctor, and god i’m so sorry that i made u into a magician shinsou

[2:53] hatsumeme:
You did what???
Two of them!! Two guinea pigs!!!!
This is an excellent opportunity to test some of my larger and more explosive babies!!

[2:55] burble:
what

[2:55] izuku:
don’t worry about it

[2:56] burble:
are you telling me to ignore the fact that crazy inventor lady implied that she wanted to blow me up
[2:57] izuku: yes
trust me we have much larger issues to deal with

[2:58] burble: great

[3:00] hatsumeme: What our darling vigilante’s talking about are the kidnappings!!

[3:03] nyoom: oh those WAIT WHAT DOES THIS MEAN

[3:05] hatsumeme: Turns out an underground villain group’s running a fighting ring!! and they’re the ones that kidnapped all those kids!!!

[3:06] burble: ah that doesn’t bode too well

[3:06] hatsumeme: It sure doesn’t!

[3:06] nyoom: ARE WE BREAKING THIS RING UP izuku i love ur friends

[3:07] izuku: i’m so sorry

[3:08] burble: we’re doing what

[3:09] hatsumeme: Get with the game purple boy

[3:09] burble: do you all realize that i’m a civilian

[3:10] izuku: technically we all are

[3:10] burble: not helping

[3:10] izuku: sorry

[3:11] nyoom: so are we rescuing the kids and breaking up this fighting ring or not??
hatsumeme: Yes we are!!

burble: do you all want to get arrested?

izuku: been there done that

nyoom: lmao right

hatsumeme: Next time you get arrested you have to tell me! I could’ve crushed their security system AND created a distraction AND uploaded the footage to the internet!!

izuku: but u already posted the transcripts what more will it take

hatsumeme: International headlines

izuku: what

nyoom: i like how u think, friend we’ll get along splendidly

burble: can we get back on topic are you really planning to blow up a police investigation

hatsumeme: You’re so dramatic!! It won’t be a huge deal. Actually lol that’s a lie It’ll be a huge deal and we’ll be famous!!!

izuku: MEI NO

hatsumeme: MEI YES

nyoom: MEI YES

hatsumeme: That’s the spirit!!!
[3:19] burble:
what the fuck is going on

[3:19] hatsumeme:
ANYWAY
It’s really about time we got involved anyway!
We’re vigilantes fighting for the people, right??
The police have been so entirely useless because of their procedure and all that boring stuff. That’s why they haven’t found anything!
If we want to help the kids, we have to act NOW!!
Some pretty big names are going to the matches soon, which probably means they’ll have some interest in those kids!!

[3:22] nyoom:
oh
i see
that...... really isn’t too good is it

[3:23] hatsumeme:
EXACTLY!!!
If we have the power to do something, shouldn’t we do it??

[3:24] burble:
that’s the most arrogant i’ve ever heard
this situation doesn’t require us
inserting ourselves into the narrative is pointless and selfish

[3:25] nyoom:
what, because we want to save people?
i don’t know what you’re thinking but we all know that heroes in this day and age are totally useless
what’s the point of being a hero when you don’t do it to save others?
and why is it that only certain people can be heroes?
it’s because of how obsessed people are w quirks and how toxic our society is, right?
so what’s a little rebellion going to hurt?

[3:28] hatsumeme:
Excellent points!
And consider the fact that heroes with large agencies and ties to companies are basically controlled by what the higher ups want and tend to do more promotional stuff than heroics.
Tldr; let’s teach them a lesson about how bullshit this society is!!!

[3:30] izuku:
i think
i think something needs to change

[3:31] burble:
and what’s that?

[3:32] izuku:
this quirk-based society
i’m quirkless, so i know how it uh
how it is to be an outlier
it’s not great
[3:32] burble:
hmm

[3:33] izuku:
i mean i’ve gotten over it so it doesn’t rly matter to me anymore
and i sort of have magic now so it’s not a big deal
but there are people out that are quirkless or have “villainous” quirks who’re ostracized even as
children and that’s just not fair

[3:35] nyoom:
and people get so riled up over villains and how violent they are bc that’s just how it works these
days
it’s not so much that people like heroes as much as they like chaos

[3:36] izuku:
i’ve been a fan of heroes since i was rly young and i still think they’re admirable
but it sort of seems like heroes these days aren’t really as heroic as they used to be?
    if we can change that
    show heroes that they need to improve
    and tell everyone that anyone can be a hero regardless of who they are
    that would be pretty neat?

[3:40] hatsumeme:
SPOKEN LIKE A TRUE VIGILANTE
I like how you think, guinea pig!

[3:42] nyoom:
that’s my boy!!!

[3:43] izuku:
sorry for getting you involved shinsou
you don’t have to feel obligated to come
i just wanted you to know what we were doing

[3:45] burble:
no, it’s fine
so the endgame is to basically flip society on its head?

[3:45] nyoom:
HELL YEAH

[3:46] burble:
hmm
well
it sounds interesting enough
besides, you really need to tell me more about this magic stuff
i’ll tag along

[3:47] hatsumeme:
WONDERFUL

[3:47] nyoom:
HELLLLL YEAHHHHHHHHHHHH
izuku: oh
oh my god
okay
alright
um
what now

hatsumeme:
We plan, of course!!
I already got a lot of intel on the case. The police files are pretty thorough, but obviously they didn’t
dig deep enough!!

nyoom:
WAIT
if we’re a vigilante squad don’t we need like. outfits and a name and whatever???

izuku: been there done that

burble:
i’m sure as hell not getting arrested

hatsumeme:
Oh, don’t worry.
I have it all planned out.

izuku: what
what does that mean

hatsumeme:
It means that as long as you guys do your job, you won’t get caught!
I made Deku’s outfit, you know!!

nyoom:
THAT WAS YOU
OH SHIT
honey u made my son look fine, you deserve the world

hatsumeme:
Well, of course!
I’ll need to take some measurements and get some help with the designs, but otherwise, we’re good
to go!!

izuku: are
are u guys rly ok w this
bc this is pretty serious
and dangerous
we’re messing w the police and an infamous underground villain organization

nyoom:
can my codename be cheerleader??

[3:57] izuku:
well ok then

[3:58] hatsumeme:
I’m Supporter, apparently. Thanks to purple boy for the suggestion!

[3:58] burble:
is this really how we’re doing it
sigh
i’ll be hijack then

[3:59] nyoom:
deku, supporter, cheerleader, and hijack!!!
we’re a fucking vigilante squad kids!!
god this is so exciting, i can’t wait to smash some skulls in

[4:00] izuku:
SPEAKING OF WHICH
V IMPORTANT
can everyone defend themselves?
 i rly don’t want any of u to get hurt

[4:01] nyoom:
izuku darling my aunt’s a retired pro hero
i could take on half of the active heroes and kick their asses
and that blond splody asshole who always bothers u, tell me if he hurts u ok :)))

[4:02] izuku:
don’t worry about it

[4:03] burble:
as long as it’s against humans my quirk works as self defense
and i imagine this wind magic thing will be helpful once i know what it does

[4:04] hatsumeme:
I am an impervious god.
I sit atop my throne and laugh at the pathetic plebeians underneath me.
Nobody will usurp me.

[4:05] burble:
what the fuck is wrong with you

[4:05] izuku:
it’s better if u don’t ask

[4:06] hatsumeme:
I’ll pretend I didn’t hear that!
It’s for your own good.

[4:06] izuku:
do u see now
[4:07] nyoom:
me n purple boy will come over tomorrow

[4:07] burble:
wait what

[4:07] nyoom:
this is so fucking cool!!
i get my own vigilante costume!!!

[4:08] burble:
i feel as if this conversation is a very good indication as to how our group will work in the future

[4:08] izuku:
i.... can’t say that’s wrong
but i think working together as a team will really help us keep the people safe!
and capture the cards

[4:09] hatsumeme:
Oh that topic
I demand a full explanation as to why you’re capturing these cards!!
I’m sure everybody would appreciate that!

[4:09] izuku:
i know
i promise i’ll tell u guys
u guys deserve to know
but thank u so much for tagging along even when there’s stuff u don’t know yet

[4:10] nyoom:
that’s half of the mystery!!
isn’t it sort of fun?
not knowing anything and jumping headfirst into the fray!!

[4:10] burble:
our definitions of fun vary drastically

[4:11] hatsumeme:
And then finding out!
Being part of the exclusive club that knows the truth and will fight for it until the end!!

[4:12] izuku:
i love all of u

[4:12] burble:
so to get back on track, i’m going with nagiri to get suited up at hatsume’s
and then we’re somehow sneaking into a fighting ring and in doing so surprising both the villains
and the police
and then?

[4:13] izuku:
i am v good at running away from my problems
the police happen to be a problem
so we’ll outrun them

[4:13] burble:
and how exactly are you going to get yourself and two civilians out safely

[4:14] izuku:
by breaking spacetime and using a shit ton of shadows

[4:14] burble:
what

[4:14] izuku:
don’t worry about it

[4:14] nyoom:
SOUNDS GOOD

[4:15] hatsumeme:
If everything goes wrong, I’ll figure out a way to bust you all out!!
I always find a way!!

[4:15] izuku:
so
i think that’s it?

[4:16] burble:
it’s good enough
but it’s four in the morning and we’ve been talking for two hours
shouldn’t you all be asleep

[4:17] hatsumeme:
When there’s something as incredible as this, why sleep???

[4:17] nyoom:
sleep is a myth

[4:18] izuku:
i had a panic attack and couldn’t get back to sleep
and i have to figure out what stories i’m going to tell the kids at the literature club
and i have to finish my math homework which i haven’t started yet
and i promised professor miki that i’d do a presentation for her on behalf of the research classics research department
i also need to organize my dog walking records bc my old notebook’s falling apart
oh and there’s this thing. lmao

[4:21] burble:
i am starting to see what sort of person you are

[4:21] nyoom:
IZUKU WHAT DID I SAY ABOUT SELF CARE

[4:22] izuku:
that it’s a myth?
[4:22] nyoom:
NO
THAT’S SLEEP
AND IT’S A JOKE ANYWAY

[4:22] izuku:
oh lmao
close enough

[4:23] hatsumeme:
I, for one, see where broccoli boy is coming from!

[4:23] izuku:
b
broccoli boy

[4:24] hatsumeme:
Tell me, broccoli boy, what do you think about this quote?
“I’ll rest when I’m dead!”

[4:24] izuku:
OH BIG MOOD

[4:24] hatsumeme:
SPLENDID
We’ll get along magnificently!!!
Will you have my back if I ask you for favours at three in the morning?

[4:25] izuku:
i
yes

[4:25] nyoom:
NO
BOTH OF YOU
GO TO BED

[4:26] hatsumeme:
Filthy hypocrite.

[4:26] izuku:
she’s right, satoshi
u have no reason to be up

[4:27] nyoom:
i’m usually asleep by 2 at the latest!!
and i’m in bed at 1!!
so shut ur adorable lil mouth izuku AND GO TO SLEEP

[4:27] hatsumeme:
But he can’t??
He has so much work to do!!!
izuku:
mei is the only person in this world who understands me

burble:
i agree with nagiri
you must be exhausted if your filter has vanished completely

izuku:
i
my filter
wait
what time is it

burble:
4:30 am

izuku:
ah
you are indeed correct
it is, in fact, 4:30 am

burble:
it’s unfortunate my quirk doesn’t work over the phone
go to sleep

izuku:
u know what maybe i will

nyoom:
YES

izuku:
i have to wake up at 6 to help sasha at the beach park

nyoom: N O

izuku:
I'm sorry for bothering you.

Kero blinks as his eyes scroll to the last of the messages. He looks deep into Izuku’s suffering gaze.

“Maybe you should go to sleep earlier,” he suggests, voice carefully balanced, as if he’s worried the slightest nudge will tip Izuku off the deep end. It’s very considerate.

Dragging a hand down his face, Izuku turns his phone off and somehow manages to wrestle up the energy to crawl out of bed. For a moment, he sits on the floor, wondering if he’s forever doomed to a life of very little to no sleep. The pounding in his head and the burning in his eyes seems to hint toward a resounding yes.

At the very least, it seems the conversation went sort of well. Mei and Satoshi seemed completely on board (two crazies jumping onto a burning ship) and Shinsou, while reluctant at first, seemed to accept his fate and went along with it in the end (the martyr).
Izuku forces himself onto his feet and heaves a sigh, because this is really the best result he could’ve hoped for, which isn’t saying a lot at all.

Besides, he has to meet Sasha at Dagobah Beach Park. Hopefully she’ll be able to help with this – this mess of a situation.

“You can’t keep pulling all-nighters like this!” Kero’s taken it upon himself to nag Izuku about his unhealthy habits, but Izuku’s heard the like from so many people that it really doesn’t mean anything at this point. “It’s good that you’ve decided to tone it down a little for the things you do during the day, but it won’t mean anything if you’re not going to sleep at all!”

Pulling a t-shirt over his head, Izuku blinks. “I don’t usually sleep that late,” he tries.

“Lies,” the plush hisses, hands on his hips. “You’re just saying that because I go to sleep way earlier than you do!”

Well, that failed spectacularly. “But I have so much to do.”

Huffing, Kero lands on the table, crossing his legs and his arms. A weird expression colours his features – a strange mix of irritation, sadness, and a whole myriad of emotions that Izuku can’t decipher. “I know you don’t ever want to turn anyone down, but this really isn’t great for your health.” Kero spreads his hands placatingly. “Maybe you could try leaving a bigger gap between when you need to do things by? Like, if you can negotiate it, maybe do that?”

The very thought of saying anything but yes to a request sends a strange shiver up Izuku’s spine.

That’s not it works.

Whenever his friends have favours, it’s up to Izuku to grant them, because that’s just what his role is. And it’s not all one-sided – no, he’ll receive favours granted in return, or gifts, or free meals, or anything else that demonstrates that his actions are appreciated. It’s a perfectly fair, balanced, and beneficial equivalent exchange.

Just as Izuku’s about to rebut Kero’s words, the plush raises a hand, and Izuku slowly shuts his mouth.

“You have to figure out a way to take care of yourself.” The words are softer and quieter than usual, and Izuku swears he can hear a little regret in them. “Because if you don’t, if you keep charging forward full-speed, you’ll burn out, and it’ll hurt everyone when you’re gone.”

The bitterness and sadness in Kero’s voice is well-aged. While his voice doesn’t waver once, the grip on his arms tightens, and he looks down.

Oh. Oh.

This is the second time Kero’s watched a cardcaptor threaten to – to burn out, isn’t it?

Izuku never really learned how Kinomoto Sakura ultimately met her end. From what he knows, her world was peaceful for the most part, with no quirks or heroes or villains. That was why Sakura wanted Izuku to be different; after all, incredible power should only be used against those who threaten the peace, so Sakura didn’t really have a reason to be.

(Was there something else? Was there an unknown entity, an unknown force, a villain, maybe, who threatened the people she loved?
Why did she burn out?

How did she burn out?

Is Izuku just tracing the same steps she took? Is he walking down that same path, even when Sakura so firmly said that she wanted Izuku to be different?)

Releasing a shaky breath, Izuku tilts his head back. So many people are depending on him, and yet...

If he – if he burns out, even with good intentions, won’t he just be failing everybody? There’s Professor Miki, Yuto, Rin, Zing, and Sasha, but there are also people like the drowned child spirit, the stag, Adara, Sylvie, Watanuki, and Kero.

There are so many people who’ve done so much for him, and even with the favours that Izuku’s done, it’s still not enough. It’ll never be enough, not to pay back the kindness and support – no matter how strange it may have been – that they’ve given so readily to Izuku.

He needs to pay them back. But if he goes at it carelessly, he’ll end up burdening them.

*it was enough for me,* something quiet and soft says, voice gentle like a spring breeze. *but you have so much more to do, and so much life to live. you can live quickly, like snapping fire, and blow away with the wind, or you can live slowly, like a sapling, and stretch your roots to the horizon.*

*Make a choice, and do so wisely.* That’s a voice Izuku recognizes, all bells and hollow mystery. *Your time is limited, so use it well.*

And both voices fall silent, leaving Izuku alone with the thoughts in his head.

There are hundreds of things Izuku could say. There are hundreds of thousands of things he wants to say. But out of all those options, he can only choose one.

“I’ll try,” is what he says, hands still behind him, eyes averted downward.

(It’s not a lie, because Izuku knows that this is the one thing he can’t and won’t lie to Kero about.)

Kero’s expression softens. Despite everything, he stands, puts on a smile, and smacks Izuku’s hand. “You sure will! The first step is cleaning up your schedule!”

As Izuku makes his way quietly out of his apartment, careful not to disturb his mother, and even as he weaves through the early morning streets on his skateboard to meet up with Sasha, Kero happily voices his thoughts on self-care and the benefits of eight hours of sleep (eight hours is way too ambitious, but aiming for a solid six seems slightly more reasonable).

The day has just barely begun, and Kero’s somehow talked him into revamping his life. Izuku isn’t sure if that’s a sign.

“So I hear you recruited two more kids onto the team!”

That’s really not what Izuku wanted to hear, but it’s Sasha, and if she’s related to Mei, it means that they must share the same sort of crazy, so Izuku clamps down on his urge to scream and summons Sword – with his baton, not his staff, because he’s stupid and Satoshi isn’t.

“Does Mei tell you everything?” Izuku asks, nodding slightly when Sasha gestures to a particularly
tough pile of scrap. It takes a few well-placed trusts to bend it into a flat shape, and a few more slashes to divide it up into even squares.

“Not everything,” Sasha answers, leaning in and pressing her hand against the scrap squares. A sheen of silver colours over them, and Sasha easily picks them up and throws them onto the wagon behind her. “But it was pretty hard to miss how feverishly she was working in the lab. There was a lot of purple and blue going on, so I’m guessing it’s not for you.”

Purple for Shinsou and blue for Satoshi. It fits. “Two of my friends were really, um, persistent.” Izuku raises his hand. “One of them’s crazy—” he lifts one finger – “And the other one got dragged in by accident.” He lifts another finger. “And then there’s Mei, who’s the ultimate chaotic good, and to be honest, I’m a little scared of her, but she’s smart and has her heart in the right place, so she’s there too.”

Kero, who’s decided that it doesn’t matter if Sasha sees him, snorts from where he sits, perched on top of Izuku’s bag. For a split second, Sasha’s eyes flicker over the plush.

Izuku goes to watch her expression, and because life hates him, his line of sight ends up meeting a pair of glassy blue eyes that peek out at him from the water. A pale hand lifts up out of the water and waves. Without thinking, he goes to wave back and catches himself when Sasha turns back to him.

Izuku’s about ninety percent sure that was a mermaid, but he really doesn’t want to deal with it now, so he clears his throat. “So. Yeah. It’s... an unlikely group of friends, I guess.”

Sasha quirks up an eyebrow, amused. The fact that she doesn’t appear to care about Kero is both relieving and worrying. “So the infamous people’s vigilante, Deku, is leading a group of misfits against a society full of villains and heroes to show people what a hero really is.”

“UA teaches you lots of stuff, and not all of it is good!” Sasha’s smile doesn’t fit what she said at all, but there it is, bright and wide and challenging. “I was in Support for three whole years, expecting to change the world with what I could do and make.”

Sasha’s smile turns a little wry, and Izuku can’t help but think of Shinsou.

Tossing another plate of metal onto the wagon, Sasha wipes her hands with a towel and throws it over her shoulder with more force than necessary. “It’s not about your will to do good for the world. Once you get out into the real world, it’s all about how much you can make, how profitable your creations are, how willing you are to sell your soul to the devil in order to make it big.”

“It’s about running your talents dry.” The words slip from Izuku’s lips, quiet but not truly surprised. That’s just how the heroics industry works nowadays.

Sasha grins, teeth barred. “I hated that, you know? It’s an awful environment! So I went my own way, and I’m sure thankful I did, because now I’m doing what I really wanted to do since I was a student.”

Izuku blinks, the blade in his hand faltering. “Really?”

“Well, yeah!” Smiling, Sasha throws an arm over Izuku’s shoulder, smile genuine and eyes kind. “I got to meet you, and now that you’re doing real good for us, I get to help you through your journey with my creations!”

Crying in front of people is pretty pathetic, so Izuku blinks rapidly at the sky until he gets his
emotions under control again. “I’m grateful,” is all he can get out without collapsing into a blubbering mess. He can see Kero grin out of the corner of his eye. Traitor.

“And Mei, too,” Sasha hums contemplatively, moving to check on her wagon.

That’s great, because Izuku can now do a few quiet breathing exercises before he starts hyperventilating, and hang on, what’s this about Mei?

“She’s crazy smart, but she looks at society and sees an opportunity, not a failure. All she wants is to create as much as she can, and with that personality of hers, well, I’ll be damned if she doesn’t do well!”

Sasha laughs, boisterous and bellyful, the last of the bitterness giving way to pride. And it should; Hatsume Mei is the smartest and craziest person Izuku’s ever met in his life. Her undying optimism and unfailing creativity are the two things that’ll get her through this twisted, warped world that heroics has created.

For a moment, both Izuku and Sasha stand silently, bodies lax, gazing at the waters that glimmer under the early morning sun, and despite the wrong that surrounds them, they’re at peace.

As usual, it’s Kero who breaks the silence with a cough. “So, maybe we should talk about our plans?”

The speed with which Sasha’s head swivels around is actually sort of terrifying. “Plans,” she repeats, voice about an octave higher than usual. “Is this about how you’re planning to break up an underground fighting ring while the police are pulling off their operation in hopes of keeping potential buyers at bay and letting the kidnapped kids go free?”

“Don’t phrase it like a question when you already know everything,” Izuku says miserably.

“Wonderful,” Sasha continues excitedly, ignoring Izuku’s dreary comments. The inflection and cadence of her voice are so similar to Mei’s that it’s uncanny. “What do you need? Equipment? Contacts? A game plan? I’ll do everything I can to help.”

A surge of warmth courses through Izuku’s veins, and it takes an incredible amount of effort not to either start crying) or spontaneously combust.

He just really loves his friends. He doesn’t deserve them.

It takes two tries to get anything resembling words out of his uncooperative mouth. “You were a student at UA. Um, from what I know, all students in heroics-related departments have mandatory lessons about formal police investigations. That – that sort of information would be really helpful.” Shuffling awkwardly, Izuku looks down at the sand. “…if you could somehow help us come up with a plan, that would be great.”

Sasha grins. With her teeth barred, she looks positively feral, eyes glinting under the morning sun. “Izuku, it would be my pleasure.”

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**Costume Notes for 〜★★★Vigilantism★★★〜**

**Purple Boy**

- Purple or d e a t h
- A suit!!! Like a spy!!! Stupid boring jacket and stupid boring pants. Live a little
Casual gangster theme?? PUFFY JACKET PUFFY PANTS PUFFY EVERYTHING
Metal mask for that threatening look!! Maybe just something metallic, has to be nice and breathable
Gloves and knee pads b/c safety or whatever
Nice running shoes/boots for that Clean Escape
Consider some sort of voice amplifying device? Crowd brainwashing would be AMAZING
Bunny ears?? Bunny ears!!!
DEKUCOM

Baton Boy

Cool navy blue/white theme
Clothing has to be pretty tight, handling a baton is hard!!
Nice uniform-esque top w/ buttons and clothing slits and all that good stuff
Sleeves and pants cut off early so nothing gets caught
Reinforced gloves for that good Punch
Shoes gotta be nice and tight! No laces b/c only losers tie laces!
No mask. Just paint. NICE
You’re getting bunny ears whether you like it or not. Coward
DEKUCOM

Guinea Pig

NEW OUTFIT FOR NEW SQUAD
More compact and a little less flashy for that stealthy look
Those low puffy pants Landsknecht pants!! But altered
Separate top, no puffy stuff but maybe shoulder pads
Nice boots for sprinting from the police
Gloves w/ nice grip! Don’t want to lose those cards!!
Translucent shawl thing w/ moon + star patterns b/c it’s pretty! Also space aesthetic!!
THE HOOD STAYS, IT’S THE TRADEMARK

LET’S KICK ASS AND TEACH THEM ALL A LESSON!!!

Izuku isn’t entirely sure how they managed to get where they are tonight.

But here they are, four children halfway through junior high, three of them armed with non-lethal weapons (the Sakura Cards are a bit grey in that respect), far too much information for their own good, and the will to do good, perched above an inconspicuous warehouse on the edge of the city, while one of them sits and watches carefully from across the city, waiting for the first sign of action.

To Izuku’s right, Shinsou sighs, his breath muffled by the mask that covers the bottom half of his face. By his own request and to Mei’s dismay, his costume is simple, safe, and efficient. Izuku’s sort of jealous.

“It’s almost time,” Shinsou drawls, pulling his gloves up. He’s been fiddling with them for a while.
“Tonight’s the night we see if our little group gets arrested or not.”

Satoshi huffs. He stands, using his baton as a crutch, peeking over the edge of the roof. It’s clear that he sees something, because his eyebrows quirk up and he takes a quick step back. “Keep talking like that, and we really will get arrested.”

“Can we please avoid talking about getting arrested?” Izuku begs, gripping his staff tightly with both
“Getting arrested isn’t even that bad!” Mei’s chipper voice echoes through the comms, which really isn’t helping at all right now. “If Deku can get arrested and get out okay, then you all can!”

Oh, this is going to be a disaster and a half.

Thankfully, the conversation is brought to a halt by the entrance of Kero, who zips up and onto the roof as a tiny blur of yellow and white. His features are grim, like he’s seen something particularly disturbing.

“The kids are definitely there,” the plush says, settling himself on top of Izuku’s hood. He crosses his arms and nods his head, mostly to himself. It’s a series of movements that Izuku’s gotten very used to seeing over the past few months. “Even the perimeter patrol knows about them, which means the police definitely know.”

There’s a moment of silence where everybody’s waiting for someone else to speak up. In the end, it’s Satoshi who breaks the stillness. “So the police, the villains, and us all have the same objective.”

Kero nods sharply. There’s no humor in his eyes. “We’re all gunning for the same goal.”

It isn’t surprising information at all. The police files strongly suggested that the officials knew something strange was going on, but none of them explicitly stated that the kidnappings and the fighting ring were intertwined because there wasn’t quite enough evidence. With some more digging, Mei was able to find a definitive answer, which is why they’re all here now. And police will most certainly be here as well, if Mei’s reports are accurate.

But in a situation as serious as this, it’s never good to have your fears confirmed.

Another silence falls over the group. Izuku wants to say something uplifting – after all, he is the de facto team leader – but he’s too busy holding back his own panicked thoughts to figure out how words and happiness work.

It’s a short burst of laughter, excited and amused, that breaks the silence for the second time.

“Wonderful,” Mei cackles over the comms, the glee in her voice evident. It’s a complete flip of the current gloom and tension that’s blanketed so heavily over their team. “What an opportunity! We get to jump in in front of everybody and say, ‘Look at us! We’re kids, and we’re doing so much more than any of you!’”

As Mei continues to laugh, Shinsou sighs and Satoshi grins. The tension in Kero’s shoulders drops ever so slightly, and Izuku lets out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“Well, that’s that.” Flipping the baton between his hands, Satoshi raises an eyebrow, his teeth barred. “Let’s go?”

Shinsou lets out one final sigh before pushing himself to his feet. Despite his only knowing Satoshi for less than a week, he seems comfortable, holding himself with a dignity Izuku can only muster up with the help of magic. “If we’re going to do this, let’s do it quickly. I want to get home ASAP.”

That’s a very reasonable thing to say. Maybe not the first thought Izuku would jump to given that they’re about to charge into the fray between two opposing sides who probably want them dead or behind bars, but reasonable.

“Then let’s move out,” Izuku says, voice wavering only a little. He clamps down on his jaw, takes a
breath, and closes his eyes. That won’t do.

This is for the people. It’s for the kidnapped children. It’s for the parents who’ve grown increasingly distressed as time has passed, who’ve been told that the fate of their children is entirely unknown, who’ve lost faith in the police and the heroes who spend so much time galavanting around the city, picking and choosing their fights even when villains have explicitly targeted the next generation.

A faint crooning laps at Izuku’s ears, and he opens his eyes, putting on a serene smile.

“Let’s go,” he repeats, calm and steady, self-assured and knowing.

Shinsou smiles, all teeth. Beside him, Satoshi huffs a quiet laugh, his baton flying through his fingers. Mei cackles over a backdrop of clacking keys. And just above his shoulder, Kero crosses his arms and shakes his head, a faint grin on his plush features.

Izuku throws a card high into the air, and the game is afoot.

“Shadow, heed my call!”

Chapter End Notes

the vigilantism is getting real. hatsume is crazy and satoshi is the worst (or best) enabler. shinsou has no idea what’s going on but flipping society off sounds pretty fun. izuku's suffering.

it's a little early to really delve into the precepts and the mess that is the hideout raid arc, but that doesn't mean there aren't villains izuku will have to face. mary's hand will be a particularly irritating thorn in his side.

and to all of you worrying about izuku the fact that he can't turn down a request: he's learning. he's learning how to be a magician, how to be a vigilante, and most importantly, how to take care of himself before he runs himself into the ground. please get some sleep tiny boy.

quick note: satoshi's the sort of person to text like they have 2 million twitter followers and then you meet them in real life and you sit there awkwardly for 10 mins before he gets up and shuffles somewhere else. he still very much loves izuku w all his heart and can indeed bash in skulls. he really likes his baton.

as always, thanks for reading!
causal chain

Chapter Summary

The mission.

Chapter Notes

izuku: but if i'm a vigilante, and you're a vigilante, then who's flying the plane?

shinsou: izuku please go to bed

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Izuku quickly learns something very important about infiltration and rescue.

The infiltrating part? Easy. Simple. With the cards, the perimeter patrol is completely irrelevant. All it takes to slip into the building is one use of Shadow's convenient shadow-warping ability.

Everything after that is a giant mess, and Izuku has never wished for death more than now.

One of the major issues while planning was that the layout of the warehouse was almost entirely unknown. Even with the police’s extensive digging, the floor plans remained a mystery. Spies and moles never seemed to be able to make it out. According to reports, they’d go in, report normally for a while, and then communication would be cut off just as they were entering a new area.

Which means there’s someone intercepting them. The question is when – after all, it's more than likely that a villain saw them as they were entering, tagged them with a quirk of sorts, and waited for the right time to take them out.

So if physically leaving won’t work, then how about teleporting in magically?

The answer: they teleport way further in than intended, but that’s good, since whoever’s watching probably didn’t see them. The issue is that they have absolutely no idea where they are, so they start creeping around the labyrinth of hallways in search of some clues.

The issue: the warehouse is enormous, and nobody has any idea which way to go.

Every single hall looks the same. They’re all connected to each other in an intricately woven network of dimly-lit passages resembling a cuboidal spiderweb of sorts, making it almost impossible to keep track of where they’ve been.

Mei – Supporter, right – provides general guidelines for where not to go, but beyond that, it's up to their best judgement to figure out the correct path, which is a very bad thing to leave something so important up to.
“It shouldn’t come as any surprise when they run into a guard within the first fifteen minutes."

“You three seem pretty young for information brokers,” the masked man before them hums, his arms crossed. He stands in front of a pitch-black door with a single bloody handprint (an emblem, maybe). Surprisingly enough, he doesn’t seem apprehensive or suspicious, which makes Izuku wonder just how young information brokers tend to be.

(In hindsight, they probably should’ve taken in a bit slower before rounding that corner, but hey, the guy’s guarding a door, so that’s promising. Sort of.)

“But not the youngest you’ve met,” Shinsou – Hijack, right, codenames – snaps back. With his confident posture and flat tone, he sounds like he knows exactly what he’s doing. “Our client has a very busy schedule. We don’t have time for this.”

The man pauses. Though his face is hidden, Izuku can tell his eyes are narrowed. “And who exactly is your client?”

With a wry grin, Hijack lifts his head and cocks it to the side, a single eyebrow raised. “You can’t honestly think we’re going to tell you.”

Hijack’s answer seems to satisfy the man. With a short nod, he steps out of the way and beckons to the door. “Alright. Make sure you stay in the nosebleeds. You need a membership card to go any further, and you really don’t want to test the guards.”

Hijack steps forward and pushes the door open, rolling his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. We know the drill.”

And all three of them pass through, with Izuku following after Cheerleader, who trails behind Hijack. It’s sort of funny, actually; they pass through the door in order of descending confidence.

It becomes very clear why the door was guarded once they all step into the hallway.

Dimly lit with fluorescent lights of all colours, the hallway thumps with the boom boom boom from the beat of an unknown song some ways ahead of them. Splotches of neon trail down the hall, as if glow-in-the-dark paint has been splattered carelessly over the walls, creating more of a crazy nightclub vibe than a – a fighting ring vibe. Not that Izuku knows what the latter looks like.

As the door shuts behind them, Cheerleader turns to Hijack with a wide grin. His own glow-in-the-dark face paint makes him look positively stunning. “That was amazing. You’re a brilliant actor, you know?”

“I’ve watched way too many movies for my own good,” is Hijack’s simple answer, which says nothing about his phenomenal control over his emotions or ability to stay calm in any situation. “But we’re nowhere close to being done. Let’s keep moving.”

The three of them move down the hall, walking slower and more carefully than usual. It’s dark and the luminescent paint is horribly disorientating, so Izuku gingerly places his fingertips on the right wall and trods behind the others. There’s no visible exit yet, and if this happens to be a trap of some sort – well. That would be so much fun.

“Finally!”

Supporter’s voice crackles to life over the Dekucom. Izuku flinches so hard he smacks straight into Cheerleader, who in turn trips over Hijack with a yelp. They all go toppling down in a pathetic heap of limbs.
“I can finally start mapping the place,” Supporter laughs, fingers flying over her keyboard, as if she didn’t just scare the living crap out of them all. “With all three of you in the same place, I have more than enough reference points! The hallway looks clear, so for now, just continue forward. I’ll get back to you once I have a better map of this floor!”

Supporter’s great. She’s a genius in the purest definition of the word. How she’s able to map out the building when the police weren’t, Izuku doesn’t know, but he knows that obstacles are nothing but challenges to overcome in Supporter’s eyes.

It’s just that – well, Izuku wishes she was a little better at reading the situation.

The comms click off, leaving Izuku, Kero, Cheerleader, and Hijack piled on top of each other on the surprisingly clean floor.

Izuku wonders if there’s any way he can die right here and now, because there’s no future for him after this.

There’s a silence as they all lie there, waiting for someone to make the first move. Without Supporter’s presence, they’re just three socially awkward kids and one plushie. Unsurprisingly, it’s Hijack who pulls himself out first, with everyone following suit.

“I think we need to calm down a bit,” Hijack says, then clears his throat and looks away.

Cheerleader hums in agreement. He seems a lot more comfortable with having just glomped Hijack, but given his training with Zing, it’s not very shocking that he’d be fine with physical contact (unlike Izuku, who believes respecting personal space is a virtue). “Sure. Wanna play shiritori?”

As if things couldn’t get more awkward, Kero coughs and throws out a word, which Cheerleader responds to, which then gets passed onto Hijack, who takes a little longer, and then it rotates to Izuku.

There’s no escaping this nightmare scenario, so Izuku resolutely keeps all his screaming internal and grits out a choppy answer, digging pretty little white crescents into the palms of his hands.

Haphazard splotches of paint shift abruptly to strange swirls and shapes somewhat resembling animals as they shuffle down the hall. Then the shapes turn into vaguely humanoid figures, and soon enough, they’re stylized paintings of people who Izuku assumes to be the arena favourites, if the names and numbers under each are any indication.

It’s sort of beautiful, in a messed up way.

After a good five minutes of throwing around words (with the occasional pause to admire the art around them), the comms buzz to life, and Supporter’s chipper voice echoes through to rescue them all from damnation.

Hijack and Izuku let out a relieved sigh at almost the same time, which prompts them to try their best not to make eye contact for the next two minutes.

“Oh ho, what a building!” There’s an underlying tone of respect that colours Supporter’s voice, which is sort of worrying. “I don’t have a great map yet, but it’ll do for now we get to a larger environment.” A wicked sort of cackle follows. “Speaking of a larger environment, get ready! You’re about to enter the main ring, so keep your wits about you!”

Unlike before, Supporter simply goes quiet instead of shutting the comms off, leaving the faint clicking of keys and buzz of machinery humming quietly in the background.
Kero hovers down and makes himself comfortable on Izuku’s shoulder. “By the looks of everything so far, I’m guessing this arena’s going to be pretty, uh, vivid.” He pauses briefly, as if trying to find the words to explain it. It seems he gives up, because his face scrunches up and he sighs. “Don’t get freaked out, and stay close together. As long as we blend in, we should be okay.”

As the *boom boom boom* of the music echoes louder and louder, the glowing paint gives way to neatly striped walls with floor lighting, almost like a trippy sort of backstage, before finally leading up to a pristine (but stylized) waiting room with a large sliding glass door.

They all pause and look at each other for a moment.

Things haven’t gone exactly as they expected, but they aren’t dead or arrested, so that’s a major plus. All good plans happen step-by-step, and they’ve only taken the first few steps. It’s just going to get harder from here on out, and none of them have any idea what they’re getting themselves into.

(Hell, Izuku’s been a vigilante for more than half a year and he still has no idea what he’s doing most of the time.)

It’s Cheerleader who breaks the tension. With a huff of laughter, he flips his baton comfortably through his fingers with one hand and pulls his bunny hood down with the other. “Well, I guess it’s time to party?”

“Let’s just get this over with,” Hijack sighs, adjusting his own hood, prompting Kero to pull down Izuku’s.

There’s a moment where Izuku’s waiting for something to happen when he realizes that Cheerleader and Hijack are both looking at him. Right. He’s the team leader, so naturally, he has to take the lead. That’s just wonderful, because now Izuku feels like he’s leading a funeral procession or herding a bunch of sheep straight into a volcano.

But it’s now or never, and never isn’t an acceptable answer.

As Izuku steps forward, the glass panels slide open, and a cacophony of cheering, yelling, and screaming floods his ears. Ironically enough, it’s an almost identical feeling as walking into a soccer stadium – loud, blinding, and oppressive.

And – oh. That’s – yes, that’s certainly a very large and very unique arena.

The first thing Izuku thinks is, *wrestling arena*. Because that’s really what it is: rows of seats circling the ring, each one elevated higher than the one preceding it, streaks of blue light dancing down on the crowd, a set of enormous screens hanging down from above, and of course, the ring itself, which is really just a gnarled, battered, glorified cage.

The floor of the ring is bloodied. Izuku tries his best not to feel too nauseous and fails.

What’s even worse than the blood is the fact that the place is, for lack of a better term, an absolute madhouse. Almost all the seats are occupied with people dressed in clothing ranging from street casual to uniforms to ball gowns, and all of them – every single one of them, what the hell – seem excited to be here.

There’s nobody in the ring yet, but people are already on their feet, hooting and cheering as if it’s the last thing they’ll ever do. In the darkness of the stadium, they’re one being, one entity of noise and chaos and anarchy.

And underneath it all, the *boom boom boom* of the bass beats strong, vibrating through the ground
and into the tips of Izuku’s ears and fingers, an echo of the madness surrounding the ring, digging its claws deep into anyone willing to listen.

Cheerleader sucks in a deep breath, stepping closer to Izuku. For a moment, he leans his weight on Izuku’s side, closing his eyes and lifting his hands up to cover his ears.

“Holy shit,” he laughs somewhat uneasily, more of a breath than a sentence.

“Yeah,” is all Izuku can get out of his uncooperative mouth. Then, after a moment of thought: “Should – should we take a short break?”

Hijack gestures to the seats above them. It seems that arenas are arenas despite their differences in, uh, sport, because the nosebleeds are mostly vacant. “Let’s take our seats, then.”

Izuku does his best to ignore the looks people give him as they pass by. There’s curiosity, wariness, and the occasional hint of totally unjustified vehemence, which is unfair on so many levels.

Once they’re seated safely as far away from the action as possible, Kero crawls out of Izuku’s hood and settles himself on Izuku’s lap instead. “So... this was unexpected.”

“Very much so!” Supporter’s laugh is a welcome change to the noise around them. “I’m getting way too many matches with the national criminal database for this to be a small-time operation. This is huge!”

That’s... fun.

“And get this!” There’s a series of rapid keystrokes, followed by a very confident and forceful slam of a key. “The executive members of Mary’s Hand are here! There should be a luxury box above and across from where you’re sitting. See it?”

And, lo and behold, on the other side of the stadium, a black luxury box with full-length glass windows overlooks the ring. Four figures appear to be seated in plush couches, and Izuku’s never felt more anxious than he is now.

“They’re probably the biggest threats you have here,” Supporter says. “But I have some good news! I’ve been able to identify all of them, thanks to some handy cross-referencing with police files and villain databases!”

Izuku lets out a shaky breath. This is so, so, so bad. They really have no idea what they’re getting themselves into. Here they sit, in the midst of hundreds of villains, trying to figure out some sort of plan with no information at all.

Mary’s Hand? What’s that? Executives? Who’re they?

(Save people? How?)

But it’s too late to turn back now, and there’s no way Izuku would be able to live with himself if he came so close to the finish line only to turn back because he was scared.

This is bigger than him. This is bigger than all of them. And because it’s so much greater than the spectrum of what they’re capable of, they’ve got to try, because if they don’t, what sort of heroes are they?

“Let’s hear the good news,” is what Izuku chooses to say, and by some miracle, his voice comes out steady. Maybe it’s because he’s gotten better at all of this, or maybe it’s because profiling is one of
Supporter hums in confirmation. “So we have four executives. The first is actually the boss’s right-hand woman! She’s called Trademark – cool name – and she’s actually the one tagging and eliminating intruders! Nice to get that out of the way, right?”

Beside him, Hijack leans forward, interest in his eyes. “Wait a second. If she tags people, does she actually have to touch them?”

“Indeed!”

“So it’s reasonable to think that she’d be on perimeter patrol most of the time, isn’t it?”

Oh. That’s a very logical assumption to make. Tagging suspicious people beforehand would save a lot of work, since they’re bound to be outside and around the building anyway. Which begs the question –

“Why the hell is she here instead?”

Cheerleader’s eyebrows furrow. Even Kero seems a little surprised.

“I can answer that question,” Supporter says triumphantly, and Izuku can see her beaming. “Because the second executive, Doorman, has a warping quirk!”

Now that’s a rare quirk. The fact that a villain has it and is making very good use of it isn’t great news.

Hijack huffs, leaning back into his seat. “So the guards tip Trademark off about suspicious people, and Doorman warps her over to do the job.”

“At least we dodged that bullet,” Kero offers. It’s a small victory, but in a situation like this, they need all the victories they can get. “Not much to get tipped off by if there’s nothing to see in the first place.”

Izuku simply nods. The pieces are falling together.

“So, the third! She has to be the fighter of the team, since her quirk’s all about manipulating sound waves. The police call her Boombox, which is pretty straightforward.”

That doesn’t bode well at all given the blaring music and pounding bass. Izuku takes that information and files it in for later consideration.

“And the last executive,” Supporter declares, making her own drum roll in the background, “is an information broker!”

For a moment, all of them sit in silence, processing Supporter’s words. It’s quite a downgrade from the previous three, but the fewer threats they have, the better it is for them.

Supporter laughs. “Happy? Well, you should be! The guy’s quirk is basically self-healing, and he’s not even in the criminal database!” After a pause, she adds on, “But he is pretty well known in villain and vigilante circles. Deku might even know him!”

“Please don’t say that,” Izuku says miserably, wanting nothing more than to sink into the ground. Cheerleader pats his back supportively.

There’s a short break as Supporter scans over the files. “His name – huh, weird, doesn’t have
anything to do with his quirk – is Plume.”

What?

Izuku knows cold. Early winter runs tend to be chilly, and recently, with the addition of Freeze to his arsenal, numb fingers and frostbite aren’t as foreign as he’d like them to be.

A frigid cold crawls up his spine, stabbing jagged icicles between his vertebrae over and over again, and a sort of terror Izuku hasn’t felt since he was four years old and helpless and weak roars through his body.

(Plume? Plume, as in the person who, although grudgingly, helped Izuku capture Shadow? Plume, who Yuto accepts as a friend and trusted acquaintance?

What’s he doing here? What the hell is he doing here, lounging among the executives of one of the most notorious villain families, acting like there’s nothing wrong?

What's going on?)

A strange sort of filter slams down between Izuku’s mind and his body. While his thoughts are speeding around, slamming into each other and rebounding off the walls of his head in an infinite stream of what's happening I don’t understand, his body is frozen, stuck in statis, unsure of what to do or what to say.

The ringing in his ears, for once, is louder than the pounding of the bass.

Kero, being the only one here who understands Izuku’s turmoil, sucks in a deep breath, eyes blown wide. He shoots off Izuku’s lap, leaping into the air to hover next to Izuku’s Dekucom. “What?”

Hijack’s spine goes rigid. “You – do you seriously–”

“Know who he is?” Cheerleader finishes disbelievingly.

“Thought we did,” Kero hisses, eyes blazing with an anger so hot that Izuku can feel the molten heat dripping onto his own skin, seeping into his body, demanding answers to a question that won’t be answered.

(Why?)

“We met with him once – worked with him to capture a card, actually.” There’s no kindness in Kero’s voice – just scathing contempt and a tone more acerbic than anything Izuku’s ever heard. “He had a little team and didn’t seem like too much of a threat, so we traded favours.” Teeth bared and wings spread, Kero spits out, “We never would’ve cooperated with him if we knew where his loyalties lie.”

That... Izuku doesn’t know about that part.

Despite the incessant static that rings in his ears, Izuku isn’t one to be suspicious of his friends and allies. That’s the whole point of trust; it’s a mutual, silent agreement, and questioning that trust never leads to anything good.

(There are some frayed strings that, no matter how hard Izuku may try, he just doesn’t know how to fix.

But tearing them off completely is unnecessary. No, instead, he’ll wait until there’s a day he finally
figures out how to mend what's broken, and in the meantime, he'll work on weaving together new
tapestries.)

"I–" It takes three tries for his thoughts to finally align themselves with his mouth. "I think that – that
Plume isn't necessarily a terrible person, and I want to think that what he's doing now might be
because of some other reason we don't know of. It's – right now – I think we should reserve
judgement and move on."

The next words are the hardest to get out. But there's no room for special treatment among villains, especially not when children are involved.

"Whether we know anyone here or not, they're all enemies, and none of them are more evil or more
righteous than the rest. Regardless of who they are, if they’re with Mary's Hand, then they're against
us."

Izuku wrings his hands. He knows that all villains aren't necessarily villainous, and to say that
villains are purely evil and nothing else is a hasty generalization at its finest.

"We don't have time to pick and choose our enemies. For – for the safety of the children, we need to
assume that everyone is against us."

Hijack stares incredulously at Izuku, though it's more out of surprise than shock. That same surprise
is mirrored on Cheerleader's face, and a step even higher on Kero's.

Through the comms, Supporter laughs that jovial laugh of hers, confident and unfailing. "Well, that’s
that! Again, brilliantly said, Deku!" More worrying: "Oh, I can't wait to make a compilation of all
your monologues." Supporter cackles, reinforcing her insanity. "You'll be the next Shakespeare!
People will be quoting you for years to come!"

Supporter's ability to break the tension is absolutely unmatched. It does, however, make for some
very awkward silences.

As usual, it's Kero who speaks up, just not with the clarity of voice he usually has. "Uh. Shakespeare's the old English poet guy, right?"

Izuku is ready to embrace death.

"Old English poet guy," Cheerleader wheezes, as if he's trying his best not to laugh. Hijack elbows
him in the side, hisses something in his ear, and gestures silently at Izuku.

Great. Now everyone thinks Izuku's on the verge of breaking. They're not wrong, per se, but it's not
the most flattering image to have.

Kero takes it upon himself to review the plan they've made, which is a wonderful distraction from
the chaos and sense of impending doom around them. Infiltration: complete. Extraction: uh, a little
more complicated, since they have to take out Trademark to ensure a safe escape, and that means
they'll have to take out Doorman as well, which probably means Boombox will be there too, so
that's great.

And Plume's part of their jolly little team as well, but in all honesty, Izuku isn't too worried (which
actually worries him – how ironic, that a lack of worry gives him anxiety, what the hell) since Plume
doesn't seem like a fighter whatsoever, so if push comes to shove...

Well. Izuku has gotten very good at shoving over the past few months.
Everything past that is up in the air. They have no idea where the kids are, though they do know how many there are. It’s impossible for the three of them, plus Kero and mission control, to save all the children and pull off a clean escape. Therefore, their most reasonable plan of action is to round up the kids, neutralize the biggest threats, and then throw it all into the police’s lap with a nice ribbon on top.

Supporter happily chimes in to say that she’ll leak everything online, from when they first slipped into the building to highlighting police incompetence once more. It’s as motivating as it is worrying.

From there, the conversation takes a dip. First, because there’s nothing more to say that hasn’t already been said, and now, because the lights suddenly snap off, then blaze to life with twice the intensity as before. Brilliant blue light floods the ring, colouring the blood an even darker shade than before.

“Good evening, honoured guests!”

Izuku almost jumps out of his seat. Somehow, the commentator’s voice is even louder than the music.

Around them, the audience explodes into wild screaming and cheering, and all three of them hunch a little lower into their seats, pulling down their respective hoods.

“We know you’ve been waiting for this night a very long time,” the commentator says, drawing out the very way longer than necessary. “And who can blame you? Here it is! The finals in our newly-introduced Junior Cup!”

An awful wave of nausea slams into Izuku, threatening to pull him under.

The crowd roars, and the commentator continues to amp up the chaos. “16 combatants! Half of them whittled down every night! And now, only two remain!”

Blue lights flood two opposite walkways leading up to the ring. On one side, a masked man pulls along a young girl who struggles against his grip, and on the other, another masked man leads a defeated young boy.

Cheering and jeering comes from every direction. Some of the audience even stands, throwing small items into the ring as the children are pushed in. The cage door slams closed with a gut-wrenching sort of finality.

“And remember,” the commentator adds, “After this match, we’ll begin bidding for all the contestants! That’s right; you heard me – all of them! So if you want one for combat, for testing, for the quirk, whatever you can dream up – get your cheques ready!”

Izuku isn’t a violent person. He’s passive to a fault, but when he needs to, he’ll act, and he won’t step down until he’s done.

The fact that these people can cheer and laugh and treat children with such disrespect is disgusting. It makes him want to curl up in a corner and cry. It makes him want to throw up. But it also makes him want to grab the mastermind of this travesty by the collar and deck them as hard as he possibly can.

It makes him want to do all sorts of things that go against his moral code. Izuku’s not sure what that says about him, but anger is an excellent motivator, and paired with desperation, it’ll really get him going.

“I got it!” Supporter’s victorious call drags Izuku’s attention away from the ring. “Thanks to those
two entrances the kids came from, I have the floor mapped out!”

Cheerleader leans forward in his seat. “Are we ready to go, then?”

“Hang on a minute.” Hijack, once again the voice of reason, interrupts, a single hand raised. “Let’s think about this. We have two options here, don’t we?”

They do. With a sigh, Izuku rubs at his temples, trying to soothe the headache that’s pounding in unison with the bass. “We act now and try to round up the remaining 14, or we wait and leave all of them until the bidding begins.”

There’s no telling which plan is better. The first introduces the possibility of getting caught early, while the latter forces them to confront all of their biggest threats at once.

Hijack fiddles with his gloves, pulling them up and stretching out the fingers over and over again. It’s a nervous tick that’s pretty endearing. Then: “I... think there’s a better way to go around doing this. Using my quirk, that is.”

“Let’s hear it,” Kero urges, eyes flickering toward the ring. “We need to act fast.”

“And now, honoured guests, let’s begin! On one side: Firecracker! On the other: Kinetic! Let the finals begin!”

A shrill bell chimes somewhere in the arena, and chaos erupts in the ring. Izuku ignores it and feels awful doing so, but they really don’t have time.

Taking a breath, Hijack spreads his hands. “I’ll keep it short. Here’s what I propose: we act now and take out the executives, one by one. I’ll brainwash some guards to tell the executives to leave and to get them to an appropriate place by themselves. We take them out. Then I’ll brainwash the announcer to say that the kids will be waiting in a separate room to be picked up once they’re sold. After that, it’s just a matter of picking off the remaining guards, waiting for the police to arrive, and escaping.”

That’s... actually a really, really good strategy. And it’s the best they’ve got.

Izuku closes his eyes. There are too many unknown variables in this situation. Blind heroism will get them all killed, and hesitation will do the same.

“Let’s do it.” The words slip from Izuku’s mouth without him realizing.

and for once

he doesn’t care.

There are many things that Plume wants.

He wants a normal sleep schedule. He wants a steady, safe source of income. He wants a list of the best Christmas movies in existence. He wants a cooler, more useful quirk, preferably one that doesn’t require him to start bleeding to work. He wants Mother to leave him alone. He really wants to see his sister again, but that’s a can of worms he’s not looking forward to opening.
Right now, more than anything, he wants anything but to be here.

“Look alive,” Boombox tells him, slapping him on the back so hard it stings. Plume throws her a dirty look, but Boombox simply grins. What a brainless thug. “You should be happy! After all, we would’ve never gotten this far without you and your big brain.”

Off to the side, Doorman snorts. He swirls a cocktail glass in one hand, leaning his weight on the bar counter. He’s the epitome of smug sons-of-bitches. “‘Big brain’. Sure. We all know you’re here for the cash, kid.”

That’s literally the most fucking stupid thing Plume’s ever heard, because everyone in this room is here for the cash.

“Just give me my commission and I’ll leave.” He leaves it at that, unwilling to let himself get dragged into Doorman’s little circus of words.

Trademark raises an eyebrow, but says nothing. And it’s still irritating, because the only thing as bad as Mother is her right-hand woman.

Some sort of conversation sparks behind him, but Plume doesn’t give a flying fuck, so he settles himself in one of the plush couches and tries to get interested in the match beneath him. It doesn’t work. There’s not much charm in watching two children beat the shit out of each other, regardless of how powerful their quirks are.

The girl – Firecracker, or something – doesn’t actually have a flashy quirk. All she can do is send out these weird flares from her palms, which sounds stupid, but matched with her absolutely vicious personality, it sort of works. She’s like an animal out there, fighting because she doesn’t want to get hurt.

And the boy – Kinetic, seriously, didn’t they have a better name – is the complete opposite. His quirk is absolutely devastating, capable of harnessing kinetic energy (wow, what a surprise) and unleashing it in terrifyingly destructive ways. The problem is he’s a complete wimp. He’s actually getting pummeled right now, which is sort of depressing.

Plume sighs. He really hopes Firecracker proves herself to be some sort of fighting genius, because he really wants that extra cash. Maybe the commentator can talk her up a little, make her more appealing. That’d be nice.

Sometime later, Doorman gets a call from one of the guards down in the barracks. Trademark tilts her head curiously, but Doorman waves her off, saying something on the lines of, “Some kids are just being naughty again. Save some wine for me; I’ll need it when I get back.”

He leaves. That’s a rare blessing.

The fight continues on, which is rare, but not completely unexpected. These are the two most resilient kids, after all. It’s natural that they’d put on more of a show than the others.

And that’s good. The more excited the crowd gets, the more buyers will put on the table.

Maybe Mother will be a bit generous this month, boost his commission a bit. Treatment isn’t cheap, and especially not when you have a quirk that’s ripping you up from the inside out.

Surprisingly, Trademark gets a call a little while after Doorman. The guard says something about the kids being annoying and that Trademark should come down and “teach them a lesson!”
Trademark doesn’t look too happy, but she obliges anyway, nodding her head at Boombox and Plume.

The problem with that is Boombox’s attention is now entirely focused on Plume, who at this point, couldn’t care less if a shark leapt out through one of Doorman’s sketchy portals and bit the burly woman’s head off.

By some miracle, Boombox gets called down to handle some sort of issue with the security system. She whines for a good minute, downs an entire bottle of beer, and struts out, grumbling under her breath the entire time.

Holy shit. God is real. For once, Plume’s alone in this hellhole, free to lounge around without one of the executives breathing down his back.

And it’s a good silence. It’s a wonderful silence. It’s not really so much of a silence than a prolonged moment of unadulterated freedom, but it’s about as common as a blue moon, so Plume sits there and savours the fact that fate has somehow managed to stack the odds in his favour.

The fact that he’s sitting in Mother’s domain with free will is basically an oxymoron. It’s a good oxymoron.

“And there’s our last guy!”

-That’s not a voice Plume recognizes.

Years of roaming the streets and navigating the underworld have taught Plume a lot about when to be paranoid and when to relax. The answer: constant vigilance will help in keeping you alive, but it sure as hell won’t stop you from getting killed.

But he’s not really in the mood to get murdered today.

Spinning around, Plume rests his hand on the pistol hidden beneath his jacket and surveys the scene. It’s... a weird scene.

Three kids, not much older than the ones in the arena, stand casually before him. Each of them seems to have a colour scheme of their own – blue, purple, and green. The blue kid leans casually against the bar counter, lifts one of the cocktails up, sniffs it, scrunches up his nose, and abandons the drink. The purple one stands a little away, rubbing his throat and coughing quietly. And the third one, the green kid, shuffles a card through his fingers with trained grace, a baton tucked under his arm.

All of them have hoods with bunny ears. And worse, all of them have seem amused.

Alarm bells begin to ring in Plume’s head. He tries his best not to flip his shit.

Oh, this is bad. This is bad. There’s no way Doorman, Trademark, and Boombox would let in any intruders, which means these three kids somehow took them all out. What the fuck. What the actual fuck.

“Hey,” the blue kid greets, tone way too casual for the situation. “You’re Plume, right?”

Plume takes in a silent breath, hand resting carefully on his pistol. “Depends who’s asking.”

The blue kid huffs out what seems to be a laugh, tapping his baton on the floor as he walks to the green kid’s side. “We don’t exactly go by anything yet, but you can call me Cheerleader.”
gestures at the purple kid. “That’s Hijack, and this—” he nudges the green kid, who laughs – “Is someone you might know. He goes by Deku.”

Well, shit.

This kid – this confident, calm, infamous kid – when the hell did he start getting involved in the underground? Isn’t his job intervening during villain attacks and showing the heroes one up? That thing with the shadow freak was a one-time thing, and the Christmas parade was for his sister.

All their ties should be cut. There’s no reason for either of them to get involved in each other’s lives again, but the kid’s here, with friends, and everyone with a brain knows that Deku’s the harbinger of change.

(Also, the kid one-upped him in negotiation, and that’s humiliating.)

There’s a moment where they’re all staring at each other. Then, Deku sighs, shaking his head.

“You know,” he says, in a voice so disappointed it makes Plume feel like he’s six and under Mother’s thumb again, “I expected better of you.”

A wave of anger rushes out from deep within Plume, and he crushes it mercilessly. There’s no way he’s going to lose control of the situation a second time.

“Is that so?” he manages to grit out, keeping his voice neutral.

Deku nods, his pupils resembling blazing orbs. In the dim lighting of the room, his eyes burn, glowing an almost neon shade of green. “Information brokers are only tricky because they’re always moving, never stagnant. They make no ties, and they couldn’t care less for loyalty.” Cocking his head, Deku smiles. It sends an unwelcome chill down Plume’s spine. “And here you are, practically crucifying yourself. Everyone appreciates a good martyr act, but there’s a difference between a valiant end and a foolish one.”

That smile. That fucking smile. It’s so similar to the one Deku pulled on him before, all calm and condescending and bullshit, but this one’s not just for show – no, it’s weaponized, like his lips could pull back into a snarl at any moment, like he’d bite off Plume’s head in an instant.

It’s calm, but it’s predatory. It’s like Mother’s smiles.

This kid is genuinely terrifying.

The purple kid – Hijack – sighs. “We get that you’re probably not as much of an asshole as the others, but since you’re in the way...” He trails off, then shrugs. A strange breeze billows through the room. “Three for four’s not bad, but we’re here for a perfect score.”

Now, Plume knows he’s not much of a sharpshooter. He’s not a fighter at all, really; he’s a runner, a finder, and he’s damn good at what he does. A gun’s handy because it makes people scared, and even a bad shot can be a fatal one.

He expects to pull off a good show of threatening the kids, etc, etc. Bluffing isn’t hard.

He doesn’t expect Cheerleader to lunge toward him with frightening speed, smack the gun straight out of his hand, catch it mid-parabola, and point it back at him with a sort of confidence a kid shouldn’t have.

“I’ve waited so long to pull something like that,” Cheerleader says, humming satisfyingly to himself.
Meanwhile, Hijack has basically destroyed one corner of the room with blades of wind that definitely weren't there before (those slashes are at least two inches deep, what the fuck). For some reason, he looks distraught. “I... tried and I might have overdone it.”

Deku waves his hand dismissively, as if his friends aren’t superhuman. Seriously, what the fuck. “It’s alright. Thanks for the save, Cheerleader.”

Cheerleader hums a faint noise of approval. After a moment of contemplation, he sets the pistol down on the bar counter. He then returns to playing with his baton, like it’s a better weapon than a gun. In his hands, it probably is.

“There’s no need to make things difficult.” Stepping forward, Deku flips a card up into the air. It hovers for a second before bursting into pink light, but otherwise, nothing noticeable happens.

Plume stares at the kids. Then he picks up a paperweight off the counter and throws it as hard as he can at the glass. Upon impact, a pattern of intricately woven circles flashes to life on the transparent surface, and the paperweight bounces back harmlessly. Typical.

“Shield isn’t that easy to break,” Deku laughs, clear as a bell. It would be harmless if there wasn’t a very obvious tone of warning in his cheerful demeanor.

This kid and his fucking cards. He’s so much stronger than Plume, and he can’t possibly be in senior high yet. God, the world is unfair.

There’s nothing much to say from that point on. These kids won’t kill him; that’s for sure. Whatever they could do to him can’t possibly be worse than what Mother’ll do once she finds out about this giant, steaming mess of an operation. Might as well do a little pregaming before the big event.

So Plume zones out, carefully placing a filter between his mind and his body. If there’s one thing he’s learned how to do over the years, it’s how to just... pull everything in.

Deku frowns and says something. The infliction is different than usual. He repeats it, a little louder this time. His frown deepens when Plume doesn’t respond.

Then Deku clears his throat, takes a breath, and says, “Is there a chance you’re related to Aki?”

Plume hears the sentence. He processes the sentence. And then he strongly considers knocking himself out right then and there.

Oh, what the fuck?

Like, what the hell is going on. This kid – this kid’s voice is in Plume’s head. In his head. And there’s no way in hell he knows Aki.

“I’m talking to you in a – hmm.” Deku pauses, a hand on his chin. He looks up contemplatively. “I suppose you could call it a primeval tongue. It’s not quite a spoken language, but a mental connection.” The vigilante smiles. “Try as you may to keep me out, but I’ll find a way in.”

With a shaky breath, Plume pinches the bridge of his nose. He didn’t think there was anyone in this world as terrifying as Mother. He couldn’t have been more wrong.

There’s someone who’s even more dangerous than her, and his name is Deku.

The two other vigilantes seem confused. It’s not much of a surprise; Deku’s so-called mental connection sounds almost exactly like a normal spoken language, but with a thick slather of static
and inaudible rambling thrown in, resulting in a string of sounds that you’d recognize as words but can’t hope to understand.

Except for Plume, of course, who can somehow decipher what Deku’s saying. The kid did say something about magic – maybe it’s related?

Deku steps closer, his smile falling into something darker. “And about Aki – you two are related, aren’t you?”

Plume stiffens. The only people who should know about that are his allies and Yuto. “Who knows.”

“You two look very similar,” Deku continues, circling around him a fashion too predatory to be natural. His movements are smooth and steady, like he’s twisting his grip tighter around Plume with every passing second. “Your eyes are almost exactly the same. And your quirks are both very rare and similar. Aki never told me much about her family, but I assumed it was because she didn’t have a great relationship with them.”

That’s spot on, but Plume isn’t about to let Deku know that.

“I’m asking this so I know how to deal with you. Should we throw you to the police, or should we make an exception?”

“An exception?”

“Aki wouldn’t appreciate it if her brother was behind bars. I’m sure we can do a little for each other. Perhaps we can turn a blind eye, and you can owe us a little favour.”

What’s made Deku so popular as a vigilante is he represents justice. He isn’t morally grey; no, he’s just there to help the people, show the heroes what heroism really is. That’s his whole gig.

But this? The curious flash in Deku’s eye, and that carefully worded offer? This is something Plume recognizes as a subtly delivered message: I’m willing to make an exception for you if you pay me back.

Getting arrested sucks, and frankly, Mother’s an asshole. If Plume gets a nice, solid reason to stay undercover for a few months, he’s taking it. “That’s reasonable. We’ll talk at a later date.”

Cheerleader and Hijack’s eyebrows shoot up. Deku grins. The static fades from his voice, and he raises a hand to his lips. “Good. I’m happy we came to a conclusion.”

There’s a mumble of what conclusion from Hijack, but it’s quickly silenced by a series of amused huffs from Cheerleader.

Plume sighs. With all that said and done, there’s only one matter left to address. “So, is this the part you knock me out, or–”

“Yup,” Cheerleader says way too cheerfully, and the last thing Plume sees is the blur of a baton mid-swing before an unwelcome veil of darkness falls over him.

Fucking demons, the lot of them.
The executives are pretty underwhelming.

Izuku wasn’t sure what he expected. If anything, he expected them to be crazy strong, incredibly experienced, and way more competent than a ragtag team of kids.

Shadow sweeps up from underneath Doorman the moment he steps into the room.

It’s sort of horrifying, watching a writhing mass of shadows strangle the breath out of a person. Izuku feels a little sick watching it happen, but fourteen terrified children sit huddled behind him, wide-eyed and shaking, bruised from head to toe.

He doesn’t have time to feel sorry for his enemies.

After a minute or so, Shadow deposits Doorman’s unconscious form on the tiled floor.

Cheerleader jabs at the executive, then nods. “He’s out cold.”

“Like a light,” Kero confirms, doing a little tap-dance on Doorman’s face. “I never knew Shadow could be so, uh, violent, but it worked out in the end, didn’t it?”

It appears as if the cards’ power has only increased since Izuku captured them. That’s worrying for two main reasons: first, because the cards were already incredibly powerful and now they’re even more powerful, which is way too much power for one individual to have, and second, because Izuku’s worried as to how he might use said power in the future when the stakes get higher and his standards of morality drop even lower.

Hijack returns soon after with a brainwashed guard. After making the call to Trademark, the guard stares vacantly at a wall, turns around, and quietly leaves the room.

“I told him to go to the furthest room from the arena and sit in the corner until the day’s over,” Hijack explains, clearing his throat. “I’ll send each of the guards to different rooms just in case something happens.”

Cheerleader lifts his hand up for a high-five. Hijack returns it hesitantly. Supporter cackles something about how free will is an illusion over the comms. Kero rummages through Doormaker’s pockets and begins to pull out various small objects. Izuku has no idea how they’ve made it this far.

When Trademark arrives, they expect more of a fight. And good thing they did; though the fight is short, Trademark is nimble, quiet, and smart. She easily dodges the blades of wind Hijack throws at her, and even Shadow can’t catch her off guard. It takes a well-timed, unexpected, and frankly brutal swing from Cheerleader to take her out.

His baton catches her right in the temple. Trademark’s body crumples like a broken marionette.

They all shuffle over and group around Trademark. Cheerleader kneels down and checks her head and her pulse.

“She’ll be fine,” he decides in the end, a little too meekly for Izuku’s comfort.

She should be fine, though – her Lifestrings are intact, just a little too loose and droopy to be normal. It should be fine.

Another brainwashed guard brings Boombox into play. As predicted, she’s the fighter of the group, shooting out sound waves in every direction. That’s really bad news, so Izuku quickly flips Shield up and around the hulking warrior.
The barrier only serves to enhance Boombox’s attempted attacks, and although they don’t actually make it out of Shield, they’re frightening enough for Izuku to throw out Watery and, uh, drown her a little.

Izuku consoles himself by thinking that Boombox’s sound waves rebounded off shield. Her quirk was enhanced by the water and she managed to knock herself out.

It would’ve worked if Supporter wasn’t so enthusiastic. “I can’t believe you just dunked her!” Supporter laughs, laughs, and laughs. Cheerleader grins while Hijack eyes Izuku.

“I can feel my morals actively decaying,” Izuku says miserably, clutching his staff like a lifeline.

In the end, it takes them less than ten minutes to take out three executives. During that time, it dawns upon Izuku that Plume and Aki might be related. Plume probably isn’t that bad of a person and Aki needs all the support she can get, so Izuku somehow convinces his team that they should confront Plume directly because of reasons.

It’s another serious blow to his morals, but this day has been life-changing already. If they’re going to seriously pursue this vigilante thing, they might as well go all the way.

Kero really hits the vigilante thing home by floating over and dropping the executives’ ID and important-looking items they had on their person.

Izuku asks Kero why he had to do that, because now it just seems like they mugged three mafia members.

“The police need little blessings,” Kero says indignantly. “We’re trashin their reputation. Like, we’re slanderin everything they’ve built up in this society. Helping them convict criminals plays out in our favour as well as theirs.”

Hijack is unimpressed. “You kept half the stuff you found.”

Kero waves his hand dismissively, ignoring Izuku’s sharp look. “That’s not important.”

Izuku would argue, but a tug on his cloak cuts him off short. He turns around to face one of the children – he can’t be older than ten, what have they been doing to these kids – and puts on the brightest smile he can muster.

Shiny little tears well up in the boy’s eyes. Izuku’s heart clenches painfully in his chest. “Are – are you here to help us?”

“Always.” Izuku’s answer is immediate and unwavering.

A hero is brave. A hero is strong. A hero saves everyone and never loses. A hero will do what’s right, even if it means jumping into the line of fire.

(There are three figures in Izuku’s life that have influenced his behaviour the most in recent days.

First, Kinomoto Sakura, the previous Master of Cards, who did her best to serve her friends and fulfill her duty. She died thinking she had lived an unfulfilling life, and yet she reached out to Izuku with blinding kindness and compassion. Her spirit lives on in Izuku, because even if she’s already gone, wishes can be granted past the grave.

Second, Watanuki, the mysterious owner of the Wish-Granting Shop, a magician unlike any other. He knows far more than he lets on and he’s not afraid to let everyone know it, which would
normally be infuriating, but in the world of magic, where knowledge means life or death, there’s no doubt that he’s a force to be reckoned with.

And third, Ms. Yuko, an enigma of magic and wisdom that resides within Izuku’s mind, offering advice and power in times of need. If Watanuki’s an unread book, then she’s a library. Her power is undeniable, and Izuku suspects that he might have more ties to her than he knows of.

Three powerful, unique, and mysterious individuals – these are the people that Izuku calls upon in times of uncertainty, when he doesn’t know what to say or how to act.

But there’s a fourth one. A fourth person who Izuku idolized when he was helpless and weak and without meaning. There’s a fourth person who Izuku doesn’t treat as a god now so much as another cog in the machine.

All Might is just another hero. But he’s an important hero. He’s the Pillar of Peace. His unwavering smile speaks louder than his words, and his actions even louder.

Izuku would never compare himself to All Might, but he can sure act like him.)

Calling upon all his courage and compassion, Izuku smiles again. A strange sort of fire lights deep within him, and something small but important changes irrevocably.

“My name’s Deku. These are my friends, Cheerleader, Hijack, and Kero. We’ll get you out of here.”

Cheerleader nods approvingly. Hijack smiles something not so wry. Supporter laughs. And Kero, who hovers loyally by Izuku’s side, beams proudly.

The four of them end up using what limited medical know-how they have (with the exception of Cheerleader, who actually knows what he’s doing) to examine the various injuries the children have. Izuku gives out more hugs than he expects to.

Convincing the children to leave is much easier than expected. Apparently a few of them actually know who he is, and those few trot behind him like ducklings. The rest of the children follow soon after.

“I’m not ready for kids,” Izuku tells Kero, his voice shaking.

“You really aren’t,” Kero agrees.

Hijack peers out the door quickly. “Now for the hard part. We need to get these kids through the halls without having anyone else spot us.”

Humming in agreement, Cheerleader balances his weight on his baton. “We can fight, but we can’t endanger the kids.”

They’re short on options, and they don’t have much time left. That means it’s time for Izuku to do something that he really hoped never to do again in his life.

“Supporter,” he calls, reaching up the tap the earpiece. “Are there any safe rooms we could keep the kids in while we take care of things in the arena? Specifically, ones that guards won’t check?”

A series of rapid key smashing follows. “Ah, here we are! I found one. It’s an old storage room, a little small, but as inconspicuous as it’ll get. How about it?”

“Let’s send someone there.”
“Oh? Well, alright! Who’d like to go? I’ll give you directions!”

There’s little debate over who should go. Cheerleader jumps up at the notion to pull some “sick ass spy shit” and all but sprints out the door. Three minutes later, his voice cuts through the silence of the comms to say that he’s arrived.

Hijack frowns. “What now?”

Izuku steps over to Doorman’s unconscious form. A little bubble of hysteria escapes from the boiling pit of insecurity from within him, but he crushes it.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku reaches out, grabs a handful of Doorman’s Lifestrings, and pulls back as hard as he can.

Doorman stands, wavering like he’s half-asleep. His eyes are half-lidded but open, and from what little of Doorman’s eyes Izuku can see, it’s very clear that the villain isn’t there at all.

Behind Izuku, Hijack startles, only to be called back by Kero.

“Open a two-way portal to – to room 108,” Izuku commands, a steel in his voice that by all means shouldn’t be there. This is literally the worst, but he has no right to complain when the children behind him have been kidnapped, forced into fighting each other for the sake of someone’s sick idea of entertainment, and threatened with the thought of being sold off forever.

Doorman presses his hand to the wall. A door materializes into existence, swinging open, and on the other side, Cheerleader’s head turns and his eyes go wide.

Well, that worked surprisingly well.

“Let’s get you guys somewhere safe,” Izuku tells the children, his smile a little shaky but bright nonetheless. “We have to take care of a few more things, but we’ll be back. The police will be here as well. Is that okay?”

“Okay,” the children echo, varying from meek to enthusiastic.

As Kero leads the kids through the door, Hijack steps forward to stand beside Izuku. “So, what you pulled there...”

“Goes entirely against my morals, which I’ve realized are shattering like glass, but taking advantage of others’ quirks while they’re unconscious is a very mean thing to do.”

“I meant to say that it was very useful, especially against villains, but now I think I’ll keep that thought to myself.”

Izuku looks at Hijack with pain in his eyes. Hijack grins back without a single shred of regret.

All of his friends are evil, because while Izuku’s having a moral dilemma, they’ve fully accepted the fact that they’re prancing up and down on the very thin and very grey slackline that is vigilantism. They’re evil, evil enablers.

Once the children have passed through, Izuku and Hijack follow. Doorman stands vacantly on the other side, so Izuku reaches through the portal, slashes his hand through the villain’s Lifestrings, and Doorman crumples onto the ground once more.

“That’s an interesting move you pulled there,” Cheerleader says, an eyebrow raised. “What was that
“Magic is weirder than you can ever imagine.” Kero’s answer really isn’t much of an answer at all, but it’s not like Izuku has anything better to say.

Thankfully, Cheerleader and Hijack seem to accept everything and have already moved on to setting up communications with the police. In the meantime, Izuku keeps the children calm.

“You’re really Deku,” one of the children says, entirely awestruck.

“That’s me.” Izuku has never been good with social interaction in general, but there’s a certain sort of freedom in interacting with children. They’re open-minded, having yet to form firm opinions and biases, and they see the world with a sort of clarity adults can’t. “I guess you guys have heard about me?”

The child bounces on his heels, practically exuding excitement. “Yeah! You stopped the bird monster, and the water monster, and the shadow monster, and–” He cuts off, pausing to think. “And the ice monster! And now you’re here to help us!”

Izuku smiles. “That’s what we do. When you think you’re alone, or when you think there’s nobody there for you, we’ll be there.” The burst of bravery that springs forth from the depths of Izuku’s soul is unexpected, but not unwelcome. “You can count on us, because that’s what heroes do, right?”

“Oh!” An echo of enthusiastic cries ring out from the group. The boy, whose bouncing has only become more pronounced, declares, “It’s what All Might would do!”

Izuku tries his best not to look like he’s just been slapped.

All Might is All Might. Izuku is Izuku. There’s no comparing them, because it’s equally ridiculous as it is foolish.

Heroes and vigilantes are not the same, no matter how the media might write it. The Pillar of Peace and some small-time vigilante who has no idea what he’s doing – that comparison is a false analogy at its finest.

To say Izuku is like All Might is to destroy the entire foundation of heroics and pave it over with intent rather than execution, and hold on a second, isn’t that what being a hero’s all about?

(You’re next.)

Before Izuku can think too long and hard about the life-changing revelation he’s just had, Cheerleader calls him over to check on the camera.
“We’re ready to roll,” Cheerleader chirps. “How’s it looking, Supporter?”

Supporter laughs a laugh fit for a mad scientist. “Our timing is excellent! The police are actually outside as we speak. I assume they’re trying to find a way in without tipping off Trademark, not that they need to worry about it anymore! Let’s tell them exactly what we’ve done!”

This is the part that Izuku’s been dreading the most. Granted, fighting villains and rescuing children are very serious, very dangerous tasks, but telling the police that they’re incompetent and slow makes Izuku’s stomach drop to his feet.

“Let’s do it,” Izuku says, letting the familiar crooning wash over his body. A veil of calm drops over him, and in an instant, all his anxieties are pinned down. This isn’t a task they can just ignore. Their group can only do so much, and pushing it any further will endanger everyone. “Supporter, if you’d please.”

A cheerful affirmation answers his request. The camera – one of Supporter’s many creations, bless her heart – whirs to life, and a little *ping* goes off, signifying that Supporter has managed to override whatever communication lines the police currently have in play.

“Good evening, everybody. I trust you’re all doing well?”

Silence follows, and then a series of confused questions ring out. Izuku lets them go at it for a bit; it’s fun to see them spin around in circles.

“Goodness! Everyone, I pray you calm down for a moment.” Sarcasm drips from his voice, but Izuku doesn’t care. The children behind him shuffle a little, so Hijack moves in frame to calm them down. “Don’t panic. There’s nothing dangerous here. We’re simply here to tell you that we’ve secured the children – yes, those children, the kidnapped ones – and we’re willing to leave the rest to you. What do you say, heroes?”

As expected, the comms are filled with overlapping voices and sharp commands. Then, cutting through all the chaos, one single, calm voice: “What are you insinuating, Deku?”

“Deku? Deku, the vigilante?”

“He’s changed his modus operandi. This isn’t good–”

“Who’re the others? Do we have them on file?”

“Come now, peace!” Raising his hands placatingly, Izuku cocks his head and smiles. The line falls silent once more. “To the good sir who asked for my intentions: I’m offended you’d think so lowly of me!”

“Oh so very offended,” Hijack tags on, grin wry as ever. Cheerleader laughs and high-fives him.

“Our intentions are the same as yours. We’re here to help, not to hinder. The only reason you think otherwise is because we acted while you watched.” Izuku throws a piercing gaze into the camera. It doesn’t matter who’s watching on the other side. The gauntlet’s been thrown, the challenge done and said. “Try and step it up a little, heroes.”

The same voice cuts through the comms, calm and collected. “What do you propose?”

That’s surprising. The last thing Izuku expected was immediate obedience. But they do have all the cards, and the police are completely in the dark.
“We’ll send you what you need to extract the children, then we’ll secure the remaining two and deliver them to you. Does that sound acceptable?”

“It’s workable.”

“I’d like a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’. Let’s be clear here.”

“Yes, it sounds acceptable. Can you guarantee that no harm will come to the children?”

“We’ll protect them to the best of our ability.”

“I’d like a ‘yes’ or ‘no’, Deku.”

Supporter calls out an ohhhh over the comms. Hijack and Cheerleader chuckle quietly, while Kero quirks up an eyebrow.

Amusing. It seems the man on the other side isn’t as straight-laced as the rest.

Izuku grins. “Yes. We won’t cause any harm to the children – at least, not any more than what’s already been done.”

With that final, foreboding note, Izuku claps his hands.

“Now! We’ll be finishing up our part, so you should start yours. It’s been a pleasure, everyone, but all good things must come to an end.” For good measure, Izuku laughs, spinning his staff in a wide circle and tapping it against the tiled floor. “We’ll see you on the other side!”

And with that, the line falls flat, and Supporter quickly untangles the comms.

Turning to his friends, Izuku beams. “Well, that’s a wrap.”

Taking care of Plume is much easier and far more interesting than the other executives. They exchange some nice banter, Plume zones out, Izuku zones in, and everything works itself out in the end. Izuku takes it upon himself to use Shadow to teleport Plume somewhere safe – after all, they did make a deal.

Sure, there are a few tweaks to the plan, like how Hijack brainwashes a guard to feed the announcer lies instead of brainwashing her directly, or how they end up knocking out a lot more guards than expected, but nothing’s gone awry yet.

Everything’s okay. Even if watching clips of the children forced into fighting each other makes Izuku a little queasy, everything’s fine, because this will never happen again. Not if Izuku can do anything about it.

And then Supporter says, “Ah. This might be some awful, awful timing, but you all should know this.”

There’s a horribly foreign undercurrent of dread in Supporter’s voice that makes Izuku’s eyes narrow. They’ve just finished up talking with the police; they don’t have time to spare on anything else if they want to finish the operation.

“Those kids we rescued? The kids we left in the storage room? They’re not the only children here.” A rapid series of keystrokes follows. Supporter lets out a deep huff. “I can’t locate the others, but I’ve finally managed to break into the database for Mary’s Hand. We have at least forty other minors in their circles. Where? Well, it’s a mystery to all of us.”
Forty? Forty?

Kero’s jaw drops. His eyes go wide, and it seems like he tries to say something, but pauses before he can verbalize his thoughts.

Hijack swears viciously under his breath as he rounds the corner. “You’ve got to be fucking kidding me. How are we supposed to deal with that?”

Silence. Nobody wants to speak, even though they all know the answer.

In the end, it’s Cheerleader who decides to voice what they’re all thinking.

“We don’t.” A careful blankness settles over Cheerleader’s features. “We can’t. It’s either what we have now or nothing. There’s no way we have the time, energy, or manpower to deal with that as we are.”

*Know your limits*, Ms. Yuko murmurs at the back of his mind. She then goes silent, withdrawing her presence entirely from Izuku’s consciousness.

It appears they’re really on their own. There’s no deus ex machina that’s going to fix their crisis.

Izuku takes in a breath and releases it slowly. All eyes are on him.

“Let’s keep going.” It’s not a command, because the decision is unanimous. They all nod grimly while Supporter says she’ll keep the intel safe until it can be used.

Maybe they can’t do anything today, but this certainly won’t be their last operation. The only option they have is to give everything they’ve got to the mission at hand.

By some miracle, the two remaining children are auctioned off separately from the rest, and it’s only after they’ve secured them (with a lot of hugging and hushed promises) that Supporter announces that the villains have finally caught on.

“It’s fine,” Izuku says as they sprint through the halls and back to the arena. His magic is running dry, so Shadow’s out of the question. If they want to disappear, the best place to do it is among the crowd. “This is good, actually. Chaos works in our favour. The police and heroes are already in the building, which means the children are safe. The only thing left for us to do is hide, wait, and bide our time until we have an escape route.”

The arena might as well be the depths of hell, with villains running and yelling as the heroes make their entrances, quirks flying in all directions, and in the midst of it, three vigilantes and a plush stand, watching. Waiting.

“Get down,” Hijack hisses, pulling Izuku and Cheerleader down as a hero turns their way. “What should we do? Who’re we up against?”

As a villain runs past their row, Cheerleader sticks his baton out and delivers a quick but effective blow to the villain’s temple. The villain crumples. “I think it’s safe to say that everyone’s against us right now,” he mumbles.

Cheerleader’s assumption is a good one. It doesn’t bode particularly well for them, but it’s really not surprising at all.

From what little Izuku can see, it’s obvious that this operation is a big one. The heroes are mostly those of the younger generation with the rare veteran here and there. In general, there aren’t many
top heroes, but there are certainly a lot of competent combatants.

Izuku just wishes they had an easy way out, like a big, giant hole in the ceiling. Yes, that would be nice—

“Hey,” Supporter calls, an unfamiliar anxiety in her voice. If Izuku isn’t imagining things, then her voice is— is it shaking? “We—oh, what a twist—we have incoming—”

A thunderous explosion echoes across the stadium, and the ceiling above the arena caves in.

Instinct tells Izuku to throw up Shield, but logic tells him that if he uses any more magic, he won’t have any left to use for their escape. Thankfully, Hijack takes over that choice for him, thrusting his palm out above them. A faint green barrier billows into existence, throwing some falling pieces of rubble away from them.

Hijack really was made for magic. Also, what the fuck just happened?

Cheerleader’s eyes are wide as he peeks up above the seats and down toward the ring. His eyes narrow for a moment, and then his jaw drops. “Holy fucking shit.”

“What? What is it?” Hijack raises his head, following Cheerleader’s gaze. There aren’t many things that can stun Hijack into silence, but apparently whatever just happened can do the impossible.

A terrible sense of dread pools in Izuku’s stomach as he follows suit.

Most of the villains around them have either been captured or have somehow escaped. But for those who haven’t, no motion exists. Silence falls over what was once an arena booming with sound and chaos.

(No.

No way.

There’s no way.)

All there is right now is the Pillar of Peace himself, standing in the middle of a crumbling ring.

“I am here,” All Might declares, all righteous vengeance and unmatched power.

The villains flee with five times as much vigor as before.

“All Might,” Izuku breathes out, barely a whisper. His voice is one among many. The shocked cries of All Might! It’s fucking All Might, run and we’re dead if he catches us echo through what remains of the crowd.

All Might is quick and efficient. He moves, and in an instant, a good fifteen villains drop where they are, unconscious.

Why? Why, why, why? What’s All Might doing here? Why did they call him in?

(What’ll happen if he catches them?)

Another wave of villains fall. Hijack spins around. He’s more on edge than Izuku’s ever seen him, tense and flinching at any tiny movement. “We need to leave. We need to leave, otherwise we’re fucking dead.”
Kero nods vigorously. “A huge threat’s arrived, but now we have an easy way out!” He points at the hole in the ceiling. “If we can just make a dash for it with Fly, we’ll be safe!”

That’s right – Fly’s an easy card to use, and Izuku’s sure it can hold the weight of three people. Nobody here has a flight quirk, so once they make it out that hole, they’re home free.

Except All Might’s here now, so all strategy is irrelevant.

“No.” Think, think, think. Isn’t that Izuku’s strength? His one redeeming feature? “All Might’s overwhelming fast and powerful. He can simulate flight by using wind pressure, and there’s no way Fly’s faster than him. If we want to escape, we need something that can cut him off.”

“Shield,” Kero suggests, short and curt.

“I – I can’t say with confidence that even Shield can withstand a Detroit Smash.”

“Watery? Windy? Freeze?”

“Too much magic. I won’t have enough for Fly.”

“I can try to brainwash him,” Hijack suggests.

“All Might can change the weather with a punch. I don’t think he can be brainwashed so easily.”

A sharp intake of breath places Izuku’s attention on Cheerleader, who’s watching the one-sided beatdown on the other side of the arena with a white-knuckled grip around his baton. “I hate to interrupt you, but All Might’s shredding through these small-time thugs like tissue paper.”

He is. Oh god, he really is. The pro heroes are competent, but All Might’s a one-man army. Villains are dropping one by one in a constant stream of thuds that Izuku can swear he hears, even over the noise. And All Might’s holding back too, since most of the villains aren’t high-priority.

Izuku has an awful feeling that the infamous Deku might be a desirable catch.

“We need to move now,” he says, standing. “If we wait any longer, we won’t even have a chance anymore.”

Bolting through the crowd might be the most terrifying thing Izuku’s ever done. While the villains run away, Izuku, Cheerleader, and Hijack run toward the Number One Hero.

If Izuku happened to be younger and less world-weary, he’d be awestruck, gaping, and entirely useless. That’s definitely not the case now.

(It’s too late to regret the entire causal chain leading up to this day and time. All Izuku can do right now is do everything in his power to get his friends out, safe and unharmed.)

A plan begins to formulate in Izuku’s head. Pieces fall together, and the panic slowly seeps out of the cogs, allowing them to turn once more. Despite how one-sided the situation seems, they have more cards on the field than they think.

And their trump card – magic – is entirely exclusive to two people of this world, and they’re both part of their team. It’s the wild card, the unknown variable, and Izuku’s going to abuse the hell out of it.

This is going to be interesting.
Breathe in, breathe out. Izuku doesn’t have the magic to waste on a facade of calm. All he can do is trust his gut. “I have a plan.”

“Do it,” Kero answers immediately. “We’re out of options. If it gets us out, it doesn’t matter what it is.”

“Good. Because I need you to hide under the ring while I go talk to All Might.”

Hijack stumbles over his own feet. “You what?”

“Under the ring,” Izuku repeats, picking up his pace to leap onto the stage.

Despite the hole above his head, blinding lights still shine down upon him. That’s good. He needs all the attention he can get.

Thrusting his palm up to the sky, Izuku takes a breath and calls, “Sylvie!”

Howling wind rips through the arena, screaming with a horrible dissonance as it blows past villains and knocks them off their feet. Ribbons of wind fold through the hole in the ceiling, collecting into a familiar green figure.

Sylvie barres her razor-sharp teeth. With no reason to restrain herself, she looks positively feral, her slender appendages ending in curled claws, her entire form flickering between fairy and monster. “Finally calling my name to do battle, magician?”

Izuku doesn’t need to look around to know that all eyes are on him. “To escape.”

“Hmm. Not what I’d prefer, but fun nonetheless.” Sylvie’s blazing emerald eyes fall upon All Might. Her smile widens, pulling back to reveal her second set of teeth. “Oh? It’s the so-called Number One Hero! I like how you think, Deku.”

“Stay back until I call you,” Izuku commands, holding his arm out in front of Sylvie. “Do as I say, and I’ll repay you.”

That silences Sylvie. She says nothing as Izuku steps forward to the center of the ring, but her eyes follow his every movement.

Watching All Might step into the ring is an experience unlike any other. It’s terrifying, but at the same time, Izuku can’t help but think, how did I get here? Why am I facing All Might, right here, right now?

“Good evening.” Izuku swallows the wad of anxiety lodged in his throat. He may not be able to fall back on his moon magic, but he’s spent far too long listening to Watanuki and Ms. Yuko ramble on and on to have learned anything about confronting the powerful. “I... can’t say I expected your arrival, sir.”

“I could say the same to you,” All Might answers, his tone carrying that same enthusiastic lilt that it always has. Some people think it’s inspiring. Izuku thinks it’s dangerous. Anybody who smiles in the face of danger is either insane or has reason to do so, and when it comes to All Might, it’s always the latter. “Your efforts are appreciated, but not exactly legal, I’m afraid.”

Yeah, like that’s any surprise.

It’s clear that All Might puts catching Izuku above the others. And rightly so – there are other heroes here, continuing the fight around them, leaving the biggest threat to All Might.
It’s flattering in the worst way possible.

Izuku thinks of Watanuki’s calm, knowing smile and Ms. Yuko’s silky, slippery words. He doesn’t have the confidence or experience to pull off an all-knowing-magician act without the help of his magic, but an all-knowing-vigilante act is a good substitute.

“If our actions were legal we’d be among your ranks,” Izuku says, a hand on his hip. His lips are dry and his hands are clammy. “But the prerequisite for working with pro heroes is believing in pro heroes, so I’m afraid we’ve fallen one step short. From there, everything else just crumbled.”

Izuku musters up all of his anxieties and weaponizes them, condenses those horrible feelings into one bitter smile that strikes sharp and quick, leaving those on the receiving end to bleed out slowly without ever realizing they’ve been struck.

All Might frowns. It’s genuine, pulling at the corners of his mouth. And yet it’s not angry or condescending. It’s just an expression of displeasure. At what, Izuku’s not sure. “You’ve become disillusioned.”

Seeing All Might do anything but smile is like watching the moon plummet out of the sky. For a moment, Izuku’s taken aback, but then he realizes that he’s got to keep up the act. “I guess you could say that,” he says flippantly, shrugging.

A pregnant pause follows. Despite the chaos around them, no sound seems to exist outside of the ring.

“You’re so young,” All Might finally says, an indiscernible emotion weighing down his voice. Anger? Frustration? Sadness? Maybe a mix of all three, or something else entirely? “You have so much potential, but the world has failed you.”

Oh, hell no.

“If you want a sob story, I’m sorry to say I can’t give you one.” It comes out more scathing than Izuku intended, but now that All Might’s decided to go that route, well, Izuku will return blow for blow. “It doesn’t take a troubled past to realize that the system is wrong. Don’t tell me otherwise, because if you do, it’ll be a lie, and we both know it.”

Another pause follows. It’s during this silence that Izuku realizes something very, very important that he can use to his advantage.

In All Might’s eyes, no matter how infamous Deku is, he’s still a child. And now, he’s a child who thinks the system is wrong and wants to do good but can’t find a place for it within professional heroics.

There’s no way someone as righteous as All Might would try to hurt a child.

So there’s no need to try so hard, is there?

“Let us go,” Izuku finally says, dropping the smile in place for something a little closer to his real emotions. Frustration churns in his stomach. “We did all the work, and now it’s yours to take. You’re the Number One Hero; use your better judgement. Let us go.”

All Might’s answer is firm but gentle. “I’m afraid I can’t do that. There are... many questions we’d like to ask you.” He spreads his hands in a show of goodwill. They’re calloused and scarred. They remind Izuku of his own hands. “But we can guarantee that no harm will come to you. In fact, your assistance would greatly enhance our current investigations.”
Yeah, no, fuck that. There’s no way Izuku’s selling out his friends in order to get off easy.

And also? This is the first step to showing heroes that they’ve strayed from the path. There will only be more opportunities to intervene, to show heroes what they’re doing wrong, to try and fix what’s been broken.

“We won’t surrender to something we don’t believe in,” Izuku whispers, gripping his staff tightly. His shoulders tense, and he hunches over. “If you tell us to give up the opinions and thoughts we’ve gained through first-hand experience, then I’m afraid we can’t believe in you, either.”

All Might’s stance loosens. He looks at Izuku with piercing blue eyes, and in a single breath, asks, “Why?”

Why indeed. Why is Izuku doing something so dangerous? Why is he choosing to rebel against the system? Why is he reaching so far beyond the scope of his role – the cardcaptor – and throwing himself into situations that don’t require his presence?

(In his mind, hundreds of faces come to mind, all of them having once faced headlines about heroes and action and overlooked death tolls and thought, *what a messed up world we live in.*

Aki cries tears of frustration whenever the media paves over the death of innocents to make room for more coverage about how spectacular heroes are, or how evil villains are. In her words, “If you can’t save them, why can’t you at least remember them?”

Miu’s not particularly emotional. She expresses her thoughts by combing through publicly released police files, keeping note of every small-time villain who either died facing heroes or was given an unfair sentence. “Society makes villains to punish them,” she’d say.

Rin doesn’t like the heroics industry, and she’s not afraid to be vocal about it. She’s been questioned time and time again, grilled for a long, complex answer, but her conclusion always comes to this: “You think I can trust someone to save my life when my shop blows up at noon and they’ve got a photoshoot at the same time?”

Zing left the heroics industry years ago. She knows what that world is like, having spent a good 30 years there before she made her leave. Her reason? “Every year that you’re not Number One, you pay with a little bit of your soul. I jumped ship before I gave up that last piece, I guess.”

Professor Miki is a well-educated, open-minded woman. Her thoughts and opinions are spread across many subjects, and heroics is most definitely one of them. “Did you know? In history, the majority of wars began due to people in positions of power convincing the masses that those of a certain group were unnatural and wrong. Now, take a good, long look at the world around you.”

Sasha, even more recently: “I’m not about to poison my own beliefs to fit into a world that I don’t even like.”

Watanuki, after hearing Izuku’s explanation of the professional heroics industry: “Well, that sounds awfully counterproductive. You’d imagine that the priority would be finding the root of villainy instead of culling it when it appears.”

And, some time ago, when Izuku was confused and lost and unsure of his position in the world, Sakura told him, “You have the will and the potential to do great things. Your world needs someone like you.”

Izuku isn’t one to form strong opinions and thoughts on his own. His actions are not just his own – they’re those of the people around him, who believe that there’s something better than what heroics
If Izuku has to champion that ideal – if Izuku has to be the one to make that dream come to fruition – then it’s simply fate.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku looks up to the open night sky above him. There are no stars in the sky; the light of the city has long since erased them from view. Only the moon looks down on him, round and full and bright.

And he speaks.

“You’re my hero – no, you’re everyone’s hero. Your very existence preserves the peace of this world, and for as long as you’re here, it’ll continue to be that way.”

All Might seems surprised for a moment. He opens his mouth to say something, only for Izuku to shake his head.

“I looked up to you so much when I was younger because you were the invincible Pillar of Peace, the hero that everyone looks up to.” But nobody stays a child forever, and Izuku isn’t exempt to that rule. His years spent questioning his own worth, finding a reason to be by spreading a little good in this poisonous society, have opened his eyes to the larger picture. “But... I’ve grown up, and I’ve seen the world. I have a lot of heroes, and although you’re one of them, you’re not the only one that matters.”

Izuku fixes All Might – the hero he looked up to for so many years – with an unwavering, burning gaze.

“There are heroes out there that have done so much for me, and they’re the ones that need saving. Not you.”

(Anyone can be a hero, because all you need to be a hero is the will to do good.)

Lifting his hand in the air, Izuku points two fingers toward the moon above him. Silver light collects around his fingertips, a pulsating heartbeat that draws in both light and shadow, distorting the very fabric of spacetime.

It’s time for Izuku to move on. There’s so much to do, and only he and those like him can do it. “And so... I’m sorry, All Might, but this is our fight!”

With a sweeping swing of his arm, Izuku brings down his magic, rewriting the law of natural order, creating something from nothing, returning existence to the shadowy abyss from which it first crawled from.

“Kekkai!”

A glowing wall of silver erupts from the ground. Cheerleader, Hijack, and Kero dart out from the stage and slide safely into the magical barrier. A few long-ranged attacks follow them, but the wall holds strong.

“Go, go, go,” Kero urges, diving into a safe pocket in Izuku’s belt.

Izuku nods sharply. “Sylvie!”

“About time,” the fairy snaps, diving behind the safety of the barrier. She grins, all teeth, and raises her clawed hands. “You’d best hold onto each other, you rebellious children!”
The last thing Izuku sees before he’s swept up in green wind is All Might’s burning eyes and his outstretched hand.

And then all that exists is laughter and darkness.

(Was that right?

Was that really the right thing to say?

Who’s really in the wrong?

Are any of them right? Or are they all just acting on their own ideals?

How will things change from now on?

Will they change for the better? The worse?

Will it be better, this time?)
“It wasn’t a nightmare after all,” is how Izuku greets Watanuki when he regains consciousness.

There’s an amused glint in the Shopkeeper’s eyes that Izuku really doesn’t like. “Rude as always, I see. Not even a ‘good morning’?”

Pushing himself off the surprisingly luxurious bed, Izuku presses his palms into his eyes, groaning. Even in the dim lighting of the room, his eyes scream in protest. It sort of feels like his body’s decided to go on strike and leave Izuku with just his mind, which is never a good thing. “God, what happened?”

He’s in the Wish-Granting Shop, that’s for sure. It’s hard to ignore the smell of herbs and flowers and whatever Watanuki’s cooking for dinner, and Maru and Moro’s distant laughter is a creepy yet constant ambience that’s unique to only one place in existence.

Or maybe not even in existence. The Wish-Granting Shop is weird.

It takes a minute or so for Izuku to realize that his clothing’s been changed. That’s worrying on so many levels.

“There’s no way you were sleeping in my beds with that dirty, sweaty outfit of yours,” Watanuki huffs, crossing his arms.

Fair enough. It’s not surprising in the least that Watanuki has extra yukatas lying around, given his usual appearance and the formal feel of his shop, although Izuku almost bites off his tongue in stopping himself from asking who changed him.

After Watanuki judges Izuku perfectly healthy except for some magical and physical exhaustion, he passes the Sakura Cards back to Izuku, beckons him to follow, and starts down the quiet halls.

“You’re all very lucky,” Watanuki tells Izuku, clicking his tongue. “If you weren’t magicians, the fairies would have, ahem, spirited you away, and you’d be their toys for the rest of eternity.”

Okay, that’s reasonable to say, except–

“Satoshi’s not a magician,” Izuku says, slow and measured, because this could dive straight into batshit crazy territory very quickly.

Watanuki waves dismissively, making a noncommittal noise. He leaves it at that, which is both lucky and horrible, because Izuku’s been spared details that he probably could’ve lived without knowing, but he’ll be knowing left in the dark about something potentially important.

Whatever. They just busted an underground fighting ring, rescued a bunch of kidnapped children, and ran away from All Might. They deserve a break.

“How’re my friends? Are they–”

With a short chuckle, Watanuki comes to a stop beside a door. “Perfectly fine. They’re exhausted, but there’s nothing surprising there.” The door slides open and Maru’s bright smile greets Izuku. Moro appears by her side a second later, and together, they drag Izuku in, laughing all the way.

Cheerleader and Hijack – wait, no, that’s done. Satoshi and Shinsou sit on futons, dressed in similar clothing as Izuku’s, blinking confusedly, as if they’ve just been interrupted.
A pressure that’s been pressing down on Izuku since he woke up slowly dissipates. He heaves out a deep breath. “Oh, thank god.”

“You were the last one to wake up,” Watanuki informs him, casually examining his own nails. “I can’t say it was surprising, but creating a kekkai requires more magic than you’d expect. Do be careful next time.”

Izuku frowns. Yorihiko didn’t say anything about that, but then again, he is sort of a god. “I will be.”

And with that, the Shopkeeper nods his head, smile ever present, and leaves the room. Maru and Moro follow after him, closing the door as they leave.

Wonderful. Now Izuku gets to try and explain all of this. He just loves sharing his sorrows with everyone, because Izuku’s favourite hobby after embracing death is opening up to others.

“You’re up!” Kero shoots off Satoshi’s lap and rockets into Izuku’s face, his arms outstretched.

Izuku catches the full force of the collision with his face. Kero may be small, but he’s fast, and wow that really hurts, how can something so small be so dangerous?

After prying Kero off his face, Izuku gently dabs at his nose. “Can you maybe not do that next time?”

“We just pulled off an awesome mission and got away from the cops!” Kero pumps his fist into the air, hopping from one foot to the other. “We did it! We really did good, guys!”

Satoshi’s smile is wide and bright, as if he’s already moved past the present and is thinking of everything they could do in the future. It’s not something Izuku would put past him, given the fact that Zing’s been pounding Go beyond into their brains for years now. “I second that. We had a pretty successful night, I’d say.”

The irony is amazing. To go beyond as a vigilante – well, it might be new, but it isn’t wrong, because to go beyond is to always strive to do better, so why exclude anyone from that opportunity?

On the complete opposite end of the spectrum, Shinsou looks like he wants to curl up and sleep for a few days. “You know, I’d say something since I’m apparently the voice of reason in this Hell Squad, but everything I say will be pointless when something like this happens again and we all break into, I don’t know, a supervillain’s headquarters or something.”

There’s an awkward silence in which Izuku imagines everyone in the room is trying to decide whether to give Shinsou a hug or a blank stare. Satoshi settles for the hug because he’s like that, whereas Izuku and Kero blink vacantly.

“I mean, we still have a lot more cards to go,” Kero points out. After a moment of contemplation, he tags on, “You guys don’t have to come along for captures. They’ve been--” An unspoken and very obviously discarded fine floats in the air for a moment. “They’ve been okay for the most part. The solo act isn’t a foreign concept to Izuku.”

Izuku’s tempted to strangle the plush. He’s not sure whether Kero’s playing the guilt-trip card on purpose or if he’s trying and failing to reassure the others, but it’ll have the same effect nonetheless.

Shinsou heaves a long-suffering sigh. Satoshi simply grins.

“Ride together, die together,” Satoshi declares. “We’re vigilantes now. We share a bond stronger than blood.”
“Correction,” Shinosu interjects. “We share a bond that will end in blood.”

“Close enough.”

Kero makes a sound of surprise, as if something has just crossed his mind. Izuku looks down and meets his gaze.

“You have a book club meeting with Yorihiko’s kids, don’t you?” Kero asks, effectively dragging up all of Izuku’s suppressed anxieties and chucking it across the court of emotional turmoil that is his life, scoring a rather beautiful three-pointer of despair and suffering.

Izuku drops down on the floor and wonders if it’s possible for Yorihiko to smite him out of existence, right here and now. He settles down on his side and curls up in a fetal position.

The others simply stare in silence. It’s a good silence.

Then, because life is meaningless, Satoshi comes out and says, “So, now that we’ve got the preface out of the way, I have to ask: where are we, who was that man, and why do you know him?”

A boulder falls on Izuku’s head and kills him instantly. At least, that’s what he wished could’ve happened.

Flipping over to lie on his back, Izuku sighs. There’s so, so much to say, and he has no idea how to say any of it. Spatial magic, the Wish-Granting Shop, Watanuki, Izuku’s part-time job as Watanuki’s errand boy, and everything in between – it all makes for a very interesting and incredibly confusing story.

Perhaps today will be a day for secrets to slowly start spilling out.

“Let me tell you about a woman called Ms. Yuko,” Izuku begins, and continues, and continues, and continues.

“Uh, not to be cruel, but you do realize you have to repeat everything for Mei, right?”

“God – fuck me.”

Chapter End Notes

izuku has most definitely played persona 5. he’s living the dream, lads. in hindsight, his social links are probably leveled to hell and back. everyone loves him.

some major events in this chapter! mary’s hand isn’t quite as loud as the league of villains, but they know what to do and when to act. they have eyes everywhere, and now they’re pissed. will this affect the hell squad later? yes, because life is suffering.

plume’s an interesting person. he walks a path even more dangerous than then one
izuku's on, and his family is uh. complicated. he's not a great person and he doesn't want to be one, but he still cares a lot. expect to see him in further down the line. wonder what yuto thinks - or rather, what yuto knows.

ALL MIGHT. of course the first thing izuku does when he meets his childhood idol is spit in his face. izuku still looks up to all might and what he does, but he just can't accept the style of heroics he works with. everyone's suffering. all might's confused and sad. izuku would love to die immediately.

again, thanks for reading!
hello, my name is

Chapter Summary

The postmortem. New developments, and a new friend.

Chapter Notes

shinsou: hey do you want -

izuku: not to be dramatic but i would literally rather die

shinsou: i didn't even say anything

izuku: i know

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Going back to daily after a night of extreme vigilantism, Izuku discovers, is more surreal than anything he’s ever done.

It’s strange. Izuku’s been pursuing casual vigilantism as a hobby for a good seven months now, so staying out late to finish up some illegal activities shouldn’t be all that life-changing.

Except it is, because the media’s going absolutely wild over his latest escapade. At least, that’s what Mei told him, because he’s too scared to look at what he imagines to be a bloody, burning battlefield risen from the pits of hell that is the entire Deku situation.

“It’s like watching hungry animals tear each other to pieces,” Mei had not-so-helpfully informed him after he arrived home safely from Watanuki’s. “Except it’s on the Internet, so it’s five times as brutal! What a show!”

“Oh no,” was all Izuku could say without dissolving into hysterical tears.

Izuku doesn’t think he’ll ever be able to get Mei’s maniacal laughter out of his head. “I’m going to go post another montage of your best moments. Oh, I’m going to get so many followers. Godspeed, guinea pig!”

And then she left. Izuku hasn’t checked any of his social media for a few days, and honestly, he’s terrified at the wreckage that Mei will inevitably leave behind her in her gallant crusade to – to what? She’s a chaotic good at best and a chaotic evil at worst. Every time she posts something, Izuku has heart palpitations, and not in a fun way.

If Izuku dies via heart attack, he knows exactly who to blame. Himself first, and then the demon that is Hatsume Mei.

But the whole running away from All Might thing is finally behind them. As long as a card doesn’t show up, Izuku’s fine. He’s totally fine, because that’s what he is all the time.
“Uh, just so you know, you’ve been writing down all your notes in the wrong notebook for fifteen minutes,” Kero says, slow and measured, as if he knows one wrong poke will send Izuku careening off into an abyss. He’s right.

It takes an incredible amount of willpower not to snap the pencil in half. “You couldn’t have told me earlier?”

“Your soul didn’t really look like it was in your body. Also, I did, and you didn’t say anything, so I’m assuming you sort of... astral projected?” Crossing his arms, Kero huffs. He doesn’t look pleased in the slightest. “And not in a magical way. You were just catatonic.”

Well, that doesn’t bode well. “Ah,” Izuku says, trying to connect that to something else to say, only to give up entirely on words.

Kero leaves him alone. It’s a good call.

There’s something a bit surreal about going out in the city, casually walking through the streets with a few dog, greeting the shop owners on Sunset Boulevard, hearing people talk about some big event that happened last night.

Izuku’s no genius, but he doesn’t need to be one to guess what said big event is.

As he walks by an electronics store, he’s treated to the sight of eight different televisions all playing a clip of Deku’s escape from All Might. That’s all of them – green rabbit, blue rabbit, purple rabbit, yellow bear thing, and an unknown supporter working in the shadows.

Izuku stops and stares at the display for a good two minutes. The dogs pause too, sniffing curiously at his ankles, whining a little when he doesn’t react.

Kero peeks out of his hood. He looks nervous. “Are you, uh, good?”

“This is bad, but not outside of my predictions,” Izuku says, processes, and laments.

Why is his life such a mess? How is fleeing from the Number One Hero something that’s considered normal for him now?

For a moment, Izuku wonders how Satoshi and Shinsou are taking the news. There’s no point pondering over Mei, because she’s definitely ecstatic that they made headlines again. Izuku fears for the safety and wellbeing of their group in the future.

As for Satoshi – well, he’s always been a very calm sort of guy. He’s not fazed easily and he was raised by an absolute madman of a retired hero, so he’s a very go-with-the-flow sort of person.

Shinsou’s a different story. Izuku desperately hopes that Shinsou will be okay with the result of their rather forward challenging of the police and the professional heroics industry, because if he’s not, then Izuku will have spectacularly destroyed a very valuable friendship.

All Izuku can do for a moment is stare at the television screens. A few people pass by him, throwing the occasional glance at the news. A few others pause and stand beside him, interested, but not fully invested.

Fair enough. Everyone has their own lives.

There’s really no use throwing a fit over what they’ve done. Despite the severity of their actions, Izuku believes that what they did was right.
Change doesn’t come easy. In this world, where the status quo is so firmly rooted in the minds of the people, it’s hard to get people on your side. But All Might was able to do it because he’s strong. He’s strong, he never gives up, and he fights for justice. He’s right, because he never loses.

(It’s a strange thing to think about, but Izuku hasn’t exactly lost yet either, has he?)

Izuku isn’t really fighting for his own justice, but it’s a justice he believes in anyway.

Eventually, Izuku makes his way to Rin’s restaurant, dropping off the dogs along the way. When he enters, a few heads turn toward him. There are a few faces that Izuku recognizes and a lot he doesn’t, but all of them crack faint smiles when their eyes land on Izuku.

Rin’s no exception. The edges of her eyes crinkle as she grins. “Oh, Izuku! Thanks for taking care of Hiro. Do you need anything to eat? Want to stop for a bite?”

“Say yes,” Kero whispers eagerly in his ear.

Might as well. Food is an excellent distraction, but Izuku’s really not sure how much of a distraction it’ll be when everyone in the restaurant appears to know exactly who he is.

As Izuku settles himself into a bar seat, Kero hops out of his hood and onto the counter. Rin’s eyebrows shoot up. There’s series of chuckles behind him, but he really doesn’t want to turn and face the music right now.

Izuku orders the special for himself and a size up for Kero. Rin complies with a simple hum. Her eyes sweep over the counter for longer than usual.

“I heard that Deku pulled some pretty audacious stuff yesterday,” Rin says after a brief silence, her eyes sparkling with amusement. “What a move, to bust up a police operation and talk down All Might.”

There’s nothing intelligent for Izuku to say. Miraculously, he manages not to die on the spot. “Uh-huh,” is all he can get out.

Rin laughs, her hands busying themselves behind the counter. Her movements are sure and practiced, rolling with a rhythm of sorts. It’s soothing, watching her work. “Uh-huh indeed.” Then, raising her voice to address some of the regulars, Rin says, “What do you guys think of Deku’s stunt last night?”

“Ballsy!” One man laughs, lifting up a bottle of beer. A few others chuckle along with him, offering up similar comments.

“Reminds me of my youth,” another customer says. She grins, all teeth. “Rebellion’s the maker of the teenage mind!”

“Guys had it coming. Leaving a case to sit for months, only for a few kids to have to take it into their own hands?” A group of customers at a table all cheer in tandem, clapping the speaker on the back. “I say we give it to ‘em! Deku’s a good kid and a great hero!”

Oh.

Izuku flushes from head to toe. He looks down, keeping his head almost parallel to the counter table, wringing his hands.

It’s incredible, seeing how he still has the support of the people even after saying something so
Rin laughs, jovial and light. She reaches over the counter and knocks Izuku on the forehead with her knuckles. “Keep up the good work, Deku!”

Izuku accepts his food quietly, his cheeks still burning.

Slowly but surely, the other customers begin shifting to the counter seats, trying to make conversation with him. Their questions are general in nature but imply that everyone here definitely knows about his illegal extracurriculars, but they either don’t care or just really like anarchy. Izuku has a feeling it’s a bit of both.

Kero, who thrives under attention, pounces on all the questions directed toward himself. He proudly proclaims that he’s Izuku’s second caretaker after his mother. After a moment of thinking, he declares himself to be a single father of four.

The customers laugh boisterously. Kero laughs as well. Izuku wants to die.

Someone asks Izuku how often he eats out. He says that he eats out more than he eats in because he tends to get home at very late hours. Someone else asks him if he has enough time to relax. Izuku hesitates for a little longer, but answers that he does what he needs to do.

Murmurring spreads through the little crowd around him. The customers shake their heads, looking awfully dejected for having heard such a benign response. Kero nods vigorously, his arms crossed. It escalates from there.

One by one, the customers begin ordering food and then pushing it toward him. Izuku stares at it for a moment before realizing that yes, these people are giving him free food, and yes, it would be very rude to turn it down because they’ve paid for it after having eaten, and no, he won’t ever turn down free food, because Izuku is a growing boy with a lot of stress and a very fast-working metabolism.

Rin is more than happy to shovel out food since she’s making good money. For some reason, Izuku feels like this was Rin’s plan all along, even though there was no way she could’ve predicted it.

Then again, everyone Izuku knows is twice as smart as he is, so it’s not that much of a stretch.

Two hours pass. Kero looks more like a bowling ball than a bear. Izuku still feels okay, which really is sort of scary because he hasn’t gone all-out in a while, and his appetite has only grown.

“Do you drink, kid?” A good portion of the crowd is tipsy. That’s not the most responsible thing to do given that it’s not even two in the afternoon, but Izuku really doesn’t have the right to lecture others about being responsible.

“I’m under age,” he reminds the drunk man.

The man nods lazily. “Just one more year, right?”

Izuku can’t muster up the courage to correct him. He decides to entertain the crowd for a little longer before informing them that he’s needed elsewhere.

Rin waves him off as he leaves, her smile wider than he’s ever seen it. Hiro barks, his tongue hanging out excitedly. He sprints a few circles around Izuku’s feet before Rin calls him back.

“Keep up the good work!” Hands on her hips, Rin stands in front of her shop, a sort of pride in her
eyes that makes Izuku feel embarrassed and warm all at once. “And if you ever need a place to celebrate, you know where to find me!”

As Izuku rounds the corner, Kero peeks out of his hood, looking a little under the weather.

“Tate too much,” he whines miserably.

“You did,” Izuku agrees, tugging at his collar. His hood feels like it’s trying to strangle him.

“But!” Kero’s head pops up again. He mirror’s Rin proud smile. “That was nice, wasn’t it? Let’s make Oodles Noodles our hub world!”

There’s no use arguing against both Rin and Kero, especially not when they’ve made up their minds.

As Izuku continues through his schedule, a few others approach him with greetings. It’s not uncommon, but their expressions are all a little more sly and a lot more knowing.

At this point, Izuku’s given up on trying to figure out if they actually know that he’s Deku or not. It’s easier just to assume that every living, breathing soul in the city knows.

Yuto, for one, seems very interested. “So I hear Deku got involved with some underground business,” he hums, his eyes scanning over his phone. He looks up and smiles as Izuku shuffles over the counter. “Never pegged me as a hardcore vigilantism kind of guy, but I guess everyone has their hobbies.”

Izuku’s expression is carefully blank. “Maybe,” he offers, placing his haul onto the counter gingerly.

This is dangerous territory. Yuto and Plume are... associates? Friends? Either way, Yuto’s aware of Plume’s activities. To what extent, Izuku’s not sure, but it’s best to play it safe.

“What do you think of Deku?” Yuto asks with that casual smile of his, holding out a plastic bag with Izuku’s new wares.

Slowly, Izuku accepts the bag. To anyone else, the conversation would sound normal – just two friends speaking to one another.

To Izuku, it sounds like Yuto’s testing him, asking questions and gauging his reactions. That, by itself, implies that Yuto knows more than everyone else.

But being tested isn’t anything new to Izuku. By now, every new person he meets seems to want to test him. The fact that Yuto doesn’t fully trust him hurts a little, but only when considering that everyone else’s reactions were abnormally positive. All in all, it’s nothing surprising.

And so Izuku cocks his head to the side, smiles a smile just as fake as the one he’s facing, and shrugs. “I suppose Deku has an appetite for vigilantism. And, in the world we live in today...”

Izuku leans forward, placing both hands on the counter. His lips curl into something knowing and mocking.

“There are always more meals to be had, no?”

Silence. Yuto’s smile has slipped from his face, leaving behind a blank slate.

At first, Izuku thinks that he pushed way too hard and now Yuto thinks he’s absolutely crazy.

Then Yuto laughs, full and genuine, hunched over in his mirth. Apparently today is the day for full-
body blushes, because Izuku’s cheeks are on fire.

“I get it,” Yuto chuckles, his laughter coming to an end. A strange light illuminates his eyes, not exactly amusement as Izuku expected, but more akin to realization. It strikes with a chilling finality. “I get it, Izuku. All the world’s a stage, and all of us merely players.”

Swinging one leg over the other, Yuto grins. It’s not quite real, but not all fake, either.

“It’s just that some of us are queens while others are pawns.” Leaning in, Yuto taps a finger against Izuku’s chest. “And you, my friend, are one hell of queen.”

There’s nothing Izuku can really say to that except hastily agree and make his escape. He butchers something resembling a reply and hightails it out of Stationary Stop, shoving his newly acquired belongings into his bag.

At this point, Kero has ditched all sense of secrecy. Instead of nestling himself into the makeshift nest that is Izuku’s hood, he sits on Izuku’s shoulder, waving an occasional hello to the passersby.

“I’m a little worried about Yuto,” Kero says, his frown deep at the corners.

“I’m worried about everything,” Izuku fires back. He regrets it instantly, because Kero pounces by reflex, taking it upon himself to rant about how Izuku still doesn’t get enough sleep and is constantly overworked, etc, etc.

In his defense, he really is trying. He’s managed to clear out his schedule so he only has one of each extracurricular per week instead of the typical two to or three – with the exception of helping out at the university, since that’s actually a job.

After spending a few hours at home, Izuku heads off again, ready to see how Satoshi and Zing are taking this new vigilante craze.

His question is answered pretty clearly when Zing’s eyes land on him the moment he walks through the door of the gym. Her eyes narrow, and she calls him over with a bellowing “Izuku!”, effectively catching the attention of everyone in the room.

As Izuku makes his way across the gym, he scans his surroundings. His gaze is returned by the fifteen or so other people in the room. It’s a crowd, but it’s not big. That doesn’t make it any less mortifying.

Satoshi stands at Zing’s side, looking more downtrodden than usual. Strangely, his baton lies on the ground, and he instead busies himself by rolling a ball across his shoulders and down his arms.

It’s not often that Satoshi ditches his baton. Zing must’ve had some really strong words to offer.

Izuku really, really wishes that he could die this instant.

Kero sucks in a breath. “Oh, boy. It was nice knowing you.” With that vote of confidence, the plush dives into Izuku’s bag. Izuku doesn’t blame him. He himself would love to dig a deep hole and bury himself alive.

There’s a short moment where Izuku and Satoshi make eye contact. A silent conversation takes place between them.

*You won’t like what Zing has to say.*
Is she going to arrest us?

No. She’s going to do something even worse.

That’s not promising.

Izuku heaves a deep breath, pinches the bridge of his nose, and continues forward. Staring death in the eye has become a little too commonplace for him to be comfortable with, but at least it’s prepared him for any life-or-death situation that will inevitably befall him in the future.

“Izuku,” Zing repeats, stone-faced. She looks like she’s ready to carve Izuku in half with her eyes.


They make eye contact. There’s a moment where Izuku swears Zing’s looking directly into his anxious, messed-up, smoldering wasteland of a soul.

With a sigh, Zing shakes her head. Then she grabs Izuku’s arm and rolls up the sleeve of his shirt before Izuku can even get out a yelp.

There’s really nothing to see, and Zing recognizes that. “No bruises or cuts.”

Izuku really, really hates the suspicion evident in her voice. “Why would there be?”

“Getting out of a fight – especially with villains – leaves some pretty obvious physical evidence, as this fool’s just learned.” Zing swings her arm back to point at a sheepish Satoshi. She throws him a withering gaze, then turns back to face Izuku with an expression that promises suffering in the near future. “But it looks like you’re better off than my idiot nephew. Magical powers or not, if you can’t even dodge a swing, then I haven’t trained you well.”

Apparently Satoshi has found the meaning to life within the ball he’s messing with, because he’s staring at it like there’s no tomorrow.

When Izuku goes to check how the spectators are taking the implied message, he sees that everyone’s busying themselves with their own work. Bullshit. Misaki doesn’t even do bars, and yet there she is, scrambling to hoist herself above the bars and face-planting into the mats in spectacular fashion. Beside her, Yumika attempts… something with a ball and trips backward onto Inori. They both go down in a heap of limbs.

Ah, gymnasts – the world’s most elegant and nosy beings in existence.

Izuku meets Satoshi’s eyes. In them, he sees a sort of exhaustion that’s just barely visible through the veil of impending doom. Satoshi brings his shoulders up in a halfhearted shrug, as if saying, death is nigh, so what’s the point?

Great.

Performing the world’s most impressive mental backflip out of anxiety’s greedy, grabbing hands, Izuku gently tugs his arm back into his own possession and rolls his sleeve down. Zing’s eyes are tracing him, watching his every movement, judging everything from his words to his microexpressions.

It doesn’t matter how skilled of a liar Izuku’s become over the past few months. He still sucks, and
there’s no way he’s walking out of this alive if he lies to Zing’s face.

“I’m sort of just winging the combat as I go,” is what Izuku decides on.

Satoshi gives him the flattest expression Izuku’s seen from him yet. That’s uncalled for. If he’s going to be honest, he might as well go all the way.

Zing’s expression doesn’t change one bit. It’s not surprising, given the fact that she has the same range of facial expressions as a statue, but it doesn’t help with the current situation.

“I never taught you how to fight with a sword.”

“It’s complicated.”

There’s no room for excuses in Zing’s voice. “I have time.”

And so Izuku reluctantly but honestly explains how he has a magic card that can transform into a sword and grant him half-decent mastery over swordplay.

“But no reflexes?” Zing asks, tone the same as ever. At least she’s taking in what Izuku has to say instead of calling him a liar, or, uh, calling the police.

“Some, I think,” Izuku answers, not entirely sure. Sword doesn’t make him a ninja. It just makes him very much more intimidating and prevents him from tripping over his own blade. “But not enough to make me omniscient or anything.”

Unimpressed, Zing crosses her arms. “Is that an excuse?”

Oh, shit. No, no, no, Izuku isn’t ready to die yet. Watanuki’s calling in all his favours for what he calls tutoring and what Izuku calls unpaid internship, plus that post-vigilantism B&B service that Watanuki so happily offered upon their group that definitely didn’t have any ulterior motives behind it.

If Izuku dies before he can pay Watanuki back, he’s sure that asshole will find a way to call his soul back from purgatory and torment him for eternity for not paying his dues.

No matter what Izuku does, he’ll never win, so he looks Zing in the eye, channels as much of his readiness for death into his voice, and says, “I’m pretty sure it’s a thinly veiled cry for help, but I guess you have your own opinion about it already.”

Zing stares. Izuku stares back. Satoshi’s gaze flickers between the two of them. Everybody in the gym’s probably waiting for someone to get killed.

The silence is unsettling. Everyone’s watching to see the conclusion of a retired pro hero and a vigilante butting heads.

After a while, Zing nods sharply. Her expression hasn’t changed in the least, but there’s something different about the look in her eyes.

“At least you’re not a fool. And you’re right about that – I do have my own opinion. I’m going to tell you about it, and you’re going to listen.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Izuku says, feeling a rush of relief sweep over him. That relief is quickly and utterly annihilated when he catches Satoshi vigorously making a cutting motion across his throat with wide eyes, as if to say, don’t get your hopes up.
“You lack training and fighting experience.” With narrowed eyes, Zing walks slow circles around Izuku. “What you’re doing is dangerous and stupid. Do you even understand the weight of your actions?”

Ah, there it is: the first of Izuku’s friends to actually interrogate him about if he’s actually thinking things through. He’s actually sort of relieved. Excluding Yuto (who has about sixteen layers of secrets Izuku has yet to pry through), Zing’s the only one with enough sense to ask these kinds of questions.

It’s not fun, but at least it inserts some well-needed sanity into Izuku’s life.

Izuku takes a deep breath. He’s not just talking to a civilian. These questions are coming from a retired pro hero, and said hero probably has powerful contacts that could slam handcuffs over Izuku’s wrists in a heartbeat.

“I’m aware that my actions speak loudly.” If Izuku backs down now, he’ll be showing Zing that he doesn’t have any conviction. And if there’s one thing Zing hates more than a fool, it’s a gutless fool. “It’s because my actions have a voice that I’m choosing to act. I’ve been given the opportunity to bring change where it’s needed most.”

This is one thing Izuku knows is an absolute truth.

“If I have the ability to make things better, then there’s no option for me to sit and wait. The only thing I can do is act and hope to make things better. Because—”

“Because that’s what a hero does,” Satoshi finishes, the small smile Izuku’s grown so accustomed to seeing plastered on his face. He drops the ball, picks his baton off the floor, and casually strolls to Izuku’s side. “That’s what we think.”

Silence. The others aren’t even making an effort to pretend like they’re not listening anymore.

Two vigilantes and a retired pro hero are tied in a standoff. It’s like the beginning to a bad joke.

Then, suddenly: “Do you believe in fate?”

Izuku blinks. It takes a moment for his brain to process the question, and another for him to realize it’s being directed toward him and not Satoshi. “Sorry, what?”

“Fate,” Zing repeats. “Do you believe in it?”

At first, Izuku considers the possibility that Zing’s making some sort of joke. He discards that notion quickly.

Zing doesn’t joke. She says what she thinks and doesn’t care what others think of her.

But this? This is strange. Izuku expected a lot of things when he first walked into the gym, including being interrogated, but he didn’t think that he’d have to give a short lecture about his opinion on determinism and free will.

Satoshi looks a little taken aback, but tilts his head forward, as if prompting Izuku to talk.

And, well, it’s Zing, so Izuku gives an honest answer. “I do.”

It’s impossible to miss the disappointment that falls over Zing’s face. “Do you, now?”

It takes sense that someone like Zing wouldn’t think to highly of the whole concept of fate. After all,
heroes defy fate – they take disasters and make them into miracles, mold despair into hope, and turn pointless violence into righteous justice. If fate is the world’s natural progression toward the inevitable, then it’s heroes that are at the front lines, pushing back against the decomposition that all life eventually ends in, acting as beacons of light for everyone lost in the dark.

That’s not all there is to fate, though.

“I believe in fate, and I believe that it binds people together,” Izuku says. “Like – like you and me, and me and Satoshi, and all of us in this room. We’re all tied to each other in some way.”

Zing frowns. “You don’t think it’s because we have the free will to choose our friends?”

Izuku doesn’t understand why Zing cares so much, but this is something he cares about too. “I do believe that we choose our own actions. But I think that fate’s not as restrictive as people think it is.

“Fate lays out the board for you. It throws the pieces at you, and then it tells you to play. Whether you know the rules or not isn’t important. Whether you win or lose isn’t important. It’s that chain of events that matters.

“It watches, and it decides. Every causal chain only has one outcome, and once the game is over, it assigns that outcome to you. What you choose to do with that conclusion is up to you – whether you want to continue on or play again.”

Izuku takes a moment to take in a deep breath.

“So no, I don’t think fate is the Game Master that directs our lives. I think fate is a deck of cards, a pair of dice, a roulette wheel.” Spreading his hands, Izuku cocks his head and tries on a winning smile. “The game is set and ready for you. It’s up to you to play it.”

A familiar set of bells rings through the corridors of Izuku’s mind. Wise words for someone so young.

There’s a moment of silence where everyone in the room appears to be absolutely in awe, save for Satoshi, whose grin simply cocks up, and Zing, who stares.

And, for the first time in what seems like a millennium, the gods smile down upon Izuku and grant him a blessing, because Zing cracks a smile.

“You’re a very eloquent speaker. Have you tried motivational speaking on for size?”

Those two sentences change Satoshi’s demeanor completely. Allowing his shoulders to fall ever so slightly, he nudges Izuku in the side with his elbow, grin extending into a full smile. “Oh, you haven’t seen the videos, have you?” He asks, entirely giddy and not serious in the slightest.

As the tension seeps out of the room, the impromptu audience begins to shift back into doing what they’re actually supposed to be doing.

But Izuku would have to be blind if he didn’t see the smiles and glances that everyone’s tossing around. A lot of them are directed toward him when they think he’s not looking.

Well, it doesn’t really matter. Izuku doesn’t think anyone’s that much of an asshole to turn him in. Plus, Zing would skin someone alive than have drama unfold in her gym.

Just as Izuku’s about to let out a shaky sigh of relief, Zing clears her throat. “Thank you for your insight. It was... interesting.”
Izuku has no idea what that means. He has a feeling he’d rather not know.

“But,” Zing continues, steel in her voice, “Whether you believe in fate or not, you can’t possibly think that you’re destined for greatness without putting in the effort required for it.”

Wrong, Ms. Yuko chirps unhelpfully. *You have three very powerful people relying on you – one who’s still with you, one who has faith in you, and one you absolutely can’t fail. It’s been that way before you came into existence.* A pause follows. Ms. Yuko chuckles, then adds, *But your friend here doesn’t need to know that. She seems like a competent individual; let her believe what she wants.*

For what seems like the millionth time, Ms. Yuko proves that the all-knowing are the most infuriating beings in the universe. Also, Izuku has no idea who the third of of those three people are, but there’s probably a better time and place to ponder over such things.

“I know that results will only show if I put effort into what I do.” He’s not sure what Zing wants to hear. Her questions have been all over the place. Regardless, honesty will always win with Zing. “And to help the people, I know that I have to try harder.”

Zing nods approvingly. “Good. So you acknowledge that you aren’t strong enough as you are right now.”

“I’m not,” Izuku admits. He’s not ashamed of that; after all, his opponents range from magical creatures to All Might.

“And you know that you need more experience in order to minimize danger to yourself and civilians,” Zing continues.

“I know.”

“And you know that the rest of your team needs to become stronger as well if they want to keep up with you.”

“That – yes, I know.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

Izuku opens his mouth to say something. He closes it when he realizes he doesn’t have an answer.

It’s something so simple and rudimentary, but for some stupid, stupid reason, Izuku hasn’t thought of it yet.

(All this time, he’s been getting stronger and stronger by himself. He’s become somewhat proficient with the Sakura Cards and spatial magic. There are so many people that he turn to for help, whether it be the spirits, the fairies, Watanuki, Sasha, Rin, or any of the countless people who have helped him both through life and his current journey.

But things have changed. Now, he’s no longer fighting alone.

The battles he so readily charged into aren’t putting himself at risk now. What about Satoshi, who has no idea how magic works? What about Shinsou, who has no experience in actual combat? What about Mei, who’s at risk every time she breaks into confidential files?

Izuku’s no fool. He doesn’t think he can protect all of them by himself.
But getting stronger isn’t an easy thing to do. After all, it took him twelve years to find the strength to say no to someone who was hurting him.

“I... I’m not sure what to do.” Bowing his head, Izuku wrings his hands. “I – we haven’t planned that far. Yet.”

Zing sighs, shaking her head. It’s impossible to decipher her emotions. “I didn’t think so. Children can only see so far into the future without the experience adults have. That’s why I took it upon myself to answer that question for you.”

Oh. Well, that’s convenient, and what?

“What,” is all Izuku says, unwillingly verbalizing his thoughts.

“Congratulations,” Zing declares so monotonously it would be comical in any other situation. “From this day forward, both you and Satoshi are officially receiving combat training from me.”

“We’re what,” Izuku half-yells. His tongue feels like it’s glued to the top of his mouth. He’s never been attacked by wasps before, but the jolt of psychosomatic pain his brain so happily unleashes onto his person feels convincing enough to be real.

Satoshi, who still remains by his side, nudges him viciously. “I told you,” he hisses under his breath.

Zing’s eyes narrow, making her infinitely more intimidating than before. “Would you like to repeat that?”

“No, ma’am,” Satoshi answers immediately, back straightening like he’s just been struck by lightning. Better lightning than Zing’s baton; that thing can survive getting run over by a bulldozer, and that’s just the prototype.

(Izuku would know. After all, said baton is sticking out of his backpack.)

“I didn’t think so.” There’s really no way to argue with Zing if you don’t want to die. “Now, as I said, you two will be working on developing a separate set of skills than the average gymnast.” Zing meets Izuku’s eyes, as it to watch his reaction. Izuku tries very hard not to look away. “Though, from what I’ve seen, you’re quite capable when it comes to scaling buildings.”

Right. That thing with Fly all those months ago. Since then, Izuku hasn’t really had the need to scramble up the face of a building, since, you know. Fly can fly.

It takes Satoshi a little longer to catch on. “Oh. Right. So, what does that have to do with anything?”

The look Zing gives Satoshi borders offended. Satoshi steps behind Izuku for protection from her withering gaze, which is pretty much sabotage.

Thankfully, Zing chooses not to go through with her righteous vengeance. “Whether it be your stamina or your...” Zing pauses, considering her next words. “Magic – however that works – nothing is infinite. If I’m not wrong, you should’ve been completely drained last night.”

Satoshi and Izuku turn to look at each other. Neither of them are sure how long they all slept. Time doesn’t really work in the Wish-Granting Shop.

“Yes,” they say in unison.

“That’s what you’ll be working on,” Zing continues, nodding. “Stamina training, specifically. That,
and parkour.”

Silence. Satoshi looks like he can’t believe what he just heard, whereas Izuku’s wondering which god he pissed off today.

“That’s not combat training,” is all Izuku can get out before his voice compresses into a pathetic wheeze.

With an eye roll, Zing beckons for them to follow. It seems the conversation is approaching its end.

“I’m not a martial artist. I’m a gymnast. I learned how to fight because I developed the strength and reflexes to find my own style.” As they approach one of the many storage rooms, Zing pauses. “Besides, Satoshi already mimics me, and I’m sure you’ve adopted some habits from your activities.”

That’s one way to put it.

Zing opens the door and they all shuffle in, presumably so they can touch up on the more sensitive topics. Izuku can’t shake the feeling that they’re walking into a crypt.

“There are two more, aren’t there?”

Izuku’s breath catches in his throat. “Sorry?”

“The purple boy and whoever’s working behind the scenes.” Zing’s gaze and voice are unwavering. “Give me their contact information. I’ll make sure they’re properly trained.”

That’s... not very promising.

In the end, Izuku submits and types two new numbers into Zing’s phone. It’s reminiscent of that signing his life away to the devil. At the very least, she promises that she won’t use the information against them as they head out, which is a small victory.

And, because Izuku’s an idiot with a penchant for self-destruction, he asks, “Why are you helping us instead of turning us in?”

He immediately regrets ever verbalizing his insecurities after Zing’s eyebrows curve upward. God, he must sound so pathetic. Why can’t he be like Satoshi, who’s quiet but confident in everything he does?

There are a lot of things Zing could say or do. But she’s a busy woman with no time to waste.

“You aren’t alone in this fight.” The tiniest of smiles creeps onto Zing’s face. She clears her throat and drops a mask of neutrality back across her features. “You children are the light of the future. If we’re going to leave the world to you, we might as well prepare you for what you’ll have to face.”

Izuku spends the next five minutes stifling tears. Both Zing and Satoshi are too socially inept to help, so they huddle around Izuku and block the others from witnessing his epic breakdown. It’s a gesture Izuku appreciates, given that they’re in public.

After his tears have adequately subsided, Izuku sniffs horrendously and wipes his eyes. Zing offers him a tissue. He takes it.

There’s really no more pride Izuku can lose, so he stumbles out of the gym after bowing a hasty thanks. Following him closely is Satoshi, who looks concerned for his mental state.

“Thank you for your help,” Izuku splutters for what must be the tenth time in the past minute. “I –
this really means a lot, and—"

With a sigh, Zing lays a hand on Izuku’s shoulder. “Go home and sleep.”

Izuku doesn’t really have a say in the matter; Satoshi drags him out of the gym while calling out thanks to his aunt.

Some semblance of a conversation happens as they’re walking through the streets, but Izuku’s really not in the state of mind to be formulating words. Kero recognizes this quickly when he crawls out of the bag, patting Izuku’s cheek with a deep heave.

Together, the three of them stroll down the bustling afternoon streets. Izuku can’t help but feel like he’s being led around like a drunk salaryman on a Friday night.

“It’s been a long day,” is the only thing that Kero says that permeates deep enough into Izuku’s mind for him to actually process it.

They’ve really been saying that a lot lately.

The week goes by without much trouble.

Surprisingly, Zing’s new training regiment isn’t nearly as bad as Izuku first expected. It makes him hurt in places that shouldn’t hurt, yes, but coming from Zing, it’s a mercy.

“We’ll up the pace once you stop running into walls,” is what Zing tells them when Satoshi asks why she was being so lenient.

Reasonable. Despite Satoshi’s years of gymnastics and Izuku’s magically-enhanced senses, neither of them are very good at making their limbs cooperate when leaping across buildings. All their experience has been on flat, firm ground, not the roofs of high-rise buildings, where one misstep equates to becoming a splatter on the pavement below.

In all honesty, Kero’s probably taking the brunt of it all. If he was nervous before, his tiny heart must be at its limit now.

One thing Izuku doesn’t understand is how nobody’s stopping them. Retired pro hero or not, leading two minors across the city in the most roundabout ways possible has to attract some attention. Heroes patrol the city at all times, yet here they are, one adult and two children, none of whom have any self-preservation instincts whatsoever, leaping into construction sites to practice crossing beams as quickly as possible.

Izuku’s beginning to think that this might be a little illegal.

Satoshi probably knows that it’s illegal. Zing definitely doesn’t care either way.

Regardless, training with Zing is less of a labour and more of an interesting hobby. What Izuku lacks in physical experience, he makes for with his extensive knowledge of the city.

“You shouldn’t even remember where all the stupid ladders are,” Satoshi wails after scaling down the face of a building only to realize that Izuku had slid down the ladder. “Isn’t that cheating? Zing, isn’t that cheating?”

“Finding an easy way out isn’t cheating. It’s smart.” Izuku will never forget that nod of approval. “Get smarter, Satoshi.”
The training’s helping, but it’s also making both Satoshi and Izuku much more competitive than they actually are. That’s sort of scary. Every time Satoshi takes the lead during one of their many impromptu races, a little voice says, why not give him a little shove?

It’s not Ms. Yuko. It’s not Sakura. It’s not his anxiety. It’s a very, very bad part of himself that needs to be kept in check, or else he’ll actually start pushing people off buildings.

Freud may have been a mess of a human being, but man, he was right when he said all humans were innately evil.

The only other new thing that Izuku’s faced with during the week is what Watanuki calls “the beginning of your actual training” and what Izuku knows to be “a series of requests that I don’t really want to do”.

Izuku has become very, very good at reading in between the lines.

Before, all Watanuki really made Izuku do was the occasional delivery or small favour. Now, it’s expanded into actually granting the wishes of people that come into the shop. Is that legal? Izuku’s not getting paid, but he’s basically doing Watanuki’s job.

It isn’t volunteering. It’s child labour.

When Izuku brings up this fact, Watanuki actually stops to think for a second.

“I mean, I could leave you alone to figure out the intricacies of magic,” he offers with an infuriating innocent expression.

Apparently Satoshi isn’t the only person who makes Izuku’s id rear up. Watanuki’s been a vague asshole since the very beginning, but it’s only become increasingly more irritating. Fortunately, Izuku doesn’t have the same internal struggle that he had with Satoshi, since Watanuki’s very much stronger and much more of an active threat.

“I’m going to strangle you in your sleep one day,” Izuku answers in the most monotone voice he can muster.

Watanuki just laughs, patting his shoulder. “Oh, please. You and I both know that neither of us actually sleep.”

He’s right. Stupid all-knowing beings and their all-knowing bullshit.

And so Izuku grudgingly agrees to upgrade his status from occasional freeloader to official henchman. That doesn’t mean he can’t be bitter about it.

One good thing to come from the mess is the fact that Izuku now has access to the entirety of the Wish-Granting Shop. He isn’t sure if Watanuki just doesn’t care what he sees or is just really good at hiding secrets.

Among the many strange rooms is one very clearly used for storage. It’s a mess of a treasure collection, housing just about every strange thing in existence, from a withered monkey’s paw to a worryingly accurate replica of the Sealing Staff.

Both objects are concerning. Izuku’s read enough of The Monkey’s Paw to know better than to mess with the paw, but that replica staff brings up an onslaught of questions Izuku would rather not ask.

“These are all up for exchange,” Watanuki tells Izuku upon first introducing the room to him. “Of
course, the only beings who’d ask for a trade are magi. Most of the time, people will come in to
discard cursed objects.” With a sly smile, Watanuki picks up a sleek, silver ring, and something cold
and old runs down Izuku’s spine. “Who knows? Perhaps you’ll need to use some of these to fulfill
requests.”

Okay. That’s great. That’s fun, but Izuku has a feeling that half the things in the room are cursed in
some way, shape, or form, and he really doesn’t feel like adding another curse onto his already
wretched existence.

Surprisingly, things turn out alright. While Izuku greets the citizens of Musutafu who wander into the
shop, it’s still Watanuki who listens to the requests and decides whether or not to take them. All
Izuku does for the first day is prepare tea and make conversation with the customers.

During the gaps when no customers are around, Izuku wanders around the shop and digs through
everything he can. Watanuki didn’t set any boundaries, so Izuku isn’t going to respect any. It’s a
habit from childhood he’s never been able to rid himself of.

The next day, Watanuki tells Izuku to fetch objects from the storage room without specifying. For
some reason, Izuku never fails to bring back the right object.

At first, he thinks he might have really good intuition. Then he remembers that he has a whole
magical peanut gallery up in his head.

That... well. That sure is something.

By the third day, Watanuki’s letting Izuku listen to the customers’ requests while he goes and does
whatever the Shopkeeper’s other duties are. Normally, Izuku would be freaked out to the ninth circle
of hell and back by now, but instead, he feels sort of calm.

Like, in control. He never feels in control.

Izuku chalks it up to his growing familiarity with magic and the Wish-Granting Shop. Also, he’s
never been able to refuse a request. At least that feels normal.

Customers come and go. Watanuki wanders in and out at random times.

Four days pass, and by then, Izuku’s bartered with six different fairies (scary), gingerly quarantined
nine cursed heirlooms (scarier), and offered up five objects of varying magical power to people who
needed them (scariest). How he knew what to do is up in the air. It’s probably for the better to leave
it there.

Soon enough, Izuku realizes that despite the fact that half the city recognizes him and knows him to
be Deku, nobody questions him about it.

Being the cryptic asshole he is, Watanuki simply says, “It’s a matter of cognition. If they think you
can’t be Izuku-Deku, then you won’t be.”

“You literally call me Deku.”

Watanuki laughs. “If your name is John, do you seriously think you’re the only John in the world?”

A single raised eyebrow and a knowing grin is enough to convince Izuku that he if really wants to
figure out the ins and outs of the Wish-Granting Shop, he’ll have to do it by himself.

Between the new training regiment and the new workload Watanuki’s imposed onto him, little
actually changes. He continues to walk dogs, go to Yorihiko’s book club, help Sasha clean up Dagobah Park, work at the library, and visit his friends at the hospital. The name Deku holds much more weight than before, but a vigilante will always remain a vigilante to the people, and that’s what Deku will continue to be.

A few days into the normal yet not-so-normal week, Shinsou sends him a text.

[14:34] Shinsou:
what did you do.

It seems that Zing has kept her word.

[14:34] Izuku:
sorry, what?

[14:34] Shinsou:
are you behind this

[14:34] Izuku:
behind what

[14:35] Shinsou:
a scary woman is telling me i suck over text
i mean she’s right but why does she know

[14:35] Izuku:
don’t worry about it

[14:35] Shinsou:
i am, in fact, worrying about it
she literally just said that i have no experience in combat or urban escape tactics
and
wait
what the fuck

[14:36] Izuku:
???

[14:36] Shinsou:
who the fuck is aizawa shouta
is this another one of your millions of friends

Izuku frowns. That’s not a name he recognizes, and he’s quite good at remembering people who’ve helped him or he’s helped.

[14:37] Izuku:
i don’t know who that is, sorry
but if zing wants him to train you, i’m sure he’s trustworthy
she knows what she’s doing
and she’s on our side

[14:38] Shinsou:
i don’t have a say in this matter, do i
[14:38] Izuku:
you do!

[14:38] Shinsou:
don’t lie to me, midoriya

[14:38] Izuku:
you really don’t

[14:39] Shinsou:
wonderful
if i die it’s all your fault
i can’t even get out of bed normally, how does this lady expect me to work out??
is that what kids these days call it

[14:40] Izuku:
i’m sure it’ll be ok
at first you might feel like crying
maybe even throw up a little
but it gets better!
and it helps in the long run

[14:41] Shinsou:
fuck me
whatever
i’ll take breaking my body willingly over having the police break it for me

[14:41] Izuku:
there’s that too, that’s probably smart

[14:42] Shinsou:
i hate everything

Shinsou drops off from there on, probably wondering how his life became so screwed up so quickly.

Izuku doesn’t blame him. Pondering over his own measly existence has become somewhat of a nightly ritual by now.

As usual, Mei spams him on a daily basis, going off about how her follower count has tripled since her latest series of tweets. That by itself is worrying, but what really sets off all the alarms in Izuku’s head is when Mei excitedly declares that she’s creating specific support items for all of them based on their fighting styles.

Since her lab is in Sasha’s shop, Mei can’t possibly get into anything horrible. At least, that’s what Izuku tells himself so he can sleep at night.

And then: “Guess what, guinea pig?” The energy in Mei’s voice borders unhinged. “Sasha agreed to help me design weapons and support items for you three! Oh, just imagine the wonderful marvels we’ll be able to create!”

Mei’s ecstatic. Izuku firmly believes that she’s going to blow up her lab and Sasha’s shop. When he imparts this information onto Mei, all he receives is a boisterous laugh.
“Ah, but consider this: grappling hook belts, so you can swing through downtown like Spiderman!”

Izuku pauses. He narrows his eyes. “Have you been watching anime recently?”

“No,” Mei lies cheerfully.

In the end, Izuku concedes. Arguing with Mei is akin to smashing your head against a wall until you knock yourself out; the wall’s still there, and it doesn’t know why you even tried.

Kero’s opinion on the events of the week can be summed up in one short quote: “This is it. This is normal.” Then, painfully: “How have our standards dropped so much?”

To placate a very tired Kero, Izuku goes to a patisserie and lets Kero go wild. It lightens his wallet noticeably, but at least Kero’s mood is better. Also, the macarons there are amazing.

Yes, life is normal.

Until it isn’t.

It starts like this:

On a day like any other, Izuku walks into the Wish-Granting Shop. Usually, Kero would get some sort of separation anxiety because he knows that Izuku can’t be left alone or else he’ll end up getting himself killed. But Kero’s been loving the Persona series, so Izuku leaves him at home while he goes to Watanuki’s place.

Maru and Moro greet him by tackling him to the ground. Watanuki wanders in a little after them, yawning slightly.

“It’s a good day today,” the Shopkeeper declares, nursing a mug of coffee. He smiles while Izuku stares.

Oh, no. Whenever Watanuki takes the effort to point out special occasions, it means suffering and stress for Izuku. That serene smile promises despair forthcoming, and Izuku really, really doesn’t want to be there to see it.

Apparently Watanuki can sense the anxiety rolling off of Izuku’s pathetic being, because he declares that he’ll be handling some larger requests for most of the day. That leaves Izuku alone with Maru and Moro to make sure the place doesn’t go up in a glorious bonfire, which Izuku feels is becoming an increasingly likely situation.

This is the first time Izuku’s had to hold down the fort without Watanuki. It probably means something important, but Izuku’s too busy freaking out over what he’ll do if somebody shows up and asks for, like, the death of another person.

They’ve been over this, although Watanuki’s answer had been infuriatingly vague and disturbing: “Oh, no, that’s not our area of expertise. There are certain, ah, individuals who happen to be very good at ferrying people to hell.” One of these days, Izuku’s going to tell Watanuki that smiling knowingly doesn’t answer any questions. “I – apologies, we – grant wishes, not grudges. Those go somewhere else to roost, though I will say our roles are very similar.”

The implications of that are so horrible in so many ways. Izuku isn’t sure what sort of hell-ferrying service exists out there in the vast, miserable world, and he doesn’t want to know.

What sort of price would you have to pay to send someone to hell?
Izuku wanders in and out of his morbid thoughts for a good hour or so. He hasn’t had any customers yet, so he tries to distract himself by plowing through a nice, fun, relaxing book. Surely *The Graveyard Book* will distract him from his own mortality.

But it’s a well-known fact that the universe has a vendetta against again, so when the grandfather clock in the main hall chimes at noon, the door of the Wish-Granting Shop slams open.

Izuku clamps down on a shriek. He barely avoids knocking all his shit off the table.

A voice echoes down the hall, loud and energetic. Izuku can feel the impending headache already. “Excuse me! Is anybody in?”

“I–” It takes a few tries for Izuku to find the words he’s searching for. “Yes! I’m sorry, I’m coming!”

Dropping his book on the table, Izuku rushes into the entranceway, haphazardly slapping on the fakest smile he’s probably ever worn as he slides into view.

“Welcome to the Wish-Granting Shop,” he parrots like he’s done for the past week. He hope this person doesn’t know anything about customer service, because he’ll be able to see right through Izuku’s paper-thin smile. “Please, come in.”

The boy at the door can’t be any older than Izuku, but he radiates with the brilliance of a thousand suns when he smiles. He seems like just another middle school student – shaggy black hair, uniform, curious eyes – and then he bares his teeth, giving a full-on view of two rows of pointy canines, which Izuku hopes is due to his quirk and not a choice of style. “Thanks! Sorry for the loud entrance. I’m just, uh, really curious. I’ve heard a lot about this place!”

Okay. That’s wonderful. How on Earth he knew about the Wish-Granting Shop is beyond Izuku, but the fact that word is starting to get around is worrying.

Why now, of all times? Watanuki’s been working for god knows how long, but it’s only after Izuku comes along that people start talking about a strange building that only shows up when you have a wish that you want granted?

Life is unfair. Fortunately, Izuku knows how to deal with that. He’s been playing a rigged game since the day his was diagnosed as quirkless.

“Follow me, please,” Izuku says. Maru and Moro poke their heads out from behind the door frame of the hallway, identical grins on their identical faces. They prance beside Izuku as he walks down the hallway.

As usual, Izuku leads the customer to a small tea table by a window facing the garden. It’s reflex that spurs Izuku to fetch tea and snacks, not conscious thought, because all his mental energy is currently being used to damn Watanuki to hell and back for leaving him alone to deal with this.

Before Izuku can give a proper introduction, the boy laughs sheepishly. “Oh, man, I didn’t even introduce myself, did I? Sorry. I’m Kirishima Eijirou.” He smiles again, and Izuku has to look away from that brilliant, pure face. “Nice to meet you!”

“I – yes, it’s nice to meet you to.” Words spill out of Izuku’s lips as he forces his brain to perform its normal processes once more. He clears his throat, then goes to pour the tea. “I’m Deku, the Shopkeeper’s assistant.”

A strange look makes its way onto Kirishima’s face. He leans in, thoughtful. It’s the first time Izuku notices the little scar he has above his right eye.
“Deku?” he repeats, as if he’s testing the word on his tongue. His brows furrow. “Huh. Okay.”

Izuku’s never gotten that reaction before. He never expected such a reaction, given Watanuki’s whole spiel on the cognition thing, and there’s no way Watanuki would keep any information from Izuku and wait a second.

Izuku pushes down the urge to smash his head against the teapot. He can hear the seventh trumpet of the apocalypse warbling away.

“Anyway!” Kirishima’s demeanor snaps back into one of infinite energy. How he stays like that, Izuku doesn’t know. “Wait, if you’re the assistant, should I wait for the manager?”

Manager. Ha. That’s laughable. Handler would be more accurate, since Izuku isn’t getting paid.

“It’s fine. You can trust me to help you.”

“Okay, then!” God, Kirishima’s smile is blinding. “I hear that you can grant wishes here, right?”

“That’s right,” Izuku answers. And, because he’s not cruel, he adds on, “For a fair price, that is.”

Unlike some other customers who reel back at the thought of having to give something of equal value in exchange (honestly, what were they expecting?), Kirishima takes the information well, nodding as he crosses his arms “Makes sense. There’s no such thing as a free lunch, right?”

Izuku nods, suppressing a sigh of relief. Not everyone is as understanding as Kirishima is.

“I’m willing to pay for my wish,” Kirishima says, a steel in his voice that reminds Izuku of Zing – unwavering, powerful, determined. “There’s something that I really want. No matter what. No matter how much I have to pay.”

Something about Kirishima’s words makes Izuku sit up straighter. He isn’t like the other customers. He’s different.

A good day? No. It isn’t a good day. It isn’t a bad day, either.

But it is a different day. And, as Izuku has learned so many times over, change isn’t good or bad in nature. It simply happens.

(If Izuku can mold being quirkless and a vigilante into something good, then that says something about perception and the events that follow through because of it.)

There’s really no reason for the profound feeling of understanding that settles over Izuku. What does one meeting with a customer change in the grand spectrum of things?

“If that’s the case,” Izuku says, a familiar veil of calm settling over him, “then let’s hear your wish.”

Kirishima is quiet for a while. Then he looks up, red eyes facing green.

“My wish,” he repeats, quieter. There’s a bob in his throat. The steel that made up his will is rusted over.

He’s conflicted.

Interesting. He seemed so determined before, and now he looks like he doesn’t know what to think.

Then again, for someone as determined as Kirishima is, it’s not surprising that he would be fighting
against himself. A wish and a goal, while similar, are still different. A wish is something for another to grant; a goal is something you reach for with your own hands.

To turn a wish into a goal is one of the greatest achievements in life. To go the other way is soul-crushing.

(I want to be just like All Might!)

The boy seems to be in a mental fistfight with himself, so Izuku smiles and rests his chin on his folded hands. Perhaps he can nudge the boy a little, coerce him into making a choice.

“What’s the matter?” Izuku asks. “Is there something you’re worried about? The price? The process?”

Kirishima shakes his head vigorously. Hands clenched into fists, he lowers his gaze, staring into his tea. “No! No, it’s not that. It’s... it’s just...”

Izuku waits. There’s no point in forcing a false answer.

“I want to be stronger. I want to have the will to help anyone!” A series of emotions flickers over Kirishima’s face. Out of all of them, Izuku can accurately pinpoint frustration, self-loathing, and desire. “I want to be a hero, but if I can’t even act when people are in trouble right in front of me, what kind of man am I?”

While Kirishima tries to stare his tea to death, Izuku hums quietly in understanding. So the boy values resolve and honour above everything else.

What a kind child. He’ll grow up to be a fine person.

Izuku drops a few sugar cubes into his tea. That’s another reason why Watanuki went out – to buy some more herbal teas to balance out the plethora of European teas that line the cupboards.

“Who’s your favourite hero?”

Kirishima snaps out of his self-loathing, raising his eyes to Izuku’s once more. Though he seems confused, he has a definite answer. “Huh? I mean, it’s gotta be Crimson Riot.”

“Oh?” Izuku cocks his head. “That’s an interesting choice. Not quite as modern as I would’ve expected from someone your age.”

That certainly explains the whole manly concept Kirishima’s got going on.

“Just because Crimson Riot is old school doesn’t mean he’s any less of a hero!” It’s more of an exclamation than a direct answer. However, Izuku likes that Kirishima has regained some of his energy. “He’s a crazy cool hero, and he saved so many people – and he runs headfirst into danger as long as it means he’s saving lives!”

As if realizing what he just said, Kirishima’s demeanor settles down again. It almost seems wrong, witnessing such an energetic and determined boy fold in on himself. It’s like watching a star die out, in a way.

“I just want to help people,” he whispers. “I want to. I want to help as many people as I can. I’m willing to do anything.” Izuku can see Kirishima’s frustration boiling to a peak, so he snaps his fingers, and everything on the table promptly floats up into the air just in time for Kirishima’s fist to smash into the wood. “So why can’t I?”
Setting the cutlery back onto the abused table, Izuku frowns. So the boy has both the will and determination necessary to carry him down the path of heroics, but he can’t bring himself to act in the face of danger.

Izuku... doesn’t really understand. He’s never struggled with fighting for others. All his life, he’s lived by the creeds of others. He lives his life, not for himself, but for the people he knows he can help.

It’s always been that way. He’s always been a self-sacrificing fool. He’s always said yes.

But just because he doesn’t understand doesn’t mean he can’t try to help. Not everyone is reckless enough to charge headfirst into the fray, and Izuku understands that.

Fear is human. Resolution is human. Conflict is human.

Villains are human. Heroes are human.

To say anyone is exempt from the very traits that make them human is foolish.

Clearing his throat catches Kirishima’s attention. Izuku smiles. “What is it about Crimson Riot’s resolve that you admire?”

Kirishima stares. He looks confused, like he doesn’t know why Izuku’s even asking. “Isn’t that what makes a hero great? The will to act?”

“Yes,” answers Izuku, “but for you to feel so strongly about the importance of resolve, especially that of Crimson Riot – well, there must be a reason.”

“What else is there to say?” Kirishima’s brows furrow, and his hands clench again. “Crimson Riot... he never hesitates. He’s never afraid, like I am.” Anger creeps into his voice, directed only toward himself. “Because his resolve is so strong, he can jump in before anyone else can, save the people who need him the most right away, while I can’t even move.”

The last word is seeped in a sort of self-hatred Izuku is more than familiar with. It speaks to an internalized frustration that’s been left to fester for some time, eating its way from the inside out, corroding everything good with a poison that never truly goes away.

Sometimes the poison is administered by someone else (you’re just a quirkless Deku!) and sometimes it’s self-inflicted (why am I so pathetic?). The former isn’t easy to cure, but it’s possible (if you want someone to submit to you, you’ll have to look somewhere else, because I’m not dealing with you anymore). The latter...

(Real heroes help anyone and everyone, whether or not they’re in trouble!

You’ve always been a hero, Izuku.

I trust that you’re doing this for all of us.

I’m proud of you.)

It’s hard. It’s almost impossible to help yourself when you’re the source of your struggles. But friends exist for a reason.

Izuku barely knows Kirishima, but one thing he knows for sure is that he’d be honoured to call Kirishima a friend. If that day ever comes, that is.
“Does resolve mean action?”

Kirishima’s head lifts slightly. “Huh?”

“Resolve,” Izuku continues smoothly, “is simply ‘the firm determination to do something’. It’s a necessary prerequisite of action; after all, if you don’t want to something, you won’t.” Cocking his head, Izuku puts on a bright smile. “I’m right so far, aren’t I?”

“Uh, yeah.” The confusion in Kirishima’s voice has taken on a new tone, one of _I don’t get where this is going_ instead of _are you serious_.

Izuku doesn’t blame him. Whenever he slips into this ever-so-familiar trance of calm, he tends to act a bit too much like Watanuki for him to be comfortable with.

But Izuku’s never known Watanuki to be wrong about anything. Alas, the merits only slightly outweigh the demerits. However, he will get to the point much faster. And he is a vigilante, so some dramatic flair is perfectly justified. “Going off of that, does action mean fearlessness?”

“Well, yeah!” Kirishima’s answer is quick and confident. The manner in which his demeanor flips-flops is like the moon. It wanes, and then it comes right back, bright and full. But it changes so often that Izuku can’t help but be curious. Is Kirishima just a very emotionally free person? Is this his first experience with self-doubt? Or has he been keeping his emotions so tightly wound that he doesn’t know how to express them? “You have to be brave to throw your life on the line, right?”

And that’s where the error in thinking is.

Ah. Things are starting to make sense now. Izuku’s no expert on the whole hesitation thing – after all, he has the self-preservation instincts of a lemming – but he can tell when A doesn’t equal C.

“Bzzt,” Izuku sounds, crossing his fingers in a little X. The onomatopoeia only furthers Kirishima’s confusion, as demonstrated by his frown, the slight opening of his mouth, and the prompt hesitation.

What a kind child. He’s so very patient. If Izuku was in his position, he’d be contemplating strangulation.

Leaning back in his chair, Izuku allows his head to hang over the cushioned back. Maru and Moro catch his gaze and grin back. “I understand, Kirishima, what’s going on in that head of yours now. Would you like to hear me out?”

Kirishima really doesn’t have a choice. Izuku continues on before he can answer.

“We’ve established that you need resolve to take action. And you’ve just said that action means fearlessness.” Izuku spares a glance over to the eternally clear pond that rests just outside. He wishes that humans could fix things in the same way they see that unnaturally beautiful pool. To see not only your reflection, but what lies at the very bottom of the thing that’s bouncing it back – it’s profound in some way, probably.

Well, a pond isn’t quite as easy to understand as another sentient being. Perhaps he ought to get back on track.

With an exhalation of breath, Izuku pushes himself forward again, snatching a macaron off the plate. He tosses it to Maru, then repeats the same for Moro. They eagerly snatch at the treats.
“So we’ve got resolve equals action and action equals fearlessness. So, by extension, wouldn’t resolve equal fearlessness?”

“That’s my point,” Kirishima urges impatiently. It seems that if Izuku tries hard enough, he can get under even the nicest person’s skin.

Good. Better frustrated than depressed.

“So,” Izuku says, evenly and without much inflection at all, “You think fear doesn’t exist at all, then?”

Silence. Instead of confusion, it’s surprise that colours Kirishima’s features.

Sighing, Izuku leans his head on one hand. “I understand. It’s easy to make that mistake. It’s easy to think that the heroes you look up to aren’t human, but something superhuman, like kings or gods.” It’s easy, because heroes are glorified to the point where it almost seems as if they were destined for greatness.

That’s bullshit. Nobody’s destined for greatness. Life is just a game of poker. It’s just that some people get a straight flush and others are stuck giving their high card in a desperate attempt to satisfy society’s expectations.

Izuku peeks at Kirishima. He actually seems to be contemplating Izuku’s words, which is a nice surprise. If he wants to be a hero, then Izuku won’t say anything else.

There are many ways to be a hero. Kirishima’s is the standard. Izuku’s is a little unorthodox. But it’s all the same in the end, isn’t it?

“I think I get what you’re saying,” Kirishima finally says, his brows furrowed in concentration. “We – we’re all scared of putting ourselves in danger, regardless of who we are. Because it’s human.”

The boy stares at Izuku expectantly. “Am I on the right track so far?”

Oh hoh. So he’s smarter than Izuku gave him credit for.

Channelling Watanuki’s vagueness, Izuku simply answers, “As long as you believe it, it’s right.”

There’s a short pause, but Kirishima continues, having taken in Izuku’s words. “Okay. So, if we’re all scared, then it doesn’t make sense for resolve to equal fearlessness, because then... nobody’s fearless?”

The conclusion seems to confound Kirishima, whose expression crunches up. Understandable. He’s just completely flipped his argument on its head.

Still, he’s willing to look at things differently. That’s excellent. Determination tends to walk the same line as single-mindedness, which is infinitely more irritating to deal with.

“Nobody’s fearless,” Izuku confirms, nodding gently. His head rolls across his palm as he stares Kirishima down. “Who isn’t afraid to put their life on the line? Who isn’t afraid to die?”

With a winning smile, Izuku leans forward and taps his finger on Kirishima’s chest.

“Heroes are afraid. They’re always afraid. It’s just that they fear the thought of leaving innocents to die more than they fear their own deaths.”

Food for thought. That should keep Kirishima occupied for a bit.
It seems that Izuku’s really said something quite meaningful, because the boy’s eyes are wide and fixed on him, like he’s just had the revelation of a lifetime. Really? Do heroes seem that invincible?

Then again, vigilantism isn’t exactly a popular thing. Things tend to look a little different when you’re the one showing up the invincible heroes.

Oh, society and its narrow-mindedness. Izuku sighs and pops a macaron in his mouth. Oh, not bad – wait, are these from the same patisserie he and Kero visited a few days ago?

Izuku frowns. Watanuki bought them this morning. There’s no shortage of places to buy macarons in Musutafu.

Either this is all a big coincidence or Watanuki’s a bigger creep than Izuku expected.

But, ah, they’re pretty off-topic right now, aren’t they? It looks like Satoshi’s right; without the haze of anxiety clouding every single one of Izuku’s conscious thoughts, he’s just a cocky, talkative asshole. “I said a lot. Sorry. I didn’t mean to distract you from your wish.” He pauses, thinking a little. “But I wanted to make sure that you really wanted a wish.”

“My wish,” Kirishima repeats vacantly, clearly not all there. Then he seems to processes Izuku’s words, and the glassiness in his eyes burns to give way to determination once more. “My wish! Yeah, that’s what I came here for. I want–”

He cuts off. Izuku suppresses a sigh.

Conflict is human, but it’s annoying. As much as he admires Kirishima’s resolve, there’s an upper limit on how much time he can spend with such a morally righteous person without tiring.

“I hate to ask, but are you sure you want a wish?” Izuku asks, because at this point, even he’s not sure what Kirishima’s thinking anymore.

“I think–” Another pause. The tick, tick of the grandfather clock in the hallway acts as monotone background music. “I think I do. I came here, right?”

Well, he’s right about that, at least. “If you managed to make your way here, then you must have a wish.” Izuku gestures around him. “That’s the nature of the Wish-Granting Shop.”

“Well, you see,” the boy admits, “I’m not so sure if I have a wish or a goal at this point.”

Couldn’t he have said that before Izuku spent all that time correcting his flawed syllogism?

Customer service: god’s ultimate test to humanity. And what a test it is. Izuku desperately tries to water what remains of his shrivelled patience.

Running a hand through his hair, Izuku takes a deep breath. “I know you’re not familiar with how the shop works, but don’t take this lightly.” Green eyes bore into red. “Wishes aren’t to be thrown around carelessly. They’re the culmination of desire.”

Watanuki may not have taught him anything about why the Wish-Granting Shop exists, but Izuku isn’t blind to the sort of people who walk into the shop.

Not everyone is as gentle as Kirishima. There are the greedy, the hungry, the desperate, the cruel, and occasionally, the kind.

“Desire, resolve, ambition – it’s all the same. So, boy, do you really want to use me to grant your
Izuku’s never had to ask a customer the kinds of things he’s asking Kirishima. He hopes he’s going about this the right way.

As expected, it takes Kirishima a while to even speak. Red eyes lift to fix Izuku with a confused gaze, searching for answers yet finding none. “What do you think I should do?”

Well, Izuku thinks Kirishima should hurry up and choose before it gets dark out, but he can’t win everything. “It’s not my choice to make,” he ends up saying, waving his lazily. “If you want to wish for something to help suppress your fear, I can do that. If you want to go and figure it out on your own, you can do that.”

“Well.” The boy has one hand cupping his chin. Is it really that hard to make a choice? “Those are some pretty crazy extremes.”

“Mm-hmm.”

It takes a few more seconds of silence, but Kirishima finally perks up. “I got it! Instead of wishing for a direct path, I’ll wish for something to help me get to where I want to go instead of pushing me there right away!”

Smart boy. Izuku likes people who can come to conclusions on their own without wasting away in indecisiveness.

“Here’s my wish,” Kirishima finally, finally says. “I want something that can teach me to to be a hero – someone who can act even when they’re scared, who never hesitates to jump into danger if it means saving others!”

Unbeknownst to Kirishima, a faint shimmering billows into existence between them, folding in on itself a thousand times over into the form of a golden knot that stretches taught over the table. Something pulls on Izuku’s magic, grabbing eagerly, waiting for the power it needs to be cut loose.

An interesting wish. Ms. Yuko’s voice reverberates within his mind, amused. So, Deku, how will you go about granting it?

It is an interesting wish. It’s unlike anything Izuku’s ever granted. Kirishima might not know, but his wish – to indirectly achieve something instead of leaping across years’ worth of work – is the best way to minimize the cost.

Smart boy. He’ll grow to be someone very interesting.

Reaching his open palm out, Izuku smiles. “Your wish has been heard, Kirishima Eijirou.” Just above his palm, silver lines draw themselves between five glowing, purple points. A star within a hexagon within a circle etches itself into the fabric of existence, humming faintly. “To sever the contract that has been formed between us, I hereby grant you the object of your desire.”

It’s not a magic ring, ornament, or weapon that falls through the circle.

A slip of paper floats gently onto Izuku’s palm. He flashes a grin at the confused customer, then drops the slip onto Kirishima’s hand. The golden knot disappears with a violent flash, disintegrating into tiny particles of lingering magic.

The boy takes a moment to read the paper. His confusion only increases.
“It’s a phone number!”

“The phone number of someone who will help,” Izuku elaborates.

This wish couldn’t be easier to grant. So Kirishima wants someone who can help him become a hero?

Well, where should Izuku even begin?

Miki, the most intelligent person Izuku’s ever met? Sasha, who supports people unconditionally? Rin, a pillar of emotional stability?

There are so many choices. But the one that Izuku knows very well to work for a person as determined as Kirishima is none other than the retired hero who’s been leading him and Satoshi around the city in the most dangerous ways possible.

“Her name’s Zing. You might know her as Charlatan.”

Kirishima’s eyes come close to bugging out of their sockets. His jaw drops, and the confusion he demonstrated so vividly before is replaced entirely by shock.

“Charlatan?” he yells. Maru and Moro shriek with joy at the change in pace, running around the room. Kirishima pays them no attention. “Charlatan, the Untouchable?”

So Zing’s still popular even after ten years of retirement. And what a legacy she’s left, too. Who wouldn’t want to go down in history as an Untouchable?

Izuku goes to speak, but Kirishima barrels over him in a rush of excited words. “Charlatan’s a living legend! She was a spy and a pro hero!” As he continues, both his pitch and volume rise steadily. “Man, she busted so many criminal rings, and there was that one time she wiped out that extremist group, and she has the highest capture count of all pro heroes!”

Through Kirishima’s excited rant, Izuku leans back into the chair and nods along. The boy certainly knows what he’s talking about.

“And you know her?” yells Kirishima, his excitement peaking. He’s basically standing now, shoving his face in Izuku’s.

Yikes. Excitable, much. Izuku gently presses the tips of his fingers against the boy’s face and pushes back, nudging him into his seat. “She can help you,” is all Izuku says.

Revealing any more could be dangerous. It’s best to keep his answers as cryptic as possible and wait a second, is this why Watanuki’s always so vague?

Huh. Today’s a day for revelations.

Before Kirishima can continue gushing about how amazing and awesome Charlatan was, Izuku clears his throat loudly. “Now, the price.”

It’s like Izuku just murdered a man right in front of Kirishima. The boy settles down quickly, collecting the energy his spat out on his gallant crusade to sanctify Zing and shoving it all down. “Uh. Right. So...” Kirishima shuffles in his seat with shifty eyes. “What do I need to pay?”

What, indeed?

What sort of price would be right? All Izuku gave Kirishima was a phone number. Just a few
numbers scribbled on a piece of paper.

But what does that one phone number mean in the greater spectrum of things? How will Kirishima’s life change from here on out? Will he become Zing’s apprentice and follow the path she took – one focused on infiltration, espionage, and escape instead of heroics? Will he cross paths with Deku, join their group, and help change society?

Or will they find themselves on opposite sides, a hero versus a vigilante, fighting against each other for the ideals they believe in?

It’s impossible to tell right now. But regardless of what the future may hold, this is Kirishima’s wish. It doesn’t matter if Izuku suffers in the future for it. To impose his own worries onto someone else’s desire is truly the worst thing he could do.

“The price,” Izuku finally declares, “will be your phone number.”


Izuku laughs. What, did Kirishima think Izuku was going to ask for his firstborn or his left eye? “Isn’t it straightforward? A phone number for a phone number.” Spreading his hands, Izuku cocks his head and smiles. “Give me your number, and we’ll be even.”

The exchange is horribly anticlimactic, given what came before it. All Izuku does is slide his phone over to Kirishima, who looks at him with uncertainty. That leads to a round of reassurances that yes, everything will be fine, no, Izuku won’t use this to blackmail him, yes, Izuku’s one-hundred percent sure that the price is that small, and no, it isn’t a joke.

Once everything is said and done, Kirishima stands and bows.

“I’m not really sure what just happened, but I really appreciate this!” He looks up, red eyes brimming with energy. “I’ll – wait, you have my number. I promise to pay you back!”

Um. Okay. Clearly he’s being honest about not understanding the exchange, because he literally just paid Izuku back.

Then again, being friends with someone like Kirishima Eijirou could be interesting. And possible beneficial.

“Alright,” Izuku says, nodding. What’s one more contact added to his list of hundreds? “Text me if you ever want to meet up.”

As they walk to the door, Kirishima goes on a little longer about Zing’s time as Charlatan, The Untouchable. It’s beginning to get a little old. Izuku knows everything about Zing’s time as Charlatan given his own interests and the fact that he’s under her tutelage, so he just nods along. Also, isn’t Kirishima a Crimson Riot fan? Where did the entire Charlatan spiel come from?

Just as Kirishima’s about to leave, he pauses. A contemplative look passes over his features, and he turns to face Izuku.

“You know,” he says confidently, “I think you’d make a great hero!”

It’s only the veil of calm that stops Izuku from choking on his own spit. Even so, he can’t help but flush from head to toe.

Where – where did that come from? What? It’s clear that Kirishima doesn’t have the best filter, but
that has nothing to do with – with the current situation. Absolutely nothing.

Apparently Kirishima takes Izuku’s silence as a negative response, because he frowns deeply. “No, really! You understand so much of what makes heroes great. That resolve and fear thing...” He trails off, then snaps back with a determined vigor. “I don’t think I would’ve been able to piece that together by myself! You’re crazy smart, Deku!”

Hastily slapping one hand over the bottom half of his face, Izuku turns away.

This boy – Kirishima – how free is he with emotions? How can he say what he feels all the time? How is it that he feels so much, yet never seems overwhelmed? What’s his trick?

“Hey, you okay?” The worry on Kirishima’s face is palpable.

Izuku’s face feels like it’s on fire, but whatever. “I’m fine. Are you leaving now?”

He wants to punch himself immediately after the words slip from his mouth.

Oh, no. The veil that gives Izuku his faux calm is slipping away through his fingers, fading into the back of his mind, checking out for the day.

Pulling desperately on the last dredges of magic that shield himself from his wonderful thoughts, Izuku throws on a smile and prays to god that he doesn’t look like a maniac. “Because if you are, don’t expect to be able to find this shop again. Unless you have a wish, you won’t be able to come back.”

Izuku almost heaves out a sigh. Oh, thank god. He was able to save his soul.

“Huh,” is all Kirishima says in response. He looks thoughtful. “I guess magic is pretty weird.”

The day could’ve ended on a happy note, but noooo, the gods always get the last laugh, those divine bastards.

“Why do you think it’s magic,” Izuku half-shrieks. Maru and Moro laugh gleefully behind him. Filthy traitors, the lot of them.

Kirishima, for one, seems surprised. “What, haven’t you heard? Magic exists! Haven’t you heard of—”

Izuku knows what’s coming next. He braces himself for impact and prays that he comes out in one piece.

“...Deku,” Kirishima finishes, a curious look in his eyes. Realization sweeps slowly over them.

Perhaps, if he tries hard enough, Izuku can force his soul out of his body this very instant. That would be nice.

Having forgotten all about his shoes, Kirishima takes a step forward. “Hey,” he says, tone of voice caught somewhere between vacant and surprised, “Uh, this might seem really weird, but you’re not actually the Deku, are you?”

Answering that question is harder than swallowing a boulder. However, Izuku really doesn’t want someone who wants to get into professional heroics as much as Kirishima to know about his, um, illegal extracurriculars.

So he swallows the boulder. “I’m not.”
Kirishima lets out an audible sigh. Then he laughs, bright and full and happy, a change so jarring that Izuku flinches. “Oh, man! You really threw me for a loop there. Deku’s cool and all – saving people without even caring about what happens to him, how manly is that – but vigilantism is sorta. You know.” A shrug. “Illegal.”

Izuku does, in fact, know. “Yeah,” he agrees rather pathetically.

Luckily, Kirishima’s attention is directed back toward putting his shoes on. The boy flashes one last smile and calls out a “I’ll text you later!” before he slides the door open, waves cheerfully, and slides the door shut.

And then he’s gone.

Izuku immediately slides down onto the ground. He curls up and lies there. It’s nice and cold and welcoming, unlike the world around him, which is burning. All of it. It’s all burning.

A few minutes later, the paper-screen door slides open and Watanuki steps in with several plastic bags. Upon seeing Izuku, he cracks a grin.

“Tough customer?” he asks-slash-taunts, handing the bags too Maru and Moro, who sprint off to the kitchen, laughing all the way. They laugh so often that Izuku can’t tell what they’re laughing at anymore. He thinks it might be himself.

Izuku has no more energy to spare. He makes a noise that probably doesn’t sound like anything in any human language, and at this point, he couldn’t care less.

With a chuckle, Watanuki steps over Izuku and beckons him to follow. “Well, come on. It’s about time for dinner. In exchange for your hard work, I’ll make your favourite.”

That catches Izuku’s attention for two reasons: first, Maru and Moro sing praises about Watanuki’s cooking far too often for Izuku’s liking, and second, there’s no way in hell Watanuki knows what Izuku likes and doesn’t like.

Watanuki simply laughs. “Not in the mood for katsudon?”

Okay. So Watanuki happens to be an uber-level stalker. That’s... well. That sure is something.

In the end, there’s nothing Izuku can do. His week, which had started on a rather peaceful note, ends with his life in shambles. It’s not even remotely surprising.

This is what he tells Watanuki over his steaming bowl of katsudon, lamenting the day he was ever born under an unlucky star.

As usual, Watanuki recites some cryptic bullshit about how there’s no point worrying about what’ll happen, since the hopes and wishes of three very important people rest on Izuku’s shoulders, so his fate has probably already been determined.

Izuku ignores the irritatingly deterministic comment and focuses in on something that’s been bothering him.

“There are three people. The first is Ms. Yuko, who’s living it up in my brain. I’m still not sorry for messing with you, by the way. The second is Kinomoto Sakura, since she passed her powers onto me.”

Pinning down Watanuki with an unwavering gaze, Izuku asks, “Who’s the third?”
The *tick, tick* of the grandfather clock marches onward. Maru and Moro stare at Izuku, expressions terrifyingly neutral. Watanuki returns a vacant, empty gaze, revealing absolutely nothing.

It’s cold. It’s quiet.

And then:

“It’s yourself.” There’s no emotion whatsoever on Watanuki’s pale features. His mismatched eyes bore deep into Izuku’s soul, as if he can see all the inner workings that occur within it.

What?

“How, ha,” Izuku laughs robotically. Stabbing his chopsticks into his rice, he sighs. What did he expect, an actual answer? “Very uplifting. I can’t let myself down, now can I?”

Amusement colours Watanuki’s face, and some warmth creeps back into the room as if it never left.

“No,” the Shopkeeper muses, a knowing look in his eyes, “I suppose you can’t.”

And with that, Izuku finishes up his meal, accepts some leftovers that Watanuki offers upon him in a surprise act of generosity, and takes his leave. Maru and Moro escort him to the door, and when Izuku turns back to face the shop, he can see Watanuki through the window, staring out into the darkness beyond the garden.

He... looks a little more peaceful than he did when Izuku first met him.

The Wish-Granting Shop is a mysterious place. It’s where paths converge and diverge, where fate goes for a joyride, where anything and everything happens.

Izuku sighs. Every time he thinks he understands a little more, he realizes that he really doesn’t know anything.

Well, at the very least, he knows that Watanuki’s cooking is actually pretty damn good. So that’s a plus.

He walks home among the late-night crowd, feeling more exhausted than he’s been this entire week, stumbling among the neon lights and carefree laughter, wondering if he should work at night instead of throughout the afternoon.

There’s no such thing as a free lunch, but maybe there’s such thing as a free dinner.

Chapter End Notes

a lot of stuff's been happening in the last few chapters, so i decided to take things down a step. it's a new day for the vigilante squad, and society gets that. but izuku's tired and craves the sweet release of death, so he's just. taking things easy (or trying to), adjusting to new developments, etc. typical.

i feel like izuku would be a lot better off with parkour than hardcore combat training. the boy's got magic cards. he has sword. he'll get fight. he's got that covered. running away from the police while low on magic, though, is useful. and yes, this gives satoshi reason to quote as many The Office memes as possible. and shinsou? well. he's training with
someone very familiar.

i love kirishima with all my heart and soul. he's an amazing character and a source of endless happiness. the manga addresses some of his internal struggles, and according to the timeline, it would happen around the same time as the sludge villain incident (3rd year junior high), but i decided to shift things back by a month or so. this izuku doesn't really see eye-to-eye with kirishima, but he really admires his heroic spirit and determination, so instant friendship.

if izuku seems a little sassy in his magic-induced-calm state, that's how it's supposed to be! yuko has a teasing calm state, watanuki has a knowing calm state, and izuku, the sweet child who normally would never risk being rude to anyone, has a sassy calm state.

as always, thanks for reading!
Izuku should’ve known that this happy, somewhat peaceful life wouldn’t last.

A week of calm is suspicious enough. Any longer and he would’ve been wallowing in a state of constant anxiety, waiting for something horrible to happen. Too much of a good thing is always a bad thing, and if Izuku’s learned anything over the past few months, it’s that any semblance of calm is just a pretty facade before the inevitable storm.

So, when Shinsou calls him at god-knows-when, it’s really a small mercy disguised as a curse. Or maybe it’s the other way around. It’s not very obvious. Izuku’s mostly given up on trying to tell them apart.

Either way, it’s a blatant deviation from the norm. Shinsou hates phone calls, which means he must have some very strong feelings he wants to make clear. That’s fine and all. Izuku just wishes that he could’ve called at some earlier time, like, oh, who knows, not fuck-all in the morning.

“It’s very early,” Izuku provides helpfully, propping himself up on his bed with his elbow and switching on his bedside lamp. He’s trying very hard to act amiable, but it comes across as cheerfully vacant instead.

Kero stirs on his nest-bed, flipping over with an unintelligible mumble. Lucky him. He doesn’t have to deal with human struggles, like getting phone calls at – Izuku looks at the clock – at four-fucking-eleven. Really, Shinsou?

“Shut up, shut up, I hate you,” Shinsou snaps back. There’s venom in his voice, but it doesn’t seem like it’s entirely directed toward Izuku. Keyword: entirely, which still means most of. “Fuck you, fuck this, fuck everything.”

Well. That’s mean, but not surprising in the slightest.

It’s only been a week since Izuku threw Shinsou to the wolves. It shouldn’t be that bad, right? For all of her, ah, hardassness, Zing wouldn’t break a civilian. At least, not that quickly.

Then again, it’s not like Zing’s teaching Shinsou herself. Who was it again? Aizawa something?
“Let me guess,” Izuku says, because it’s four in the morning and he has neither the energy nor the will to filter any of his words. “Moving hurts, breathing hurts, everything hurts and you want to die?”

Silence. Then, with more spite than Izuku imagined could be humanly possible: “I’ll rearrange your dental work through the goddamn phone, Midoriya.”

It doesn’t look like Shinsou cares about filtering his words either. Excellent. Izuku turns into a rude gremlin when he’s tired, anyway. “Good luck doing that when your arms don’t work.”

“Don’t need my arms. I’ll just tell you to smash your head against a wall until you knock yourself out.”

“Oh, trust me, you don’t need to brainwash me to get me to do that.”

Shinsou’s next words are particularly acerbic. “You sent me to fucking Eraserhead.”

Izuku frowns. No, he sent him to Zing, who sent him to – to Eraserhead?

Blinking blearily, Izuku rubs his eyes. Wow, that name really rings a bell. Just a very small bell, and very far away.

It takes a moment for the sleep-clogged gears to kick into motion. “Huh.”

That’s… a name. A hero name. A familiar hero name.

Wait, wait – where was it? Notebook 4, page 17 – no, page 18. Eraserhead, Eraserhead…

Oh, the underground hero, Eraserhead? That’s probably why the name was so familiar but so hard to remember. After all, some of the most famous heroes are the ones that avoid the media like the plague (see: Charlatan).

For Izuku to take so long to remember a hero he knocked out while escaping the police – wow. He must be really tired.

There’s a pregnant pause as fearful realization swallows up Izuku’s exhaustion. “I sent you to fucking Eraserhead?”

“Better late than never,” Shinsou snarks back, which is incredibly unfair. It’s four in the morning, Izuku has so much to do before school starts up again in a week, and this very unwelcome realization isn’t doing much for what’s left of his sanity.

Of course. Of course Zing would know people like Eraserhead, because she’s a retired pro hero with awards and achievements lining the walls of her gym like paint on a newly furnished house, and although she never brags or boasts or even mentions the tiniest detail about her experiences as a pro hero, it’s clear that she has the community at her feet.

Zing knows how to play people. She knows how to get what she wants. She never liked the bigger heroics community, never liked what it really represented to the masses, but hell, if she wasn’t cunning and sly and tricky beyond relief, then Izuku’s never known her. Who knows what sort of favours she could call in?

Well, Izuku knows now. In hindsight, he probably should’ve thought things through a little more carefully before throwing his friends to the wolves.

“Did you know,” Shinsou asks, words drawn slowly and as sharp as a blade, “that Eraserhead loves
mind games?"

It’s too early for this. “I do now,” Izuku answers, feeling exhausted beyond relief, and not just because it’s four in the morning. He feels like crying.

“Did you know,” Shinsou continues, because he’s evil and cruel and absolutely merciless, “that Eraserhead just loves staring you down when you lie to his face?”

“It’s his quirk,” Izuku tries to explain. He can feel whatever semblance of control he thought he had slipping from his fingers. “It’s – It’s called Erasure, and he can erase your quirk as long as he keeps his line of sight on you–”

Shinsou sighs, deep and irritated, but tired before all else. Izuku promptly shuts up.

One of Kero’s eyes flicks open. For a short moment, he stares at Izuku, looks deep at his expression and at the phone in his hands. Then he murmurs something unintelligible under his breath, flips over, and rolls himself back into a cloth burrito.

Unfair. Relatable, but unfair.

“The first thing Eraserhead did when he saw me was say, ‘You look familiar.’ I look familiar, Midoriya. How am I even supposed to look at him from now on?” It’s not a Skype call, but Izuku can see Shinsou quietly tearing out his hair as his voice pitches upward. He’ll lose all his hair by the end of the month at this rate. “What happens if I accidentally use magic when he’s looking at me? Do I lie? Do I just die right there?”

Dying sounds good, but Izuku has a feeling that’s not what Shinsou wants to hear. So instead, he says, “If it’s any consolation, Zing would rather die than get you arrested.”

It’s really not any consolation at all. But it could be worse, and it’s clear that Shinsou recognizes that, because he heaves another sigh over the line. It’s tired and nihilistic and all things pretty and sparkly. “I’m going to sleep. I can’t feel my arms, I can’t feel my legs, everything hurts and I want to die.”

Izuku winces. Nihilism only gets you so far, so he offers, “It gets better?” Which would probably be more convincing if it wasn’t phrased like a question.

“Don’t say something like that when you know it’s not true.”

Before Izuku can even muster out a decent farewell, Shinsou drops the line, leaving Izuku alone in the darkness with nothing but a growing pit of despair that he really shouldn’t be so accustomed to. It’s an unwelcome reminder that Izuku’s life is really just a swirling tar pit of chaos, pulling him under with eager hands.

It’s equally amazing as it is awful, how one conversation can give him such a massive headache. For a moment, he lies awake in bed, staring at the ceiling. Kero’s light snores are little whistles, high-pitched and even, while the sound of traffic continues to rumble away, the ever-present ambience of city life that serves as a reminder that Izuku would probably be living a much more relaxed life if he lived someplace rural.

Or maybe not. Fate has a habit of chasing Izuku down and throwing the most awful of situations at him. Maybe he’s just some sort of divine garbage can, collecting all the bad luck the gods don’t want plaguing other people. What happened to waste not, want not?

Izuku certainly doesn’t think he’s wasting his luck or lack thereof – it’s impossible to avoid, how do
you even waste bad luck? – and he definitely doesn’t want any more. Bad luck, that is. Good luck? Now that would be a welcome change.

After a few minutes of philosophizing about how his life really is just the biggest, slowest, most spectacular train wreck in existence, Izuku flips his legs over the side of his bed and drags himself out of the covers.

This isn’t working. Now that Shinsou’s told him about the mess with Eraserhead, there’s no way in hell Izuku’s going to be able to go to sleep.

(Ignoring problems until they introduce a bat to your face only goes so far. This problem is just a few paces ahead of him, rubbing its hands together eagerly, giving the spiked bat of life some test swings.

It’s probably better to come up with some sort of contingency plan just in case everything goes horribly wrong.)

“Why are you awake,” Kero grumbles, a string of sounds without much meaning and more of a reflex than a question.

“Just thinking,” Izuku answers as nonchalantly as possible. His voice shakes. He clears his throat for a second try. “Go back to sleep. You won’t be able to sleep in for much longer.”

The cloth burrito pauses in its shuffling. “New school year?”

“That’s right.”

“Gonna keep me in your bag. Shove me in a desk or something.”

“If that’s what you want.”

There’s a pause, then a slow sigh. “Stop thinking so much,” Kero finally says, rolling over. His eyes are hazy with the veil of sleep, but he can somehow still see straight through Izuku. “S probably not gonna be as awful as you think it is.”

Izuku closes his eyes. Oh, if only his stupid brain would understand that. “Okay. Go back to sleep.”

A few moments later, Kero’s breaths even, his squeaky snores piercing the silence in a pattern of ups and downs. He doesn’t react when Izuku turns on his bedside lamp.

Grabbing a notebook – any one with empty space, he really doesn’t care enough at this time of day – Izuku flips to a fresh page, armed with a mechanical pencil and an eraser, trying to will his headache away.

Slowly but surely, Izuku’s murmurs join in as a new chorus among the quiet sounds of city and sleep.

“Quirk: Erasure. With eye contact, he can nullify quirks. Eye contact doesn’t have to be shared, but must be maintained on the target to continue nullifying. Counter: force his eyes shut, somehow, with physical impairment, or block his line of sight. Doesn’t affect me, which is a plus, but his capture weapon will really be a pain... Sword definitely works, but what else? Maybe Erase as a last resort...”

Despite what everyone says, there’s really nothing exciting about the last year of junior high.

Even as Izuku listens to his new homeroom teacher make the typical announcements – \textit{welcome to}
At that last question, the class cheers and hoots, quirks of all kinds flashing away.

Izuku stifles a yawn. He’s been pouring over his hero notes for the past week, making sure to memorize each and every possible hero he could encounter.

(Thinking is great. Thinking is wonderful. Izuku’s brain seems to have understood this, kicked into overdrive ten times over, and plugged into an outlet of pessimism to fuel the hamster-on-a-wheel processes that Izuku calls regular cognitive function and any rational person would call overthinking.)

Izuku keeps his hand down, but that’s no surprise to his classmates. Most of them are from his old class, which means he’s probably going to spend this year as he did the last: avoiding everyone and being avoided by everyone.

He’s caught some unfamiliar faces glancing down at the baton sticking out of his bag. They’ve probably heard the rumours of Izuku’s delinquency, how he’ll beat up anyone who crosses his path, how he’s actually the illegitimate child of a yakuza boss etc, etc.

It’s a little depressing, but if it’ll keep people from bothering him or harassing him, it’s a fair trade. Izuku doesn’t have any friends in school, anyway. Maybe he really is cursed, and the people he spends the most time with hate him the most.

On that topic:

Kacchan is currently glaring at him with the most murderous eyes Izuku’s seen on him yet. Izuku has a sneaking suspicion that Kacchan thinks he can kill him with his eyes if he tries hard enough. It’s not outside the realm of possibility.

That’s... a strange development, given that Kacchan has stayed far away from Izuku since their argument a while back. Threatening someone with a baton and cutting off all friendly ties with them tends to end in discomfort for all following interactions.

“Back to square one,” Kero mumbles from inside the desk, seated comfortably on a folded handkerchief, DS splayed out in front of him. He looks unimpressed. “I guess we’ll just have to teach him another lesson if he tries anything stupid.”

That’s a nightmare and a half.

There’s really nothing special about the day. All Izuku does is go through the motions, jotting down notes, trying to figure out if his new teachers will attempt to throw him into group projects or if they’ll get the clue that Izuku’s the black sheep of the school.

At the very least, it’s nice, seeing that his teachers have basic human sympathy. He just wished they could let him fade into the background instead of trying so hard to drag him out of the nice little hole he’s dug for himself.

Classes come and go. The roof, as per usual, is his turf, and it’s clear the student population hasn’t forgotten, because the second-years quickly herd the first-years out when Izuku makes his way up the stairs. Fearful glances are shared between the newcomers.

Izuku isn’t sure how much damage people think he can cause with a bento box and a phone, but if their reactions are any indication, he might as well be armed with a machete.
Experimentally, Izuku smiles and waves, apparently planting the fear of God, the Devil, and by extension, Izuku, into their innocent little minds, because they literally trip over each other in an attempt to escape. The upperclassmen protect the first-years out in a valiant act of martyrdom, shielding them from the evil that is Midoriya Izuku.

It’s nice to see students looking after each other.

“So,” Kero begins, after having drained through most of the DS’s battery, “You think Zing’s going to end up sending that Kirishima kid back to you?”

Izuku drops his face into his hands. Out of all possible outcomes, that one’s the worst by far. “I’ll cry if she does.”

Kero sighs, nudging Izuku’s chopsticks out of the way to grab a piece of his omelette. “Guess you better start crying, then.”

Just as Izuku’s about to throw back an expertly crafted, tastefully witty, nihilistic sentiment, his phone lets out a little chime.

Izuku checks to see who it is. Kero peeks over as well. Their movements are fluid and practiced, because if there’s anything Kero’s learned over these past months, it’s that everybody wants something to do with Izuku at all times of the day.

Strangely enough, it’s a new number.

It’s not unusual. Not infrequently, strangers ask him for requests, citing diverted help from Izuku’s friends and contacts, asking for just about anything and everything.

This text, though:

[12:02] ???:
Hey!! Is this Midoriya Izuku?
Zing told me about you.

Silence. Izuku wonders why the gods don’t put him out of his suffering right now. At the very least, it’s kinder than letting him flail his way through life like a very lost, very confused bull in a very large, very expensive china store.

“Well,” is all Kero says, somehow deciding amusement is an applicable emotion to the current disaster, “It looks like this Kirishima kid can be summoned by speech alone!”

It’s hard not to throw all of his belongings off the roof in a fit of some mangled emotion between anger, despair, and acceptance. He does, however, take a deep breath and stare at the sky for a good minute and a half, wondering if his only reason for being is to be life’s punching bag.

“Why?” he asks no one in particular, because not even God will hear him out.

Rolling his eyes, Kero wrestles the phone from Izuku’s grip. It’s hideously unfair how Kero seems to be reacting so much better to these kinds of social disasters than Izuku. “Give it here. Let’s see... Yes, that’s me. How can I help you? Proper grammar and spelling, okay, and - send.”

There’s a little swoosh sound as Kero sends the message off. Izuku stares some more.

Is this a thing now? Does Kero know Izuku so well that he can keep a text conversation for him? Because that’d be amazing, especially since he gets so many, and hang on a minute, what does this
imply about his life if he’s getting his magical sidekick-slash-familiar to handle the things he doesn’t want to do himself?

That’s an awful train of thought chugging steadily toward the station of self-loathing and pessimism, so Izuku snatches his phone back and watches the little ellipses pop up.

[12:04] Sharkboy:
Nice!! Glad I got the right person!!
So Zing told me that you could help me out with training?

“She did what,” is all Izuku’s vocal chords can manage within human limitations.

Kero sighs, deep and long, like he’s watching a cat run into a glass door for the hundredth time. Funny in a sad way. “I really do try to tell you, but you do realize that most of the problems you’re throwing away are boomerangs, right?”

Today’s just chock-full of horrid discovers. Perhaps the next revelation will be kind enough to be one that predicts the end of humanity, preferably sometime within the next five minutes, because Izuku would rather perish in the fires of hell than reply.

[12:05] Sharkboy:
We’re both working to become heroes, right?
We could share training tips!

“I would rather die,” Izuku says in a tone in which anyone else would say *How’s the weather*. Which, of course, implies that he craves death as much as he makes small talk, but that isn’t important right now.

“Give it,” Kero demands, snatching the phone from Izuku’s hands again. The plush frowns at the screen, brows furrowing. “That’s not super great. If this kid really wants to be a hero, he probably has a knight-in-shining armor sort of personality. Not ideal for a group of Robin Hoods.”

And the sky is blue. At least Kero’s trying.

“From what you told me, the kid seems like an okay person, but I don’t think he’s going to be too keen on breaking the law.” A series of pat-pat-pat follows as Kero furiously types in a response that reads, *Sorry, I’m not trained in combat, so I’m not the best person to be asking for tips.*

Which isn’t actually a lie at all. All of Izuku’s combat prowess, if it can be even called prowess, is equal parts BS and adrenaline-fueled panic as it is actual experience. Most of the time it’s unconscious, if he can call slipping into other consciousnesses unconscious.

What a mess.

[12:08] Sharkboy:
That’s okay! I’m not really looking for a workout buddy.
Zing told me you were really smart, so I was wondering if you could help me get better as using my quirk.
So basically a trainer!

“So he wants us to teach him how to get better at being a nuisance,” Kero says tonelessly.

That’s a little unfair since Kirishima really has no idea about the greater forces at play. But still. A pain is still a pain. Izuku’s not sure if Kirishima’s ignorance makes matters better or worse.
Before either of them can continue on with their tirades, the phone chimes again. Both Kero and
Izuku gravitate inward and over the screen like they’re being dragged by invisible tethers.

[12:08] Sharkboy:
It’s ok if you say no though, I don’t want to be a bother!
:)

Kero inhales sharply. Izuku stares blankly. Kero’s head whips over and he fixes Izuku with a firm
stare.

“Don’t do it,” the plush warns, voice pitching upward.

Izuku continues to stare at the screen. It’s two lines of text. It’s just two lines of text, completely
indistinguishable from the texts he gets all the time.

He continues to scan over the lines, piecing together the characters individually before forming the
words in his mind.

“Shit,” Izuku whispers to himself, fingers moving before he can think things through or convince
himself that he doesn’t deserve happiness.

It’s like watching a bullet rip through the air in slow motion, except the bullet is Izuku’s stupidity and
the target is the almost peaceful life they’ve been enjoying for the past week. Seeing it happen, Kero
makes a mad lunge for the phone, throwing himself in front of the bullet, but it’s too late.

[12:10] Izuku:
No, it’s okay, I have time.
If it’s quirk advice you need, I’ll probably be a decent advisor.
Should we meet sometime soon?

Silence. The sounds of normal students enjoying their normal lunches is an unwelcome backdrop to
the drama that’s occurring on the empty rooftop.

Kero turns and punches Izuku in the shoulder in one swift, precise jab. The plush then goes to pick
up the phone Izuku’s just dropped, probably charging right into damage control.

“That was unnecessary and painful,” Izuku objects, rubbing his abused shoulder. Immediately after
his mouth finishes running its course, he pauses. Painful, yes. Unnecessary? Debatable.

To be fair, the glare Kero’s giving him is mostly justified. “You just dragged another person into this
mess!”

Izuku winces. He really needs to stop doing that, that being latching onto any trace of compassion
this cruel world has to offer. “The smiley face really threw me off,” he pleads, only to meet Kero’s
unimpressed glare.

“Do you really need me to remind you what happened last time we got someone involved?”

Ah. He still needs to deal with Shinsou’s Eraserhead situation, doesn’t he?

“No, it’s okay, I remember,” Izuku says quickly, which pretty much sums up this entire mess. Denial
with a healthy sprinkle of hysteria.

For a moment, Kero stares deep into Izuku’s soul. The pain in those beady little eyes is obvious. “I
just wanted to guide the cardcaptor along to capture all the cards,” he bemoans, and really, the only
he’s missing is a sad piano track, a clap of lightning to light up the distress on his plush features, and the ambience of a well-timed downpour. “How did it come to this?”

That’s a question they’d both like answered. Unfortunately, that answer will never come, because whoever has the answers either doesn’t understand them or doesn’t care to give them away. It’s a recurring theme throughout The Adventures of These Two Poor Sods Who Want Things to Stop Happening.

And, oh, the idea that’s coming into Izuku’s head right now is just awful.

“I think,” Izuku says, trying his best to keep his voice steady, “That we should just go along with it. Kirishima seems like a nice person. Maybe... maybe we can sort of... get some information out of him if he’s really going into pro heroics?”

The shock on Kero’s face says that he’s really starting to question Izuku’s moral code. “You want to use him as a guinea pig?”

Izuku drops his face into his hands. Nope, nope, nope, he never should’ve opened his stupid mouth, why does he even try? “Ignore that. I didn’t say anything.”

“No, no!” Kero leans forward from where he’s sitting on the ground, eyes wide. A little spark of hope flashes in those beady eyes. Izuku doesn’t like where this is going. “That’s actually a pretty good idea!”

“It’s a what now,” Izuku says.

“Think about it,” Kero eagerly elaborates, as if Izuku hasn’t thought about it already. Oh no, he’s thought about it plenty, and all ways point to doomsday. “You help him get real good at using his quirk. He goes for this prestigious school everyone likes – what is it again? U.A? Whatever. He gets in because he’s amazing. And there we are!” Thrusting an arm up into the air, Kero grins victoriously. “The perfect mole!”

As morally questionable as that is, it’s not inaccurate, per se.

Kirishima’s a kind soul. Izuku isn’t sure what his quirk is yet – hasn’t had enough time to properly analyze him, and his physical traits don’t reveal too much, although that scar above his eye suggests some sort of quirk involving cutting edges – but Izuku’s nothing if hyperaware of anything and everything relating to quirks and heroics.

Some tips, some training with Zing, some tutoring, and Izuku’s pretty sure Kirishima will do just fine on the U.A entrance exam. Kirishima has the determination; all he needs is the skill.

And, from a more vigilante-slash-villain-esque standpoint:

A lot of the more experienced heroes Izuku’s run into are easy to research because there’s just so much material about them. But the younger heroes, the ones leading heroics into the future, are the most dangerous: they have the most powerful sense of justice that have yet to be diluted by the politics of the system, they’re eager to make themselves known and are therefore reckless, and their quirks and abilities are still mostly unknown.

U.A’s a hub of hero activity. The heroes they produce are no joke – then again, once All Might’s graduated from your school, there’s no comparison, is there?

With so many heroes working as teachers and so many eager, loud-mouthed students interning with heroes that Izuku has seen chasing him before, wouldn’t it be nice to have someone kind, amiable,
and talkative to just... get a little bit of intel, every now and then?

There’s no spy like someone who doesn’t even know they’re a spy to begin with, right?

For a moment, Izuku just sits there, staring at Kero.

An awful chill runs down Izuku’s spine when he realizes that Kero has transformed from a voice of common sense to an enabler. The adaptability of those in reduced circumstances is horrifying.

Then: “We’ve really hit rock bottom.”

“Absolutely,” Kero agrees without a beat of hesitation.

It’s difficult to tell if Kero’s really convinced it’ll all work out or if it’s just one really impressive act of denial. Chances are it’s probably both.

To make matters worse, Kirishima doesn’t reply to his text, which makes sense since his lunch period probably ended, but oh boy does it make Izuku wish he could find Kirishima and shake an answer out of him.

He spends the next two periods staring at his phone like it’ll give him the answers to life, death, and the universe. He only realizes he’s been doing so when he looks up for a moment of reprise, only to realize that his classmates are looking at him like he’s an axe murderer.

It’s difficult not to take a running leap out the window the moment the last bell rings. Instead, Izuku speedwalks through the halls with one hand on his phone and the other on his baton, effectively creating a radius of no-man’s-land around him.

His one true success throughout all his years of school is somehow convincing the school population to translate his aura of anxiety into one of death and bloodlust. It’s one of those things that falls in the grey area between a curse and a blessing. Izuku likes to think it’s more a blessing, since he really isn’t running off many of those to begin with.

As he stomps his way through the halls (making sure to steer clear of Kacchan, god, running into him now would be like two storms clashing), Izuku tries to piece together the next steps of his plan.

Okay. What problems does he have right now?

Izuku grimaces, and a few first-years scamper back into their classroom, terrified for their lives.

That’s an awful question. The venn diagram of Life and Problems is one big circle. Rather, Izuku’s life is just one big problem-making machine clamped around what little peace Izuku can salvage from his burning wreckage of a mortal existence, swallowing anything that isn’t a problem and turning it into one. He’s like the densest star around, a tiny little thing holding in matter infinitely larger than anyone can conceive, and when he snaps–

Well. If Kacchan’s temper tantrums are explosions (ranging anywhere between hand grenades and atom bombs depending on how riled up he is), then when Izuku finally loses it–

There are supernovae, and then there are hypernovae. Before, Izuku would’ve probably been a supernova.

Now, with magic, vigilantism, and secrets to last a lifetime and the next, Izuku’s probably hitting the latter end of the spectrum.
“Whoa there, cowboy,” Kero hisses as they round a corner.

Izuku blinks out of his reverie and looks down.

There it is: the look of concern-slash-acceptance that Kero should really trademark one of these days. “You want to calm down there? I can see your train of thought derailing real quick.”

Right. Problems. Izuku has a lot of those and he’s currently solving none of them by freaking out.

So, backing it up a little bit. The biggest problem right now is Kirishima Eijirou, who, by some stroke of divine intervention, has found his way into Izuku’s life, probably by following a trail of crumbs left by fate or by Watanuki. They’re basically the same, anyway.

By accepting Kirishima’s offer to, uh, train him into a competent fledgling hero, Izuku has effectively dug himself into a hole. But with Kero’s morally shaky suggestion of using the poor guy as a mole of sorts, that hole might just lead somewhere helpful.

Izuku takes a breath. He really does want to see Kirishima succeed. A strong will is more important than a strong quirk, but if All Might’s any indication as to what people really think, then a good pro hero needs both.

It’s not like Izuku’s ever been able to say no anyway, so he’ll have to deal with helping Kirishima and coaxing information out of him, all while remembering that one day in the future, they might be standing on different sides of the battlefield.

Well, that day isn’t now, so it could be worse. Kirishima Crisis: troubling, definitely worrisome, but not as horrible as the next issue.

Eraserhead and Shinsou’s new arrangement, which is so bad on so many levels. What was Zing thinking, sending Shinsou to Eraserhead, one of the few heroes specializing in underground work?

“It’s suicide,” Izuku says vehemently to himself, probably a little louder than necessary, since the mood instantly drops in the hallway and he can feel about twenty pairs of eyes staring at him. He turns to look, and everyone scrambles away. Typical.

“Think of it as an opportunity,” Kero suggests when they’re a safe distance from the school. The plush shuffles, then peeks his head out of Izuku’s bag entirely. “If we play our cards right, maybe we can get Eraserhead to like us.”

Izuku heaves a deep sigh, running a hand through his hair. “It’s – it’s less us, and more Shinsou. I don’t know him too well since it hasn’t been too long, but he’s not a huge fan of heroes, right?”

Kero frowns. “But underground heroes aren’t conventional heroes.”

“I just don’t want anything bad to happen,” Izuku says, feeling more tired than he should be. “If this is – if it’s some sort of prelude or prologue to the kind of things we’re going to have to do later on, then we have to be careful.”

Silence. The walk home is peaceful, quiet, and completely ordinary.

As they near Izuku’s apartment, Kero quietly says, “We didn’t sign up for any of this, huh?”

Which part? The magic, the vigilantism, the corruption of ideals that once meant everything to Izuku, or something else entirely?
Izuku could ask. Instead, he shakes his head. “No, but here we are anyway.”

It’s a beautiful, sunny day outside. That means plenty of natural light to illuminate the always-too-dim hallways of the Wish-Granting Shop, because apparently weather is and isn’t tied to whatever plane of existence Watanuki’s quaint little home sits on.

It’s been quiet so far, with only a couple of customers coming in to inquire about bad luck. Watanuki’s laid out afternoon tea, which he boldly proclaimed was his newest culinary masterpiece, before leaving to do mysterious all-knowing things.

Too bad Kero can’t come in. Despite everything, Watanuki makes the craziest finger foods Izuku’s ever had the (dis)pleasure of trying.

All in all, not a bad day. Maybe Izuku has somehow stumbled into the eye of the storm. All he needs to do is to navigate the waters carefully to stay there.

Alas.

Fool me once, shame on me. Fool me twice, I’m a goddamn idiot, what the hell is wrong me me?

Or, at least, that’s the wonderful train of thought that drives itself into the station of Izuku’s mind as he attempts to compose himself.

“Watanuki said what?”

Maru smiles brightly. “He said he ran into something really interesting while he was out doing errands! He said, and I quote, ‘Tell that clueless magician to get here quickly, otherwise we’ll have a real-life Street Fighter tournament airing on breaking news!’”

Izuku takes a deep breath. Holds it. Holds it some longer. Holds it to the point that he can hear high-pitched buzzing and see the twins glancing at him curiously. Then he expels it before he can pass out.

Watanuki’s phrasing, as always, is frustratingly vague, which means the interesting thing could be anything from a cursed arcade machine to a villain.

Or, of course, it could be a Sakura Card. That would be... well. It would certainly be something.

There’s nothing Izuku can do except for grab his phone, the pendant, the cards, and his belt. Just as he’s slipping his baton into its holster (which feels awfully like he’s arming himself to go off to war), Moro grabs his arm and tugs him into another room.

Izuku knows the shop pretty well. The first thing he did when Watanuki gave him free reign was figure out what exactly every room housed.

It’s been a while since he last bothered to peek into every room, but there’s no way Watanuki managed to gather a department store’s worth of strange outfits in such little time.

For a moment, Izuku stands there, blankly scanning the outfits he’s certain Watanuki doesn’t even wear. Most of them look like they’ve been ripped out of a fantasy world: too many layers, colours, patterns, and styles to be considered even remotely normal.

In fact, there’s a corner that looks like a nine year-old tried to design magical girl outfits. There’s a hat for just about every costume, and – hang on, are those pink cat ears?
“Watanuki said to dress appropriately for the occasion,” Maru says, explaining absolutely nothing. The twins wear identical grins as tear through the hundreds of outfits hanging from what probably adds up to a couple hundred yen’s worth of clothes hangers.

Definitely a Sakura Card, then.

Izuku drops his face into his hands as the twins sprint around, occasionally holding up an outfit in front of him, only to look at each other, shake their heads, and go off in search of a better one. At this point, Izuku’s tempted to grab the tattered black cloak that’s clearly way too big for him to fit into and just run out the door.

He runs a hand along the ripped edges as the twins run by him. For some reason, it feels like magic, smells of sweat and blood and triumph over the greatest of hardships. It almost feels familiar, but only distantly, not like the tugging in his chest whenever Sakura speaks to him or the aching hollowness of the voice that speaks in memories that aren’t his.

These clothes have a long history with people Izuku’s never met. Whether they were collected by Watanuki or Ms. Yuko, all of them feel a little like magic. No one leaves the Wish-Granting Shop the same as when they first entered.

Regardless, there’s no way Izuku’s going out in that black cloak. Going by how tattered the fabric is, the owner was either a really aggressive swordsman or got murdered by one. It’s hard to tell.

“Found it!”

Moro jumps up and slaps a hat on Izuku’s head with a victorious cry. With a yelp, Izuku goes crashing to the ground with Moro firmly planted on his shoulders.

Maru pushes him up as Moro moves off, and together, they fannagle Izuku’s uniform off and somehow manage to wrestle him into something that really does look like it could be from Street Fighter.

After Izuku picks himself off the ground, he grumbles as Maru and Moro pull him over to a full-length mirror. The twins spread their arms, smiling brightly. “Ta-da! What do you think?”

“I think that you’re really pushing the green thing,” Izuku says, flatly.

Seriously – green hat, green outfit. Sure, the pants and shirt are white, but the long green cloak that drapes over them renders that point null. Izuku isn’t sure who designed this, but it looks like they couldn’t pick between a tailcoat, a cape, or a martial arts uniform, and decided to smash them all together to create whatever amalgamation Izuku’s currently wearing.

Izuku turns the cap so the tassel isn’t hanging directly in front of his face. At least he can fit his belt under the cloak.

Maru and Moro both offer him a thumbs-up. The action is so in synch that it’s disturbing. “You look great!”

“I look like a cosplayer,” Izuku says.

The twins exchange looks. A metaphorical light bulb flicks on above their heads. They scramble away into a room Izuku actually knows about – the item storage – and after a few very loud noises and crashes, they scamper back out, carrying one long sword between the two of them.

Maru and Moro smile as they thrust the sword into Izuku’s arms. “To complete the outfit,” they say
cheerfully.

Of course. Another green thing. There’s no doubt the outfit and the sword are a set, but God almighty, this sword’s almost as tall as he is.

Izuku changes his grip on the sword, shifting it so his wrist isn’t being crushed. It feels strangely heavy for a replica.

Out of curiosity, he pulls the blade from its sheath, catching a glance of the very real, very shiny, very sharp metal underneath.

He slots the sword back in one swift jerk. The twins continue to watch his expression, staring at him happily but vacantly.

“I already have a sword.” Izuku hopes Maru and Moro can hear the please don’t do this to me in his voice.

“Sure,” Maru chirps, “But this one’s a present from Watanuki!”

Watanuki’s so-called gifts aren’t gifts at all. They’re early deposits for an expected return. That’s awful enough, but Izuku can also feel the faint tingle of magic from the sword, which really doesn’t bode well.

Izuku desperately wishes that the motivational posters at school preach the truth with their boasting that dreams can become reality, because it means if tries hard enough, he can will Mount Doom into existence and hurl this stupid sword straight into the fires of hell.

As Izuku struggles to find a way to hold the sword without slipping the scabbard off or tripping on the ridiculously long tassel hanging from the pommel, Maru and Moro beckon him deeper into the shop, eventually stopping at a paper-screen door.

Something crawls up Izuku’s spine and stabs something sharp into his neck. That’s what it feels like when he stands in front of this door.

“Um, that’s not normal,” he tells no one in particular, taking a step back.

Moro shrugs. “Watanuki doesn’t use the back door often, but he told us it was okay for you to try using it. So come on!”

Of course Watanuki wants him to take the evil door that feels like death. That sounds about right.

“But I left Kero outside,” Izuku pleads, trying to stall for time.

“We’ll handle it,” the twins chirp, each latching onto one of his arms with an iron grip.

The last thing Izuku sees before Maru and Moro shove him into the door (which ripples like water and then folds inward upon his touch) is a pair of identical smiles, so happy but so empty at the same time.

Maru and Moro wave as Izuku falls, falls, and falls. “Have a nice trip!”

At least they had the decency to walk him to the door. Watanuki would’ve just tripped him in.

It’s by pure luck that Izuku doesn’t splatter face-first into concrete.
Apparently Watanuki’s never bothered to check what was on the other side of the door. Well, Izuku can tell him.

It’s a 200 foot drop off the roof of the Musutafu Business Centre.

It takes him far too long to scramble for his pendant and frantically call out, “Fly!”

He just barely veers upward on his staff and avoids becoming a stain on the sidewalk. He does, however, terrorize a couple of civilians during his stunt dive, but he doesn’t take anyone’s head off, which is the important part.

Izuku’s going to die of a heart attack at this rate. It can’t be healthy, running into life-or-death experiences every day with his tiny, adolescent heart.

Watanuki looks up and Izuku circles down, an eyebrow raised in amusement. He’s dressed in casual clothes, blending in as just another civilian, but his thousand-yard stare and smile aren’t easily forgettable. “So that’s where it led! Goodness, it’s been a while. I’d forgotten completely.”

Izuku closes his eyes and forces himself to breathe through his nose. He clamps down on the temptation to strangle Watanuki with his bare hands, because no, attempting to throttle the literal embodiment of breaking the rules of reality won’t accomplish anything.

Then he looks around at the flipped cars, the burning street, and the general wreckage and collateral damage only a parade of villains or overly enthusiastic sports fans could cause.

The murderous rage turns into cold panic very quickly.

“What’s going on?” Izuku flinches as civilians run by him. Strangely enough, they don’t even pause to look at him. Then again, that might be because he’s not in his usual Deku outfit. That, and the fact that there are – holy shit, there are about twenty heroes strewn across the street, all unconscious or injured, what the hell?

Watanuki gestures out in front of him with a dismissive wave. “I suppose you could say, as the kids do these days, that a challenger has appeared.”

The only person standing is girl dressed in a blue leotard, tall boots, and elbow-length gloves. Tied in two loose buns, her hair bounces as she does. She hops from one foot to the other, then takes a deep breath.

She’d blend right in with the other heroes if she didn’t look like a ghost. Her skin glows white, reflecting off the shiny surface of the flipped cars around her.

Before Izuku knows it, his staff’s a blade and he’s resting a hand on the grip of his newly acquired sword. A shiver runs down his spine. “A Sakura Card.”

“And a powerful one, at that.” Watanuki chuckles as he surveys the defeated heroes with his mismatched eyes. “The cards scale in power with the world in which they exist, so I suppose it isn’t too surprising that Fight would be able to overpower the average hero. If anything, it makes for a great show.”

Everything in that sentence makes Izuku want to shrivel up and die, but he takes on a shaky breath and pushes on because he’s a big boy. God, why does he even try? “Fight? The card’s name is literally The Fight?”

A nod. “Not too difficult to understand, is it?”
Straightforward, yes. Easy to handle? If that were true, then Izuku wouldn’t need to pray to the gods every time something like this happens.

Izuku turns back to scan his surroundings. Going by Fight’s appearance, it doesn’t seem like the card is particularly destructive, unlike Watery and Freeze. The remnants of battle – the fire, the destruction, the traces of what Izuku haphazardly labels as elemental damage – don’t seem like they were Fight’s work.

If anything, Fight launched into combat, and the collateral damage was the result of heroes trying to fight back.

That’s strange. Why the heroes? Why not the civilians? If anything, it seems like Fight purposely chose powerful opponents. It’s not lashing out, then, like Fly.

It’s almost as if–

“It’s testing its ability,” Izuku says, realization dawning in his voice.

“Well, that didn’t take as long as I thought it would!” Grinning, Watanuki pats Izuku on the shoulder. It’s not comforting at all. In fact, Izuku’s tempted to cave his face in with a fist. “That’s all the information you need, really. Oh, you might need this as well.”

Watanuki snaps his fingers, and Kero just... pops out of nowhere.

The plush falls with a yelp, landing on Izuku’s outstretched hand. It takes a while for Kero to process his surroundings, and by then, Watanuki’s gone.

Izuku sucks in a piercing breath and prays that he didn’t just hallucinate Watanuki out of his fever-dream of a mortal existence.

“Oh no,” Kero wails, darting up into the air. His tiny limbs flail back and forth as he, for lack of a better term, panic-dances. “Not Fight again!”

Izuku grimaces, then lifts his blade a little higher. Not promising.

Unfortunately, Kero’s reaction is entirely justified. Most violent cards freak out because they have no idea what’s going on, so they lash out randomly, whereas Fight hones in on specific targets with a bloody vengeance.

And... well, to be honest, if Fight wants to go on a little longer, Izuku isn’t too against it. The collateral damage and disorganization on the heroes’ part is a clear indication of how the system of individual hero offices fails when attempting to respond to immediate threats.

But the property damage is less a concern for the heroes and more for the owners of the businesses along the street, and if there’s one thing Izuku knows, it’s that small businesses are the first to get swept under the rug. He makes a mental note to ask Sasha and Yuto to help him clean up this mess.

The tip of Sword’s blade drags along the ground as Izuku makes his approach. Kero yells out something behind him. He blocks it out.

“Hey!” Hopping on top of a car, Izuku points Sword at the glowing girl, praying that his magic will hide his identity once again. “What do you think you’re doing?”

Kero swears violently, but takes his place above Izuku’s shoulder nonetheless. He grumbles something about self-control and the whims of fate, and honestly, who can blame him?
Fight turns to face the commotion. The card stands there, eyes blank but posture tense, as if it’s giving Izuku a threat analysis.

Izuku’s no martial artist, but he’s dressed like one. At the very least, it’ll be a good show for the Internet.

“Why’re you picking a fight with those pathetic heroes?” Raising his voice, Izuku musters all his false courage and sends a quick prayer off to Zing and her teaching. If he loses here, the beating he’ll get from Zing will probably knock him into the twelfth dimension. That thought alone is enough to keep Izuku going. “Don’t you know? If it’s a fight you’re looking for, go pick one with Deku!”

The civilians burst into chattering behind him. There’s no need to listen in; Mei will tell him all about the consequences of his stupidly brash actions later. Besides, he’ll probably be trending on social media after this, so if he ever musters up the courage to go search himself up (he won’t), he certainly won’t be short on sources to check.

Fight continues to stare blankly. Okay. So maybe Izuku isn’t a very obvious threat right now, given his small stature and his obviously not being one of the heroes.

In that case, maybe all Fight needs is a little more incentive.

Clearing his throat, Izuku prepares to ignore everything Satoshi and Kero have told him about self-preservation and self-sacrificing tendencies and go straight to pissing off a magical entity with the power to take down a horde of heroes all at once, an immortal being created for the sole purpose of challenging incredibly powerful opponents.

It could be worse. At least Fight isn’t. You know. Drowning or freezing people to death. So, who’s the unlucky one, really?

(It’s Izuku. It’s always Izuku. The very fact that he considers a card with a penchant for assault lucky is a clear indication of just how desensitized Izuku’s become.

There is no god. Except there is a god, and not just one god, and they’re all laughing.

Izuku’s life is just one poorly written sitcom, and everyone’s having a good time except for him.)

“You’re being awfully immature,” Izuku drawls loudly, sounding as condescending as possible.

It’s not difficult, since he’s been hanging around Watanuki for a while now. In fact, the Shopkeeper’s been rubbing off on Izuku so much that Izuku’s worried he’ll end up turning into a mini-Watanuki. Now that’s a scary thought.

For extra emphasis, Izuku levels Sword at Fight. The afternoon sun draws a line of light down the edge of the blade, and Izuku smells flowers. “What would Sakura say if she saw you doing this?”

And, just as expected, Fight’s eyes light up. Before Izuku can force out any more bravado, he’s leaping to the right to avoid a fist that just barely scrapes by him and tears through the car. He clamps down on a rather undignified yelp, repeating Zing’s teachings in his head over and over again. Duck and roll, duck and roll, duck and roll.

That certainly explains the mini-craters in the pavement.

“Ah,” Izuku says to himself, picking himself up from a roll. He tries not to let his voice shake too much or pass out on the spot. “That’s... troublesome.”
Fight turns around, features unnervingly blank as always, and leaps. Izuku feels his heart drop through his feet.

The minutes that follow are, for lack of a better word, a shitshow.

Izuku isn’t a fighter; he’s a vigilante armed with magic. It’s just as Zing said: he’s hopelessly outmatched when it comes to hand-to-hand combat, especially against a being that can take down a whole horde of pro heroes without breaking a sweat.

“When Sakura took Fight down, she had a power-enhancing card!” Kero yelps as Fight’s fist opens another hole in the pavement. “Even then, it was a lucky shot! Fight’s a lot stronger than it was before, so we’ll need to figure out a way to overpower it!”

A magical fist skims by Izuku’s cheek. The residue heat of the attack is a good indication of just how much energy Fight’s attacks unleash, and Izuku isn’t in the mood to land himself in the hospital today. “That’s easy for you to say!”

Trying to exhaust Fight is a fruitless endeavour. Magic cards don’t run out of energy, so there’s no point trying to extend the fight if it means causing even more damage.

But Izuku’s short on options: no Watery, no Shadow, no Freeze – in general, no cards that could drag the unconscious heroes into the fray. Time and Erase won’t work, since using them basically knocks Izuku out, and that’s something he’d like to avoid, thank you very much.

Kero swears as Fight jumps up onto an archway. The card’s probably getting frustrated: Izuku isn’t much of a fighter, but he sure as hell knows how to run away from his problems. “This is really bad for us, Deku! We can’t change the location either, otherwise Fight might run off and pick a fight with even more people!”

Even if Fight won’t target innocent civilians, there’s no telling how much chaos will ensue because of the battles.

Oh god, if they send in All Might...

Nope. No way. Absolutely not. They must keep the fight here, so Izuku has to work with what he has.

If only there was a way to trip the card up, make it fumble, make it trip. One opening is all Izuku needs.

Izuku pauses. Oh, hang on, he has some cards he hasn’t considered yet, doesn’t he?

And then he gets a kick to the stomach that sends him flying across the street, bouncing off a car, and into a (thankfully) previously shattered window, and holy shit, that hurts like a bitch.

“Deku!” Kero darts over, panic written all over his features, slapping Izuku’s face with his tiny, plush limbs. “Hey! Get up!”

Groaning, Izuku pushes himself up, using Sword as a crutch. He winces, hand hovering over his stomach, which miraculously doesn’t have a thousand pieces of shrapnel and glass embedded in it. Must be that weird reinforcement magic at work again.

Fight advances slowly but surely. Izuku spares a second to poke at his stomach, hissing as the injury throbs in protest. Nothing... nothing’s broken, hopefully, but he’s going to have a purple stomach for the next week. He’ll have to get Satoshi to look at it.
If something like this can take him out of the game, then he’s hopeless.

Doing his best to ignore the pain, Izuku unsheathes his new weapon from where it’s strapped on his back. It’s a big blade, heavy and long, unlike the nimble and lightweight weapon Sword materializes into.

But, for some reason, when Izuku holds the sword in his hands, he smells the pungent scent of sweat and blood and metal, feels something like a calloused, guiding touch, hears a familiar voice whisper into his ear.

It isn’t like spatial magic or moon magic. Whatever this sword is, it’s never belonged to Izuku before. He has no right to its power, no claim to its inheritance.

But whoever wielded this blade before him, whoever’s spirit still rests inside this weapon, in whatever fragmented form it sleeps, wants to help.

“Welp,” Izuku mutters, swapping Sword into his left hand and holding his new weapon with his right, “I’ve never tried using a jian before, but there’s always time to learn something new.”

Apparently Fight doesn’t agree, because it lunges forward again, kicking up a shower of rubble as it prepares to strike. Only this time, Izuku’s ready to intercept.

*bring your blade up. turn to anchor yourself to the ground. don’t take the blow head-on. glance it off instead.*

When Fight brings its fist up, Izuku swings around, body facing sideways to the incoming blow, one foot behind the other. He breathes, then drops Sword. Fight’s punch comes rocketing down, and Izuku turns the sword ever so slightly, one hand on the hilt and the other the blade, effectively glancing the blow off the blade.

Time slows. Sparks fly as the heat of the attack and the metal of the blade clash. In the corner of his eye, just for a second, Izuku swears he sees licks of flame dance on the blade, lashing out in tendrils of red and orange.

For once, Fight looks surprised, or at least as surprised as an emotionless magical entity of combat can look. The card stops for a moment, jumps back, and stares at Izuku with something even more piercing than before.

Izuku releases a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Stooping down, he snatches Sword off the ground.

It’s hard, wielding a heavy, slashing blade in one hand and a light, piercing one in the other. Sword’s magic pulls on one end, singing songs of grace and speed and poise, while the new blade doesn’t sing as much as march, a constant beat of power and practice and perseverance over skill.

It’s confusing and headache-inducing. Maybe it’s best to leave dual-wielding for another day, when he figures out how to properly use both weapons at once.

Izuku leaps back and snaps his fingers. Sword’s form shatters back into the Sealing Staff, then darts to hover behind Izuku.

If a rapier won’t do the trick, then maybe a longsword will. But Izuku isn’t one to brute-force his way through things.

Fight pushes its advance, and Izuku pushes back just as hard. Punches and kicks are exchanged for
slashes and pommel thrusts. But even with whatever borrowed power Izuku may be calling on now, if he doesn’t end this quickly, his body will fail him.

Slipping past Fight, Izuku lifts two cards in the air. “Rain, Flower, heed my call! Heavy showers on the forecast today!”

A few seconds later, rain intermingled with sakura petals storm down. It’s not long before the road is slick with water and covered in pink.

Fight pauses to look up. Kero does too. He looks like a wet dog. A very small, very tired wet dog.

“Okay,” the plush says, somehow even more tired than before. “But why?”

As Fight turns back to continue the battle, Izuku grins. “You said Sakura managed to get in a lucky shot? Well, I’ll make it happen, too.”

“Huh?”

Fight charges in, and Izuku runs forward and ducks under the pale arm to barely avoid walking into a concussion. The card tries to turn, but, oh, would you look at that, wet petals don’t offer too much traction, do they?

Fight slips and falls flat on its face in a manner that would be comedic in literally any other situation. As it tries to push itself up, obviously infuriated, Izuku rushes forward, using both hands to swing the pommel of the blade directly into Fight’s temple with righteous justice.

The card crumples. Izuku breathes.

Shaking from exhaustion, exertion, and panic, Izuku waves his hand, and Rain and Flower appear back in his hand in a flash of pink light.

Snatching the Sealing Staff from behind him, Izuku gives it a spin, mostly out of reflex, then brings it down above Fight.

“Fight, I command you return to your form confined. Seal!”

He expects the magic circle that bursts from his feet and spins around him. What he doesn’t expect is the strange, new border that’s been added onto it.

The ten-point star, moon, and sun all remain intact above the backdrop of a twelve-point star, but the entire circle now rests within an octagon, which itself is confined within two overlapping squares. Eight pillars jut out from the circle, all reading familiar kanji characters, but Izuku doesn’t manage to catch them all.

Fight’s form dissolves into pink light, and a new card materializes in Izuku’s hand. He slips it into his pocket.

That’s... curious. Worrying, definitely worrying, but curious. Maybe Watanuki will know something. In fact, he’ll definitely know something, but he probably won’t want to tell Izuku, which is. You know. Fun and all that.

Kero blinks, eyes still on the pavement where the circle was moments before. For a moment, he just floats there, silent.

Then, quietly, but with emotion: “Holy shit.”
“Let’s deal with that later,” Izuku snaps, swiping his new sword off the ground. There’s no doubt heroes will be rushing to the scene soon, and he doesn’t want to be around for that. He’s drained, injured, and way too busy to get arrested. “For now, let’s go bother Watanuki until he tells us something.”

He can hear people calling his name as Fly’s wings sprout from his staff. There’s something about autographs and interviews, both of which make Izuku’s breath hitch just by thinking about them.

But the fact that people are cheering for him, treating him as a celebrity – or a hero, god, how weird is that – instead of a criminal, actually seeing his actions for what the are (a social critique) instead of what they look like (vigilantism), believing in him when he can’t even believe in himself, is astounding, special, and magical in both a literal and metaphorical sense.

So Izuku gives a bright smile and waves to the crowd of spectators. Before he takes off to the skies, he shouts, “Thank you for your support! If there are any certified first-aiders here, please make sure to help the heroes!”

Then he shoots upward, trailing sakura petals behind him, praying that everything will work out.

And then Izuku almost falls off his staff on the way back to the Wish-Granting Shop. Typical.

Watanuki sighs. Maru and Moro sigh along with him.

“Goodness,” the Shopkeeper says, shaking his head, watching Kero devour two days’ worth of snacks. “I agreed to let the Guardian of the Sun in under the condition that he would work for me, but I’m starting to regret it.”

“Not my fault you can’t handle my appetite,” Kero snarks, abandoning the fork and using his grubby little hands to dig into the cheesecake – American, which means it’s about five times as dense, which means that he’s eaten the equivalent of three whole Japanese cheesecakes, what the hell, Kero?

Izuku drops his head against the table with a resounding thud. Maru huffs, pushing him back into a sitting position and holding him there. Moro grabs his arm and works at cleaning out his cuts with a cotton swab.

This truly is hell.

Even as Kero makes his way through his fourth slice of cheesecake, the half-grimace, half-frown on the plush’s face remains. His eyes narrow as he looks upward to Watanuki. “I’ve heard about you from Sakura. During her last–”

Kero catches himself, a pained expression on his face. He shakes his head.

“Toward the end of her cardcaptor career, she mentioned you. We’ve never met, but I feel like we have. Have we met before?”

Watanuki shrugs, stirring milk into his tea. As usual, he’s far too casual for the given situation. “Not directly, no. But my master knew your master – your original master, that is.”

Maru catches Izuku’s head the moment it dips down toward the table. Moro pokes at the cut above his eye, murmuring something about staying still.

So everything comes full circle.
Izuku’s moon magic is a specialized type of cardcaptor magic, which he inherited from Sakura, who in turn inherited star cardcaptor magic from Clow Reed, who was some sort of mega-mage or something.

Watanuki was the apprentice of Ms. Yuko, the original owner of the Wish-Granting Shop, who was involved in so many confusing shenanigans that Izuku doesn’t think he ever wants to know why exactly Ms. Yuko isn’t exactly, uh, corporeal anymore.

If Ms. Yuko and Clow Reed were best friends, Izuku’s going to... maybe not scream, probably just cry or something.

The universe has just twisted in a very strange way, because Izuku now knows that he and Watanuki are just unfortunate people who happened to have larger-than-life fates thrust upon them.

Either that or Watanuki was, like, Ms. Yuko’s child or something and oh god that’s a horrible thought, moving on.

Watanuki walks over, pulling one of Izuku’s bruised arms up, moving it around to get a better look. He frowns. “I suppose this is the first real beating you’ve experienced while on the job.”

“I suppose you did,” Watanuki muses. Izuku’s not going to think of how he knew that, absolutely not, that’s a headache for another day. “But this was your first encounter with a card that knew how to punch back.”

Which implies that there are more. “The first of many, I’m guessing?”

Kero snorts into his cheesecake. He fixes Izuku with one of those trademark stares. “You don’t want to know.”

Silence. Izuku can feel the tension in the air. It’s thick and heavy, like wading through a swamp, and Izuku’s lost his boots a long way back.

As always, it’s Kero who breaks the silence. The plush heaves a sigh as he polishes off the last of the cake, gaze shifting to Izuku’s new sword, then to Watanuki. “Izuku’s told me a lot about what you do, Shopkeeper. You’re a tollkeeper, aren’t you?”

Izuku frowns. “He’s a what?”

Watanuki smiles. It’s something old and weary but accepting and knowing all at once. “You’re more intelligent than you look, Guardian.”

Wait, what?

There’s something strange about that. To say Watanuki’s something as specific as a tollkeeper just seems... well, inaccurate. The Shopkeeper is just that – the owner of a store who, when customers demand it, offers solutions to their troubles for a price. He’s the ultimate customer service employee.

Bringing a hand to his chin, Izuku’s frown deepens. There’s no doubt Watanuki’s hiding important information from Izuku, especially about Ms. Yuko, the Sakura Cards, and why Izuku has magic that doesn’t belong to him. Yorihiko said something about that a while back, didn’t he?

You’re a projector, the god had said. An empty slate, born without any magical potential yet capable of wielding so much power, almost as if a piece has been carved out of you from the moment you
came into existence – no, even before that.

You’re an anomaly. You don’t make sense. You shouldn’t even exist. What are you?

And god, if Izuku could answer that, all his problems would go up in smoke. What’s the voice count in his head now? Four? Five?

But why would all that magic collect within Izuku? He doesn’t even belong to the same world as any of the people he’s inherited magic from.

Izuku’s already had the rundown of how Sakura and Clow weren’t from this world, which, by extension, means that there are an unknown number of worlds that exist outside of Izuku’s.

It’s difficult to say what counts as a “world” and what doesn’t. Watanuki mentioned something earlier about how the Cards scale in power to fit into the world they’re in, and if Kero saw a huge jump in Fight’s power in comparison to when Sakura was an active cardcaptor, then Sakura’s world and Izuku’s world must be pretty different. But what about parallel universes, where things are almost exactly the same? There are too many unknown variables.

The Sakura Cards made it here from another world. As absurd as magic is, Izuku’s learned that there are boundaries it can’t cross – literally, in this case. By the way Kero’s spoken about Sakura, it seems as if she didn’t come into Izuku’s world and physically hide the cards somewhere.

Which begs the question: why? Wasn’t she a cardcaptor? Couldn’t she have used some sort of magic to take a little vacation to another world?

Maybe she couldn’t. Boundaries exist for a reason, and that’s to set down walls in spacetime. Maybe even the most powerful of magicians can’t cross the boundaries between worlds by themselves.

Except for Shopkeepers, that is.

The magic surrounding Shopkeepers is vague as hell. They have absolute authority when it comes to granting wishes, so technically, if the price is paid, they can do anything they want. If hopping worlds is a thing magicians can’t normally do, then it makes sense that the Shopkeepers would be tollkeepers as well.

Crossing over to another world? Sure – but not for free.

What if, to send the cards off to a new world, Sakura came to the Wish-Granting Shop, where she knew someone with the ability to grant any wish would be able to help her?

That look-alike Sealing Staff in the item storage proves that Sakura’s been here before. But then, which Sakura? If parallel universes really exist, then who’s to say that the Sakura who Izuku inherited cardcaptor magic from was the Sakura who gave that staff to the shop?

Izuku claps his hands on his cheeks. He shakes his head, then takes a breath.

No, he’s thinking too hard. The look-alike staff isn’t important right now. If that Sakura wasn’t Izuku’s Sakura, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that Sakura – any Sakura – had the ability to reach the Wish-Granting Shop.

Sakura wanted to give the cards to Izuku, right? To do that, she would’ve had to do something she couldn’t, and that’s to toss the cards and her magic over to another world. As usual, the Shopkeeper would’ve asked for a price.
But no, that doesn’t make sense. If Sakura wanted to toss her magic over, what would the price have been? A wish that enormous would’ve had an equally as enormous cost, and although Izuku doesn’t know Sakura that well, he does know that the price wouldn’t have been easy to pay.

Running a hand through his hair, Izuku sighs. This is complicated, but not so complicated that he can’t understand it. The clues aren’t all there, but the fact that some of them are there means he can try to piece together a coherent story.

Wait. There’s another possibility.

What if Sakura’s wish wasn’t to pass the cards on, but something else entirely?

That would make much more sense. If Sakura’s wish was remotely related to the cards but not addressing them directly, then she would’ve been able to pay the cost using her magic, the staff, and the cards, wouldn’t she?

Izuku’s eyes widen. For the first time since he became a cardcaptor, it feels like he’s actually solving a part of the mystery he was thrust into.

His theory isn’t perfect. There are huge questions that he has no idea how to answer yet, like what Sakura’s wish actually was, why he has moon magic instead of star magic, why Ms. Yuko exists within him, why he sometimes talks to himself in a voice that isn’t his.

But it’s a start, and it’s an important start, because Izuku has a feeling it wasn’t Watanuki who helped Sakura with her wish.

It was Ms. Yuko.

Izuku grins. There’s no reason he should be smiling. The one person who can answer all his questions with absolute certainty is the one person who’d rather watch him slave over finding the answer, but hell, if he’s gotten this far on cryptic clues and deduction, who’s to say he can’t go even further?

Looking up, Izuku fixes Watanuki with a satisfied smile. “I think I figured out some important stuff,” he declares, feeling confident for what feels like the first time in his entire life.

Watanuki laughs. For some reason, he looks satisfied too. “I’m happy to hear that rambling session was an actual cognitive process instead of a slow descent into insanity. Congratulations.”

On the opposite side of the spectrum, Kero looks even more confused than before. “We’re talking about this later,” he demands. “Explain everything to me in detail.”

There’s another clue: Kero doesn’t know what happened to Sakura. Sure, he knows a lot, but there’s even more he doesn’t know.

“Anyway,” Kero says, jabbing a hand at Watanuki, “Where’d you get that sword? How’d you get it? Why did Syao – why did he give it to you?”

(A name? Who?)

The Shopkeeper waves dismissively. “It’s not anything that’ll affect your life at the moment. I advise you to leave it be.” Turning to Izuku, Watanuki raises an eyebrow. “Or, if you’re curious, you can try to find out yourself.”

Izuku’s more than accustomed to the flippant not-telling gesture, but Kero isn’t. The plush bristles,
and Izuku tastes bitter heat on his tongue.

“You promised them something,” Kero spits, scathing and acerbic and scalding, heat radiating from him in a burning, scathing way that isn’t just magical. “What did you do?”

Shadows rise along the walls, and if Izuku eyes aren’t screwing with him, then that’s an actual lion with actual wings, what the hell?

Watanuki doesn’t seem fazed in the slightest. Instead, he raises his pipe to his mouth, inhales, then exhales, and a scent Izuku doesn’t recognize curls around the room. It circles in a way that definitely isn’t natural, almost predatory.

“I can’t reveal the contents of a contract that isn’t yours,” the Shopkeeper answers smoothly, mismatched eyes staring into the past, the present, and the future all at once. He leans an arm on the table, resting his chin on his hand. “You can challenge me as many times as you want, but unless you happen to be as powerful as Clow Reed, don’t expect to get anything out of it.”

Kero snarls – like, actually snarls. Watanuki cocks his head and smiles back serenely, which is an obvious challenge. It’s horrifying, it’s threatening, Izuku hates it and hates how two of his newest friends look like they’re ready to rip each other’s throats out.

Oh no, no, no. Izuku doesn’t defuse situations; he runs away from them because he’s a coward. This isn’t his area of expertise, and he has no idea how to stop these two stars from colliding.

So maybe this is a really bad idea, but it’s as good as it’ll get.

“Why, what’s this?” Izuku’s voice pitches upward as he scrolls madly through the #deku tag on Twitter. He really needs to thank Mei for the awesome screen protector. “A journalist who wants to interview me about my actions and opinions on pro heroics? How interesting!”

Kero’s head swivels around with frightening speed. The plush fixes him with a look of sheer panic so raw and true in form that it’s almost impressive if it weren’t also terrifying. It’s like he’s trying to escape in every single direction in once, resulting in a twitch-convulsion-jerk action so violent Izuku suspects Kero’s heart might be failing him. “Don’t,” is all he says, voice carefully measured.

Alas, common sense has abandoned Izuku long ago, so he’s already typing away. It feels a little like signing his soul to the Devil, but there’s no Devil, it’s just inescapable current of fate, why does he do the things he chooses to do? “Let me just book a meeting time. Yes, I’d love to talk to you, how about next Saturday? Send, and done.”

The absolute horror that dawns upon Kero is almost comedic. It’s like he was just jabbed with the taser of truth, except instead of truth, it’s Izuku’s horrible crisis aversion skills, and instead of a taser, it’s the dawning realization that Izuku solves problems between friends by making himself into a larger problem, thereby distracting everyone from their previous concerns.

Kero opens his mouth to say something, but the words stumble and catch as they fall out, resulting in an unintelligible string of garbled vowels. He eventually composhes himself enough to yell out a single, “Why?”

Staring down at his phone, Izuku’s beginning to realize that throwing himself into the public wasn’t the best solution to something he could have solved by acting as a mediator.

“Why not,” is the answer Izuku decides upon, feeling faint. The fact that he isn’t breathing into a bag in a corner right now is a victory in and of itself.
Watanuki has the audacity to start laughing like some sort of amused spectator. It’s so infuriating that Izuku’s tempted to bash him over the head with the first aid kit Moro’s currently packing away, preferably severing what Watanuki calls the red string of fate and Izuku calls a blood-stained leash that ties them together. Moro clearly notices Izuku’s longing gaze, because she starts laughing too, making everything even worse.

“I suppose your fans are dying to get to know you,” the Shopkeeper says, smiling brightly. “You’ve been active for – what, half a year now? You have a lot of the public on your side, so edging more of them over isn’t a bad idea.”

“Except for the fact that Deku just made an appearance in the media, so the officials are going to be more careful than ever!” Kero’s expression is the very essence of Baroque suffering. The metamorphosis is sort of horrifying.

Izuku wrings his hands. “The person I talked to doesn’t work for anyone,” he offers, like that helps at all. “He’s an amateur journalist, and I think he’s a college student.” Thinking about it a little more, Izuku tags on hesitantly, “I don’t think he’s a bad person.”

Kero stares at Izuku incredulously. Watanuki’s smile hasn’t faltered at all.

While Kero’s having a mental breakdown, it dawns upon Izuku that the only time he’ll face his problems willingly is when he’s running away from other problems. Oh god.

“We’re going to get arrested again,” Kero laments, the fight draining out of his tiny little body. He drops his face into his hands in an unnervingly similar manner to how Izuku does it: full of despair and internal screaming.

“Do whatever you think is right,” Watanuki says, puffing out another breath of smoke. He fixes Izuku with a glassy, thousand-yard stare.

“Wow, thanks,” Izuku drolls robotically. The least they could offer is a vote of confidence, but then again, Izuku wouldn’t believe them anyway.

And so Izuku leaves the Wish-Granting Shop a lot more bruised than when he first entered, carrying leftovers from Watanuki’s pastry-making spree in one hand and a mysterious new sword in the other.

He hasn’t solved many problems – in fact, he’s added to them – but the universe feels a little more in place, like an important cog has begun turning again, like the corner pieces of an infinitely large puzzle have been found.

you’re doing well, the blade’s voice says, something unfamiliar but kind, a steady hand bracing him for whatever may come.

we’re proud of you, Sakura whispers, voice flowing in and out like an ebbing wave, not always the loudest, but undoubtedly the proudest.

There’s still more to come, Ms. Yuko laughs. And, well, that about sums it up, doesn’t it?

Izuku lets out a breath. He looks up, past the bright lights and bustle of the city, up toward the stars and the moon and the galaxies far, far beyond them, as if he could reach them, touch them with his scarred, calloused hands, and bring some of the magic that only he can see to the people he treasures.

Izuku – no, Deku – has made sure to stay out of the public eye, hidden in the shadows or under the veil of night, taking care not to endanger anyone around him. In doing so, he’s created a mystery that everyone wants answered.
Perhaps it’s time to shine some light onto the enigma that is Deku.

Who knows? He might even make some new friends.

(Don’t let me down.)

Interview with Deku, Vigilante (!!!!! holy shit!!! mom holy shit!!!!)

Togami Natsuki, amateur journalist

NATSUKI: Then let’s get right into it. Thank you for coming today, Deku.

DEKU: Oh no, the pleasure’s all mine! It’s nice to meet you, Natsuki.

NATSUKI: And it’s very nice to finally meet the vigilante who’s captured the attention of an entire nation.

DEKU: Oh! W-well, surely I’m not that infamous.

NATSUKI: Pardon me for asking, but do you not, ah, keep up on the news about yourself too much?

DEKU: N-not very much, actually. I – well, I have... horrible stage fright, really, and I prefer to let people think and say whatever they want of me. I’m not too interested in how popular I am, you see. But it does make me happy that I’ve reached so many people with my message.

NATSUKI: Let’s talk about that. Your message, that is. You’ve said this before, but your goal is to do what heroes can’t, isn’t it?

DEKU: That’s – yes, that’s about it. There are... other reasons why I started getting involved in heroics, but I want to highlight what the heroes of today are doing wrong and what we should be doing to fix it.

NATSUKI: Could you elaborate on that?

DEKU: Oh, where do I even begin?

NATSUKI: How about your famous encounter with All Might? You said a lot of potent things, and your famous heist isn’t very forgettable.

DEKU: I suppose that would be the highlight of my career! But I don’t think the heist needs too much explanation. The police suspected that I was part of a criminal syndicate, so I did some research. I found out that they were running an underground fighting ring and kidnapping children to fight in it, and that was unacceptable.

NATSUKI: So you and your associates decided to take matters into your own hands?

DEKU: That’s right. The police investigation had been going on for at least a few months, whereas my informant was able to collect information much more efficiently. And, with our skill sets, we were confident that we’d be able to speed up the official investigation along.

NATSUKI: You certainly did. Thanks to your efforts, the police were able to apprehend far more
villains than originally anticipated.

DEKU: [laughter] I mean, they did almost catch me!

NATSUKI: But you escaped, as always, using your cards. Could you tell me a little more about them?

DEKU: My cards? Of course. Here are the ones I’ve captured so far.

NATSUKI: So far?

DEKU: There are many more I haven’t been able to capture yet. I know the transcripts of my interrogation were leaked, so I apologize if I sound a bit like a broken record.

NATSUKI: No, it would be wonderful to have confirmation from the source himself.

DEKU: Well, I’ll explain it as simply as possible. These cards aren’t the result of a quirk. They’re magical creations.

NATSUKI: [pause] You mentioned magic during your interrogation as well.

DEKU: Sounds absolutely unbelievable, right?

NATSUKI: Well–

DEKU: Don’t worry about it. I know the very concept of magic seems implausible, but to borrow from the revered Sherlock Holmes: when you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.

NATSUKI: Of course. However, many people believe that you’re working on conjunction with a larger organization.

DEKU: To do what? To create sentient, all-powerful beings that can somehow be contained within cards? Please. That’s even more ridiculous than magic.

NATSUKI: Then, to continue off this topic of magic, what did you mean when you told the police that stopping the false villain attacks was your duty?

DEKU: It’s the truth. I meant exactly what I said. I am, quite literally, the only person in this world capable of sealing the cards – or fake villains – away. I’m the cardcaptor, after all!

NATSUKI: Cardcaptor?

DEKU: Don’t worry about it. What’s important to remember is that to seal the cards, you need a very specific strand of magic. Have you seen any heroes stopping the cards? I’m so much younger than them, and somehow, I’m the only one capable of sealing them away. Don’t you think that’s strange?

NATSUKI: The possibility that you’re working with others–

DEKU: As a villain? Impossible. What would I get from allying myself with criminals? I’m young, I’m inexperienced, and I’m – well, I’d like to think so, at least – morally conscious. As a vigilante? You’ve probably caught wind of my associates, but still, there’s a difference between a villain and a vigilante, you know?
NATSUMI: Yes, you’re absolutely right. There’s been a recent wave of protest against the professional heroics industry, criticizing poor organization, discrimination against quirkless individuals and those who have quirks seen as villainous, and lack of liability for collateral damage.

DEKU: Oh! Is that so? Those are some of the points I wanted to stress the most. I suppose it’s worked somewhat, hasn’t it?

NATSUMI: In comparing your actions to those of pro heroes, it isn’t difficult to see some differences.

DEKU: And those differences are important.

NATSUMI: Because they’re suggestions. Right?

DEKU: Absolutely! If a child can outdo major players in the heroics industry, then there’s clearly room for improvement.

NATSUMI: If that’s the case, then how long do you plan to continue as a vigilante?

DEKU: How... how long?

NATSUMI: That’s right. You said there were other reasons why you decided to become a vigilante. Extrapolating from what you mentioned about magic, am I right in saying that the reason you’re even in the game to begin with is because you feel an obligation to perform your duty as the cardcaptor?

DEKU: [pause] You’re much smarter than a lot of people I’ve met, Natsuki.

NATSUMI: I – thank you.

DEKU: I won’t lie. To be honest, a year ago, I never thought I’d be involved in – in all this. You see, I’m quirkless.

NATSUMI: You mentioned that during your interrogation as well.

DEKU: That’s right. You know, when I was younger, my dream was to be a hero. It’s every kid’s dream, isn’t it? To be someone that can be strong, help others, make the world a better place? I grew up on All Might videos. Until I turned four, that is. Being diagnosed as quirkless shattered me.

NATSUMI: Is that what made you give up on heroics?

DEKU: You’d think that, right? But no, not at all. If anything, it made me try harder. If I don’t have the advantages others have, all I need to do is find advantages exclusive to me. So I started running around the city, getting involved in anything and everything, helping whoever needed help, wherever they needed it.

NATSUMI: So you were quite the good samaritan, were you?

DEKU: I’d like to think that helping others is a fundamental part of human nature. It doesn’t need to be praised. But yes, I was very active in the community. You know what happens when you interact with people of all walks of life?

NATSUMI: You learn a lot about what people think about heroes.

DEKU: That’s exactly it. A lot of people aren’t happy with the heroics industry as it is. And that’s
incredibly important, because heroism is so deeply embedded into our society that people have lost sight of what it’s really about.

NATSUKI: And what is that?

DEKU: It’s about winning. It’s about helping others. It’s about upholding the peace. It’s about being a role model for the generations to come, because if you’re going to hold a title as revered as “Hero”, then you’d better be someone worth the weight of the mantle.

NATSUKI: Pardon me, but the heroes of today are outstanding individuals. All Might’s been the pillar of peace for a very long time now.

DEKU: And exactly how many heroes can you name that can compare to or replace All Might?

NATSUKI: Well...

DEKU: I’m not saying that heroes are corrupt, or that the industry needs to be dismantled. But something that really bothers me is just how much we’ve come to idealize heroes. Heroes aren’t invincible, they aren’t always right, and as they are right now, they won’t always save everyone. So we, as the people, can’t always sit back and say, well, it’ll all be okay, because they are here. Complacency has never worked.

NATSUKI: What exactly are you trying to say, then?

DEKU: Anyone can be a hero. It’s not the quirk that matters; it’s the will to do good.

NATSUKI: Pardon?

DEKU: Sounds cliche, doesn’t it? But it’s the undeniable truth. You want to be a hero? Go out in the world and do good for others, because being a hero doesn’t mean you have a fancy license or a ranking on a list. People may talk about All Might’s power, but they’ll never, never forget about your kindness.

NATSUKI: Is that it?

DEKU: But as I said, the industry is flawed. As it is right now, heroes create more villains than they take down. That’s because they forget people, the voiceless ones in society, and they commercialize the innate goodness of the human spirit, use it as weapons to combat the so-called evil, when in reality, doing good should never be a weapon.

NATSUKI: Then–

DEKU: So get involved! Do good for others, but understand that people won’t change just because you have. If you want, get involved in heroics in whatever way you like, whether it’s as a hero, an engineer, a marketing coordinator, a doctor, whatever you want. Ask questions, raise problems, propose solutions, speak up for what you know is wrong. Don’t let others do it for you, and don’t let others think for you, because to lose yourself is to lose everything.

NATSUKI: I see. It’s like telling people that if they don’t like the government, they don’t necessarily need to become a politician, but if they want to change anything, they should vote.

DEKU: Exactly! Remember that anyone can be a hero. Pro heroes aren’t invincible, they aren’t infallible, and they sure as hell aren’t the only source of good in our world. Do what you think is
NATSUKI: Another very meaningful, very memorable P.A from our very own Deku. You’re the pride of our nation, you know?

DEKU: I – I – sorry, what?

NATSUKI: You said it yourself. That kindness, that dedication to do good, that unwavering belief in the human spirit – you certainly walk the walk. You’ve become quite the hero yourself over these past few months.

DEKU: I mean, I’m not really a hero. More a vigilante than anything, really, technically.

NATSUKI: And modest, too.


NATSUKI: Oh, absolutely. Yes. Of course. It’s been a pleasure talking with you, Deku.

DEKU: You too, Natsuki.

NATSUKI: You’ll do us proud. Right?

DEKU: I’ll certainly try my best.

[End of transcript]

This kid really is something, huh?

Chapter End Notes

sorry for the long wait! it's been a while, hasn't it? i took some time off writing and finally got around to playing breath of the wild, which has wrecked me, thank you very much.

i gave izuku his one (1) chapter of relative peace, so obviously, it's time to pick up the pace. shinsou's freaking out because he swears eraserhead's going to expose them all, so of course izuku's also freaking out, school's starting up again, and nobody knows what's going on. except maybe watanuki, but he takes brevity is the soul of wit to the next level and says nothing at all, so. great fun for the whole family.

and what's this? a reference to yet another mysterious person who may or may not have wielded a sword? izuku has an upgraded magic circle? wonder who that could be.

i'm not cruel enough to leave izuku in the dark forever. he overthinks, but he's the furthest thing from stupid. he's putting the pieces together, trying to figure out where he stands in the mystery of why he even exists. he's trying his best, and he's figuring stuff out, but oh god is he confused and suffering.

thanks so much for reading, and sorry for the wait!
Chapter Summary

The debrief. The shadow of a threat unlike any other, the kindling of a soon-to-be wildfire, and a new voice in the chaos. Among it all, Silent and Voice.

Chapter Notes

guys. guys you won't believe it. brilliant lights officially has a [tvtropes page]!! i'm still in shock that we managed to come this far....... i love all of you......

check out these [amazing doodles by hahaha-cough], god they're so good and make my heart hurt thank you so much

here's some [adorable art by roseperthorns] of izuku all deku'd up, am i crying no you're crying
sasha: stop drinking red bull you're going to die early

mei: my body, my choice

sasha: no stop you're using my parenting the wrong way

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So,” Satoshi chirps, eyes shining and features sunny as the waiter places a frighteningly tall tower of pancakes in front of him, “I hear a certain vigilante decided to go and get interviewed yesterday.”

It’s a blessing that Kero insisted on staying home to play video games, because Izuku doesn’t have the mental capacity to handle another person yapping away at his lack of self-preservation, his apparent love for drama, etc.

He’s heard enough of that to last this lifetime and the next, and god, he doesn’t need any more.

Izuku looks up from his parfait. He stabs into a piece of mango in a manner that can only be described as murderous, then shoves it into his mouth in an action reminiscent of gnawing on a bone, all while glaring at Satoshi as if he could instill the fear of God into those calm and amused eyes by will alone.

There’s a reason Izuku decided to blow a copious amount of money on deserts, but it appears as
though it hasn’t exactly clicked for Satoshi. Or maybe it has, and Satoshi doesn’t care at all. Izuku is truly, thoroughly, and surely dead inside.

(The little green rabbit drawn on his napkin that the waiter passed to him along with his parfait isn’t helping.

God, does everyone know?)

“I invite you to get good food, and this is how you treat me?”

“Actually, you’re treating me.” Satoshi has the audacity to look smug, as if his beginner’s level wordplay is something to celebrate.

Izuku glares. “Ha, ha,” he barks robotically.

And, because the universe has stopped working entirely, Shinsou Hitoshi slips into the booth, looking like he hasn’t slept in three days.

Izuku chokes on his parfait. He pounds himself on the chest furiously as Satoshi nods a greeting.

Shinsou, clearly on other realm of existence entirely, immediately waves a waiter down and proceeds to order a drink so bitter it sounds like it could poison the entire city’s water supply if dumped down the drain, the same behemoth pancake creation as Satoshi, and a cat-shaped pastry.

He looks Izuku in the eye. There is no soul in that gaze. “You’re treating me, too.”

Then the universe gets kick-started but starts spinning in the opposite direction as Hatsume Mei shoves her way into the booth, hip-checking Izuku to make room for herself. “And me, of course!”

And then she turns to the waiter and orders two parfaits, both larger than Izuku’s, which raises the question as to how long she’s gone without eating in her endeavour to bring Deku to international headlines.
She turns to Izuku and gives a wide smile, looking shockingly clean compared to her usual workshop self, which means that Sasha’s in on this too.

Izuku drops his face into his hands and tries not to cry. “Why are you here?”

Silence. Satoshi looks over to Shinsou, who hasn’t stopped staring at Izuku, then to Mei, who’s still grinning.

Satoshi lets out a clap of laughter, then continues tearing into his pancakes.

The tension deflates. Shinsou’s body goes lax, and he slumps back into the seat with a sigh. Mei raises an eyebrow, oblivious to the change in mood. Typical.

“I keep telling you, but you never listen.” Mei shoves her face right into Izuku’s bubble of personal space, prodding at his chest with a finger. Her expression is manic, which really means it’s just a little more excited than usual. “Whenever you’re going to do something dramatic, tell me!”

“He’d have to keep an open line with you all the time,” Shinsou says without a beat of hesitation, which is so unfair, why is everyone against Izuku?

It’s difficult to understand how Satoshi and Mei can stay so happy and relaxed when the world’s crumbling to pieces. They’re vigilantes, fugitives of the law, infamous and mysterious, which should warrant stress and caution for any regular human.

Perhaps Satoshi and Mei are actually gods of chaos, laughing as the world burns. At this point, it isn’t outside the realm of possibility.

It becomes abundantly clear that the only reason Shinsou, Satoshi, and Mei are even friends to begin with is because Izuku has dragged each of them into his living nightmare of a mortal existence when they all begin sharing their post-heist experiences (woes).

“I only ran into four walls yesterday,” Satoshi declares, waving his fork in the air triumphantly. “Zing’s been pretty happy with my progress lately. Oh, also, Zing says that your fight with that blue girl was equally hilarious as it was depressing.”
“Thanks,” Izuku says flatly.

Satoshi then declares himself to be less of a medic and more of a tank of sorts, citing his above-average combat abilities and his lack of reliance on a quirk or magic. Mei, of course, takes the declaration as a direct challenge and/or personal offense and launches into an in-depth essay analysis of why she, as the brains of the operation, is actually the most deadly.

Satoshi calls Mei a slave to her gadgets. Mei says that if Satoshi can’t tell the difference between a dysfunctional relationship and an agreement between a genius and her creations then he’s an absolute buffoon, and slavery is horrible and cruel, you fool, have you never heard of mutually beneficial relationships?

While Satoshi and Mei engage in furious but friendly banter, Shinsou slowly turns to Izuku. The emptiness in those eyes drives ice into Izuku’s spine.

“I can’t even sleep properly,” Shinsou says, worrying monotonous. He sways to the side slowly, as if falling, before catching and righting himself. “The bruises. They won’t let me sleep. And the cramps. I have bruises and cramps in places I didn’t even know existed.”

Shinsou’s eyes glaze over for a moment when he receives his coffee. He nurses it silently (vocantly is probably a more accurate description), then lifts the cup up to his lips and downs it in one go.

Izuku watches, mildly horrified. Satoshi grins wickedly, undoubtedly desensitized from Izuku’s own caffeine-chugging habits.

Shinsou slams the mug down on the table and continues to stare past Izuku and into the twelfth dimension. Mei cackles.

“I don’t think that’s particularly healthy,” Izuku says.

“Bite me.” Shinsou’s eyes are trained on something far past the mortal realm.

Fair enough. Who’s Izuku to lecture anyone on personal health, anyway?
“So those grappling guns I’ve been working on are looking absolutely marvelous.” Mei’s hand comes flying up as she rambles about her babies. Izuku shuffles away to avoid receiving a slap to the face. “Sasha’s friends have been testing out the prototypes, and they’re excellent!”

Satoshi’s eyes gleam with an unholy light. “Grappling guns,” he repeats, tone promising destruction, dismemberment, and the threat of death.

“I’ll sign you up for testing,” Mei says, the same horrible light in her eyes.

Between pro heroes, Sakura Cards, and Watanuki, Izuku stares down death on a semi-regular basis, so there really is no good explanation for why he feels such dread watching Mei and Satoshi interact. Perhaps it’s because they’re both clinically insane, morally unstable, and the most accurate representations of chaotic neutrals Izuku’s ever seen. Or perhaps it’s because two enablers make a disaster.

Then there’s Izuku and Shinsou. Saying that Izuku’s a rational, calm individual is the same as saying Shinsou isn’t fantasizing about strangling Izuku with his bare hands.

Perhaps it’s best to simply just say that the four of them make for a rather spectacular disaster squad.

When Izuku receives the bill, he takes a moment to remind himself never to invite all three of his vigilante associates out at once ever again. He doesn’t have the allowance to fill the black holes they have as stomachs.

“So,” Satoshi says, leaning forward as he walks beside Izuku, “What did you want to talk about?”

“Yes, what did you want to talk about?” Mei leans forward and shoves her face directly between Satoshi and Izuku’s.

Izuku pulls Shinsou away from walking directly into a pole. “It’s about – our arrangements,” he explains after a moment of hesitation. “There must be a way for me to contact all of you whenever a card shows up. That way, if I need backup, I won’t get my ass kicked before figuring out an alternative method to take the card down.”

“But it’s so funny, watching you get thrown around!”
“Thanks, Mei,” Izuku says, flatly. His friends are so caring. “But I’ve already broken my ribs twice. Avoiding bodily harm would be nice. And arrest. And death, too.”

Shinsou heaves a deep sigh. “Why is death always an afterthought with you?”

_It’s because I walk the line between life and death so carelessly at this point I can’t tell what’s what, Izuku wants to say. He wisely decides to stay silent._

Mei, for one, decides to ignore Izuku’s complaints about injury, arrest, and death and proceeds directly to asking rapid-fire questions about what sort of functionality Izuku wants in the new communicator.

Izuku says no, he really doesn’t need a new communicator, the DekuComs work fine, he just thinks that they need to figure out a way to organize themselves in a manner fitting for emergencies and other situations that require immediate action.

Shinsou points out that Izuku didn’t explicitly say anything about capturing cards and instead gave the generalization of getting involved in any disasters. He says this in a tone so empty and so dead that Izuku tells Shinsou to consider going home.

Shinsou tells Izuku to go to hell. Fair enough.

“But that interview,” Satoshi says, completely off topic and no doubt attempting to dig an even deeper grave for Izuku. “That was very enlightening. You’re pretty opinionated, aren’t you?”

“I am the voice of the people.” Izuku turns to Satoshi and keeps his voice steady. “The people have spoken.”

“The people have spoken,” Mei parrots. It isn’t meant to be mocking, but it comes out that way. Mei’s social graces never fail to impress. “Deku’s the third coming of our lord and saviour. He’s a messiah. Listen closely, you little fool.”

“Third coming? What happened to the second?”
“You’re looking at her, of course!”

“We’re all going to die,” Shinsou says miserably.

Eventually, after more banter and teasing that Izuku can only handle thanks to years and years of building up a kevlar vest of emotional stability, Mei comes to the conclusion that the DekuComs are satisfactory as they are, and to solve Izuku’s organizational problems, creating a functioning grappling belt is of the highest priority.

Izuku has no idea why Mei insists on making the grappling belts a reality. Mei solves problems by making bigger problems, which is relatable since Izuku does the same, but when two people attempt to solve the same problem by making bigger, more dramatic problems, everything turns to hot garbage.

This is what Izuku tells Mei. Mei responds in turn by saying that while she enjoys chaos, Izuku hates it, and the fact that they’re doing the same thing means they’re just two sides of the same coin.

Satoshi laughs. Shinsou sighs despairingly. Izuku is horrified.

When Izuku tries to press further and convince Mei to do literally anything else, Mei smiles at him and bares her teeth as if challenging him to speak further.

Izuku holds his tongue. It’s probably for the best.

“Here’s something a little more concerning,” Shinsou says. “You just threw yourself out there, into the public, and basically told law enforcement to go fuck itself.”

That’s awfully rude. Izuku didn’t say anything like that. He just kindly suggested that society revamp itself because everything’s fucked.

Izuku kindly suggests this correction. Shinsou isn’t impressed. In fact, he looks even more vacant than before. Izuku wasn’t aware that it was possible to die twice.
In contrast, Satoshi seems excited. “This is actually a great opportunity. After months of mystery, the infamous Deku decides to act first. It’s a great opportunity to filter out what’s true and what’s not.”

Mei claps a hand on Izuku’s shoulder. Her expression is somber. “I understand that you are incapable of processing emotional turmoil and psychological instability past a certain degree; therefore, I will kindly create a Twitter page for you.”

“You’re so kind, Mei,” Satoshi says, wiping an imaginary tear from his eye.

“I am a benevolent god,” is all Mei responds with, and Jesus fucking Christ on a crutch, what is wrong with these people?

Concerned, Izuku turns to Shinsou to assure him that everything will be okay, only to find the exhausted husk of a human being plastered against the fluffy stomach of a bear… fox… thing.

The fluffy beast looks immensely satisfied. It resembles a certain giant grey fictional creature, which is cute, but it also smells of moss and old dirt and decay and something sour and still that’s probably death.

It definitely isn’t human, which means it’s a spirit, which means that to everyone else, Shinsou’s performing the most impressive lean in existence.

However, it also looks like he’s stopped breathing, so Izuku pulls Shinsou out of the furry prison by the collar and keeps a hand on his arm for support.

Shinsou blinks. “I think I may have died for a few seconds,” he says, a bit of light returning to his eyes. Now he looks like himself instead of a pale corpse.

“I prefer to call it a coma of decay,” the fluffy beast interjects.

“No, no, I’m pretty sure that’s still death.” Izuku pulls Shinsou behind him and smiles at the fluffy thing, baring his teeth. “It’s a little early to be coming for either of us.”

A gale blows through the city streets. Hats go flying, papers are torn from hands, and kindly eyes
that bore into Izuku’s soul swirl with black and grey and blue.

The fluffy thing grins. “Oh, you children don’t even know.”

Then it turns and leaves, cutting through the grassy fields of the nearby park. It paints a trail of grey behind it as everything it passes by rots and shrivels, leaving the lingering scent of stagnant, unmistakable death in the air.

For a fraction of a second, as the fluffy beast disappears into nothingness, Izuku catches a glimpse of something tall, shadowy, clawed, horned, adorned with coins, and glowing faintly red from hundreds of eyes.

Ah. There’s the nightmare fuel that’s been strangely absent. Nice to see that some things never change.

Shinsou sighs. Izuku tries to rub the smell of decay off his skin with limited success.

“Nice to see that you aren’t alone in your insanity,” Satoshi says, grinning. He and Mei are both staring at Izuku and Satoshi with identical smiles, teeth bared and eyes shining with interest. It’s so similar to Maru and Moro that it ticks off all the boxes under Uncanny Valley, and oh boy are there a lot of boxes.

For a moment, Izuku considers telling Satoshi and Mei about the Totoro of Death they encountered just a few moments ago. He decides against it, mostly because it isn’t very uplifting and he doesn’t need any more reasons for people to think he’s insane.

Shinsou levels his empty gaze at Satoshi. “I have seen death and I have embraced it.”

“Haven’t we all,” says Shinsou.

Izuku drops his face into his hands. His life is a lie, this is actually hell, he did something horrible in a past life and this is his punishment. “Please, for the love of all that is holy, shut the fuck up.”

For a single magical moment, the others go silent. Satoshi considers Izuku with a thoughtful glance,
Mei raises a single eyebrow, and Shinsou frowns.

“How about we all shuffle off to Sasha’s place,” Mei says, more of a statement than a suggestion.

“An excellent suggestion.” Hooking his arms around Izuku and Shinsou, Satoshi tries on a bright smile that’s a little too genuine to be... well, genuine. “There’s no place to do damage control like home base, right?”

At no point did they decide that Sasha’s workshop is their home base, and the implications of a group of infamous vigilantes setting up camp below the living quarters of a fairly renowned U.A alumna are so bad that they alone are enough to give Izuku nightmares for the next two weeks, but damage control probably is little necessary given the unfortunate circumstances that Izuku has once again created for himself, so all in all, it could be worse.

Mei decides to shatter the illusion that she has advanced her near nonexistent social skills when she grabs Satoshi by the collar, who has yet to release either Izuku or Shinsou’s arms, effectively dragging all three of them in the direction of their newly-determined HQ.

“We’re all going to die,” Shinsou laments, features twisted in some sort of complex emotional pain Izuku doesn’t think is particularly enjoyable to deal with.

“Oh, absolutely,” Mei agrees, and when Hatsume Mei agrees with you, it’s a sign that you’re clinically insane. “But we’ll be going down in the most spectacular, most violent, most explosion-inducing way!”

In the end, because neither Izuku nor Shinsou have any control over their own lives and Satoshi couldn’t care less which direction life pulls him, Mei ends up dragging them through the streets, all while happily recounting her many failed tests involving risk of bodily harm.

Disaster Squad, indeed.

Sasha was in on it.
“It makes sense for you four to make this your base of operations,” Sasha says, nodding along with her own words as if anything she’s saying has even a shred of logic. “Everyone knows that the workshop’s pretty crazy, so a little more crazy will blend right it. I doubt any of you have as much cutting-edge tech as we do, and frankly, you really need an equipment overhaul.”

Mei lets out a scandalized gasp. Well, a scandalized gasp in a Mei-like sense, which means it’s really more of a cry of outrage.

Sasha ignores Mei. Only fools and gods ignore Hatsume Mei. It isn’t difficult to decide which of those two sides of the same coin Sasha fits into.

Sasha seats herself in one of the two neon-coloured, ergonomic chairs in the workshop. The other one currently houses their resident hacker-scientist-engineer. “Besides, I have the almighty Shield of U.A Alumni, which basically makes me exempt from police investigation.”

“And the Certification of Ability to Make WMDs from Children's Toys,” Satoshi adds, tearing the wrapping off a package of matcha biscuits. He grabs a handful of the individually-wrapped snacks and sinks back into his bean chair. “Usually, a search warrant is enough for police to conduct an investigation, but in order to search a support engineer’s workshop, they need to go through way more paperwork than usual.”

Shinsou almost looks surprised. “How do you know that?”

“Satoshi’s aunt is a certified badass,” Izuku explains. The withering look he gets from Shinsou says that Izuku’s explanation is garbage, which, to be fair, it probably is. So, take two: “Satoshi’s aunt is one of the most decorated underground heroes in history.”

That gets Shinsou’s attention. He looks curious instead of murderous, leaning forward in his chair (notably not a bean bag, because dignity and pride or something of the sort that Izuku lost ages ago). “Which one?”

“Little Miss Charlatan, the pride and joy of the public safety bureau,” Sasha answers nonchalantly, tilting her chair onto its back legs.

Apparently finding amusement in her shoddy balancing act, Sasha continues to push herself back even as the chair continues to insist on obeying the laws of gravity and physics. It’s sort of hypnotizing. Or at least it would be if Izuku’s heart rate didn’t jump up every time Sasha pushes
“You can go far with a heroics license, of course, but you can go even further if you decide to take your shiny new licence and skip off to the police force,” Sasha elaborates, glancing over to see a wide-eyed Shinsou.

Satoshi nods as a silent confirmation. He looks sort of smug about it, as if to say, *Yeah, my aunt can kick ass. She’ll kick anyone’s ass. She’ll kick your ass. She’ll kick your dog’s ass. She’ll kick her own ass.*

And then he not-so-silently confirms it by stealing Izuku’s thoughts and verbalizing them. Like, word-for-word. Their bond has apparently dipped into the mind-reading level, which Izuku wasn’t aware existed up until now.

Then Sasha shines a little more light on the hero-slash-spy that is Charlatan by running through a shockingly accurate recap of some of the biggest events in Charlatan’s career, including the time she helped bust Japan’s largest drug cartel, the time she took down the terrorist who almost killed the Prime Minister, the time she was left to her own devices and managed to crack a decade-long cold case, the time she fought God Himself and walked out unscathed, etc.

By the end of it, Shinsou’s shock has faded into something reminiscent of confusion. He turns to Satoshi and says, “That’s your aunt.”

“That’s Zing,” Satoshi confirms, lifting his chin proudly.

Shinsou stares, looking Satoshi up and down. His confusion only grows. “What happened to you, then?”

For the first time, Shinsou succeeds in shocking Satoshi into silence. The two stare at each other, engrossed in a silent battle, probably crossing swords in their minds. Sasha steps in between them and clears her throat because she’s the only adult in the room.

“That’s Zing,” she says, practically prying Satoshi and Shinsou apart from where they’re attempting to freeze each other over with their eyes, “even if the police want to investigate me, we’ll know about it immediately—” a mischievous glance at Mei, reinforcing the fact that there are two very competent hackers in the room with them—“and even then, it’ll take them at least a few weeks to get all the legal jargon out of the way. By then, we’ll have disposed of or moved everything.”
“Avoiding arrest is fun,” Mei quips cheerfully.

Avoiding arrest is, in fact, not fun, but Izuku doesn’t have the courage or the energy to argue, so he settles for apathetically downing his entire cup of tea in one go. Typical.

Meanwhile, Mei grabs Satoshi and drags him over to her setup, where she eagerly pulls up Twitter and begins gesticulating wildly, saying something about media coverage and fans and other things that sound equally as terrifying.

On the other side of the room, Sasha’s somehow looped Shinsou into picking out aspects of underground heroes’ costumes he likes in order to make improvements to his own costume. Unsurprisingly, Shinsou pulls up a file on Eraserhead’s costume and begins listing off points that sound a little too practiced to be on-the-spot choices.

Izuku simply sits between the two groups, staring down at his now-empty cup.

This is his life now.

It’s been – what, seven months? Eight months? Regardless, it’s been a while since Izuku first was thrust into the world of magic and vigilantism, and a lot has happened, but... a lot hasn’t happened.

He hasn’t gotten arrested, which is a huge surprise. He’s had some close calls – some very close calls – but the fact that he isn’t behind bars is nothing short of a miracle.

Adara hasn’t asked for any favours, either. In fact, ever since Izuku broke out of questioning, he hasn’t seen the flame faerie once. It doesn’t do anything good for Izuku’s tendency to overthink, but at least he isn’t. You know. Dead in a ditch somewhere.

None of the answers he wants have come to light yet. That’s unlikely to change anytime soon, with the plethora of people who’d rather let Izuku rot then answer a simple yes-or-no question that make up the world of magic. There’s no doubt he’s getting closer to the answers – doing Watanuki some favours is also doing Izuku some favours, ha – but at this point, he’s more or less given up on understanding the entire story. If he ever gets it, that is.
And there’s one thing that’s even more concerning than all of the above.

He hasn’t told his mother about... all of this.

Izuku sucks in a deep breath. It’s so loud that Sasha takes a moment to glance at him over her shoulder, but apparently Izuku doesn’t look like he’s close enough to a mental breakdown for her to make a scene over it, so she turns back and continues to converse animatedly with Shinsou.

Ever since being diagnosed as quirkless, Izuku hasn’t spent much time at home. It’s not that he doesn’t want to. Between errands, favours, and a crippling inability to turn down requests from anyone and everyone, he is literally physically incapable of staying home. There’s – there’s just always so much and not enough time to do all of it.

(And even beyond that, there’s the fact that one of Izuku’s earliest wishes was to become a hero.

Time has passed, things have... gotten a little complicated, but there’s no way in hell, heaven, or whatever plane of existence all things holy and unholy exist that Izuku will ever lose his desire to help.

Give help where it’s needed, offer help even when it’s not spoken, if you aren’t suffering but others are, then you have an obligation to help.

That obligation is what gets Izuku out of bed on the worst of days. Because if he doesn’t get out there, then who the hell is he?)

His mother was the one who fueled Izuku’s desire to get out into the world. It’s what good mothers do, right? They support their children? They pick them up when they trip and fall? They give them new dreams when the old ones have shattered?

Izuku isn’t sure. What he is sure of is that Midoriya Inko is loving and caring and the very definition of a good mother, and if he drags her into this world of vigilantism and magic and unanswered questions, he’ll be destroying the peaceful life that his mother rightfully deserves.

And who the hell is Izuku to take a peaceful life away from anyone, let alone his own mother?
(He’s a goddamn fool. He’s done it so many times that it almost seems like people are actively throwing themselves into his life, and keeping them out is utterly exhausting.)

If his mother finds out about... all this, then Izuku will just have to do what he always does and cross that bridge when he comes to it. Or burn it. Burning the bridge sounds pretty good as well.

“Well, guinea pig?” A gloved hand circles around his shoulder as Mei’s face and voice rudely derail his train of thought. “What do you think?”

Izuku frowns. He tries to shrug away from Mei, only to be pulled in closer. “About what?”

“About refitting you all with better gear,” Sasha says, probably very familiar with Izuku’s tendency to flee to another plane of existence to think when things get messy. “If you really want to get involved with the media more, that means you’re going to have to get out there a lot more. So, to ensure your safety...”

Sasha turns, smacks a hand against what appears to be a projection of a collage of sketches and blueprints, and smiles a smile so bright and wide and wild that Izuku can feel the flames of hell licking at his heels.

“I hope you like testing,” Mei sing-songs, giving a frighteningly accurate portrayal of the Devil. Or God. For all Izuku knows, there’s no difference.

Satoshi offers a thumbs-up and an ill-fitting smile when Izuku looks to him for help. Shinsou’s no help either, given that he’s currently trying his best to become a rock.

Weakly, Izuku says, “This doesn’t sound like damage control.”

“No one can contain the kind of bombshell’s you’re dropping,” Sasha tells him, which is the literal worst. “You’re carving all kinds of holes in society, you know? You’re blasting apart the nasty and cracking into the gems underneath.” With a brilliant smile, Sasha spreads her arms. “The entire world has its eyes on you, Deku, so you’d better give them a show worth watching!”

That’s just a figure of speech. Sasha’s just exaggerating again for dramatic effect. Surely–
“You’re trending in Japan, America, Germany, and...” Leaning closer to the monitor, Satoshi’s eyes widen. “Oh, wow. I didn’t even know so many people used Twitter.”

Ah.

A burning train carriage falls out of the sky and crushes Izuku, killing him instantly.

God, if only.

When Izuku becomes aware of himself, he’s on the ground, his legs hugged closely to his chest, head lolling to the side like he’s some helpless infant. He faintly processes Shinsou prodding at his shoulder, but most of Izuku’s mental power is currently being used to keep him conscious and breathing.

While Izuku’s world is falling apart around him, Sasha walks over and scans the screen – why is she taking so long to read it? Why is it taking so long?

“I suppose it makes sense,” she says, like it makes sense, which it doesn’t. “People have been expecting you to make a statement for a while now, and the police have been pretty hot on your tail.”

The police. Of course the police are interested, because out of everyone and everything that wants to make Izuku’s life as miserable as possible, the police are the only ones who have a legitimate reason.

After all, anyone who can take down the villain who managed to pummel twenty-so heroes would obviously be of interest to a society that loves drama, action, and all things loud and shiny.

Satoshi frowns, leaning back, one leg crossed over the other. “It’s a bit worrying, though. All these countries—” a flippant wave toward the screen, as if it’s nothing too serious – “have major heroics organizations that work with the government and police.”

Not an hour ago, Izuku wasn’t aware it was possible to die twice.

He takes it back. He now knows it’s possible to die twice. He’s done it himself.
“You certainly look happy about the news,” Satoshi drawls. He raises an eyebrow, leveling a questioning gaze at Izuku. “Do you need a shovel to dig your grave, or would you like me to do it for you?”

Ha, ha. Very funny.

“I’ll do it.” The world may be a burning, tragic mess, but Izuku’s nothing if he doesn’t have snarky comebacks. “You’re probably too busy, following me with a pen and paper, waiting to take down my last words and time of death.”

“Oh my god,” Shinsou says in a tone so flat Izuku can’t tell if he’s being serious or not. “Why are you two like this?”

Izuku and Satoshi both offer up victory signs. Sasha laughs, and so does Mei, making it a four-on-one. Shinsou, probably knowing very well that he stands no chance against a child maniac, an adult maniac, the ultimate spectator-turned-player, and the most unfortunate human in existence, turns back to the costume designs and does his best to pretend that none of them exist.

Shinsou’s such a rational person. Izuku feels bad for him. Well, he’ll lose that common sense eventually. It’s for his own sake, really.

“I can’t help but feel like this is a sort of lead up to the storm,” Sasha hums, eyes flicking over to an adjacent monitor where Mei’s pulled up what appears to be a spreadsheet that updates every few seconds. “We’ve been following your previous escapades, but none of them have ever reached the level of attention you’re getting now.”

And that is quite strange, isn’t it?

What was it about Izuku’s duel with Fight that captured so much attention? The battle itself wasn’t anything fancy or over-the-top. In fact, Fight’s probably the most villain-like card Izuku’s captured yet. No fancy effects or giant spells. Just a boy with two swords and a card with a violent streak.

So it’s only logical to assume that it was the postmortem – Izuku’s hasty and very idiotic decision to be interviewed by a civilian – that garnered so much attention.
Even then, a single interview with a vigilante isn’t anything the entire world should be drooling over. Yes, Izuku let his mouth run a little too much, but everything he said was just an abridged version of what his friends have been saying for years now.

Then, if that’s the case—

Is there something else at play here that he’s not aware of?

A series of rapid-fire typing interrupts Izuku’s thoughts. Mei frowns as she pulls something up on yet another monitor, eyes flicking from one screen to another like she’s putting together some sort of elaborate, horrible puzzle. “As much as I’d like to believe that Deku has captivated the entire world, there are some very peculiar things I’ve noticed.”

Sasha sighs, crossing her arms. “You too?”

Mei nods, shifting so they all have a view of the screen. She points at a line of text. “See this user here?”

Everyone except Sasha moves in to get a better look. @frostyboi. A generic, uninteresting Twitter handle.

“Frosty here has been a fan for a while now. Going by their posts, I’d say they’ve been following Deku since mid-September.”

Izuku startles. God – September? The only cards he had back then were Fly and Rain, and all he was to the public back then was some mysterious character who managed to take down a troublesome villain. To the general public, he was, for lack of a better description, a one-hit wonder.

And then Watery happened.

It appears Mei notices Izuku’s confusion, because she nods and pulls up a screen of numbers, dates, and posts relating to @frostyboi that Izuku doesn’t really understand. “Nothing too strange, really. What’s another Deku fan, right?”
“But there was one post in particular that seemed a little strange,” Sasha says, moving to hover over Mei’s shoulder. “Where is it... ah. This one right here.”

oreo mcflurry pls @frostyboi

doesn’t seem like anyone really understands deku... it’s hard enough to try to force change in a society that doesn’t want to change... maybe if deku teamed up with villains it would be easier :/

Izuku reads the post, then rereads for good measure.

As much as he hates seeing anything about himself online, by the way Sasha and Mei are acting, it’s better that he take things seriously. Any semblance of calm from geniuses with questionable sanity warrants caution.

“Okay,” Izuku begins, taking a deep breath. Just think rationally, but don’t overthink too much. That’s all he needs to do. Keep calm. How hard can that be? “Nothing too surprising, considering that a lot of people still think I’m a villain. Are you sure you’re not reading into it a little too much?”

Sasha smiles. The first sign of insanity: when a smile and dangerous calm instill the same amount of fear. God, that’s scary. “You’re absolutely right for asking. And normally, I’d say of course, it’s just the a random post on Twitter, don’t worry about it too much.”

Izuku’s heart sinks. He tries to look like he hasn’t died for the third time in one day. “Normally,” he parrots, scathing and tired all at once.

“Normally,” Sasha confirms. “But we’ve been seeing a trend in Frosty’s tweets. Most of your fans go through an altered Kübler-Ross model – denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance, as it usually goes, except it’s more along the lines of denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally some borderline creepy, obsessive, protective oh what a precious cinnamon roll kind of stan culture.”

“So normal stan culture,” Satoshi says, monotonous.

“Yes,” Sasha agrees, a little too quickly for Izuku’s liking. “The only people who deviate from that model are bots, trolls, and haters, as usual.”

Izuku has had many bad days before, but Sasha’s gunning to make today the worst on record. He’d
like to say something in opposition, maybe a snarky remark or a modest *I'm sure it's not that bad*, but he doesn’t trust himself enough to keep the hysterics in if he runs his mouth.

Instead, Izuku settles for a strangled noise right there in between a goose getting mauled and one of those screaming rubber chickens. Mei laughs.

“I’m going to go on a limb here and say that Frosty doesn’t follow that pattern,” Satoshi says.

“It’s more than just that.” Sasha reaches over to mash something on the keyboard. Mei leans out of the way like it’s second nature. “Frosty’s a strange person. They definitely support you, but every few posts, they throw in something like, *I wish he was working with the villains or maybe the villains will listen to him.*”

And that’s strange because if people really understood Deku, they would listen to how he’s been vehemently denying any affiliation with villains or the yakuza and see how he’s taken down an underground fighting ring literally run by the yakuza.

Villainy clashes with Deku’s ideals head-on. At this point, there’s no denying it.

It goes unsaid, but the glances that Izuku sees being thrown around show that everyone in the room understands.

Mei nods as soon as she confirms that everyone’s on the same page. “Our algorithm for identifying potential threats caught Frosty right away, so of course we dug around a little more, found an IP address, tracked a mobile device, found the call history, the usual.”

Definitely unusual, but Izuku isn’t going to say that. “And?”

There’s a moment of silence in which Sasha and Mei exchange knowing looks. Izuku can practically hear the silent conversation: *Do you want to tell him?* and *Well, do you want to tell him?*

In the end, it seems that it’s Sasha who takes responsibility, being older and a little more sane than Mei.
Sasha turns around, an eyebrow raised and a hand on her hip. She gestures to the screen more pompously than usual. “I’d say Frosty doesn’t exactly understand how to use a burner phone.”

A page of phone numbers – yes, that’s certainly a call history. It feels like a massive breach of privacy, but at this point, morality’s just one big sea of grey and Izuku’s drowning in it.

Plus, if Sasha and Mei are going this hard to investigate one user, Izuku would like to believe that they’re doing it because Frosty might actually pose a threat and not because invasion of privacy is like, a hobby or anything.

“That’s a lot of area codes,” Satoshi murmurs, snatching the mouse and scrolling through the page. “A lot of international calls, actually. And–” An extended pause. “I think I recognize some of these numbers.”

Izuku turns to face Satoshi, thoroughly surprised. “You do?”

“Yeah,” Satoshi answers, slowly and hesitantly, like he’s unsure of himself. As he scrolls through the list, he points to specific lines. “This one’s for the European Board of Heroics, this one’s for the RCMP, Heroics Division, this one’s for Asian Board of Heroics, Southeast Region, and–”

Satoshi breaks off. His eyes widen, and Izuku feels a sense of impending doom.

“And this,” Satoshi says, turning to Izuku, “is for the Japanese Board of Heroics, Central Region.”

Ah. That’s... an interesting piece of information.

From what Izuku knows, some pro heroes prefer having two phones: one for personal use, and the other for business. For underground and popular heroes, it’s practically a necessity. And even outside of heroics, there are plenty of people who own burners, if not for business, then for convenience. The fact that the list is littered with what appear to be business-related calls certainly supports the hypothesis of a burner.

Izuku frowns. So whoever was using the burner also used it to run a Twitter account. Ironically, from the content of the account, the business burner was used for a casual, probably secondary Twitter account.
That doesn’t make much sense, does it? Keeping a personal account on a burner instead of a personal phone is strange, isn’t it?

It would make sense under some circumstances. For example, if Frosty worked for an international organization and wasn’t important enough to need an official business account, or, for some reason, they absolutely didn’t want their personal account to be traced back to their person.

Then again, if they’re going to be that cautious, why even run the risk of being traced via Twitter?

Besides, why would somebody be in contact with so many different heroics associations? Even heroes like All Might have no reason to be in frequent contact with international heroics organizations.

In fact, the only heroes that Izuku knows have to keep in touch with international associations so frequently are the ones who walk the line of pro hero and spy, like Zing, because they need to ask for classified information–

Oh. That’s an interesting possibility, isn’t it?

An underground hero running a burner for business, either new to the game or just not very bright, passing the time by making a casual Twitter account on the phone they’re forced to have on their person at all times.

It could be any of the other viable possibilities, of course. But the past seven months have trained Izuku to always assume the worst, because it’s usually the worst that ends up becoming a reality.

And. If things really start to go downhill.

What kind of hero – especially an underground hero – wishes for villainy?

Izuku can feel the ground crumble and fall from under him. He stands there for a moment, locked in limbo, before his limbs ultimately fail him and he falls to the ground, dazed.
This certainly spells out disaster, doesn’t it?

As Izuku chants up a storm of *keep calm, keep calm* under his breath, Mei takes over once again, knocking Satoshi’s hand away to take the mouse back. “We noticed this, of course. Given the situation, we came to two possible conclusions.”

Sasha holds up one finger. “Conclusion A: Frosty’s involved with international heroics, perhaps working in PR or HR, and isn’t high enough on the food chain to have to worry about keeping multiple social media accounts.”

Okay, logical, but—

“No self-respecting PR or HR employee would work off a cellphone,” Satoshi points out. “And at the point where they would bother to use a cell, they wouldn’t exactly be a grunt anymore.”

“That’s right,” Sasha agrees.

Izuku drops his face into his hands. So that means Conclusion B is—

Sasha holds up a second finger, looking as grim as Izuku’s ever seen her. “Conclusion B,” she says, voice unnervingly flat, “is that we have an underground pro hero with a penchant for villany.”

Izuku tries his best not to cry.

“Or,” Mei says, “worst case scenario, we have a mole.”

A mole. Yes, that would make sense.

Oh, merciful God, fuck you and your divine machinations.

Shinsou pats Izuku’s back in a surprise act of solidarity. When Izuku turns to face Shinsou, he’s met with the most sympathetic expression he’ll ever see on Shinsou’s face.
“God is dead,” Shinsou says, monotonous. “God is dead, God remains dead, we’ve killed him.”

“Nietzsche's only good for out-of-context quotes,” Izuku says miserably, feeling as if he’s on fire and freezing to death all at once.

While Shinsou does his best to comfort him (strangely reminiscent of comforting an animal, like a cat, which is a detail that Izuku shoves into the darkest corners of his mind), Mei, Sasha, and Satoshi engage in furious discussion of what that means for the team, as logical people do.

Satoshi wears a frown throughout the conversation. He asks very valid questions, including but not limited to: what connection does Frosty have to the media frenzy? Is there a connection at all? If there is, shouldn’t we be concerned given the scale of the problem?

Mei, for once, looks upset as well. Whether it’s because of the problematic situation or her inability to answer Satoshi’s questions is unclear. She still gives answers:

- There has to be a connection; I’ve tracked down clones of Frosty’s account in the primary languages of all the countries Deku’s trending in.
- Frosty had a huge follower surge overnight, but most of the new followers were bots or accounts tracking back to some pretty sketchy people! Tons of calls to businesses that work with a front.
- Anyway, I cross-referenced Frosty’s call history with their followers’. You’d be shocked at how many are the same! In particular, there was this one number that a lot of Japanese bots and followers have contacted at least once or twice. I wanted to poke a bit more, but, well, I’m not about to reach in and get bit, you know what I’m saying?
- And those bots I was talking about – well, I can tell that it’s the handiwork of someone who knows what they’re doing. Finally, some decent competition!

Ahem. So. As I was saying. It’s bound to be an issue, right?

With that bombshell thoroughly dropped and blown to high heaven, Sasha steps in and takes the reins:

- It’s undoubtedly strange, and I think we’re dealing with something pretty serious.
- I had some bots call the numbers. The responses were... well. They were pretty suspicious. I’m no pro hero, though, so I’ll need to get someone with experience to verify the samples I got.
- I’m pretty sure part of the reason Deku’s trending all over the globe is because these bots and followers are mass-tweeting all at once. At least, the bots are. So the question remains: why now, for what purpose, and who’s the one orchestrating it all?
• For all we know, Frosty could be a media presence that villains are building up to manipulate, and let me tell you, I’ve heard of some pretty nasty cyber-villains. Technokinesis isn’t fun to deal with.

We have to tread carefully.

After all that, Satoshi stares. Then he laughs, dropping back into his chair.

“Wow,” he chuckles, the back of his hand covering his eyes, his entire body shaking with nervous laughter, “what have we gotten ourselves into?”

Izuku’s still in the staring at nothing stage.

That – what – what the hell?

So they’re facing some unknown villain force who has the ability to manipulate worldwide opinion? Why on earth would they back Deku, a vigilante, of all people?

This can’t end well.

While Izuku astral projects, Mei and Sasha argue furiously.

“It doesn’t concern you,” Sasha says firmly. “Let me handle it.”

Reasonable. Sasha’s a respected support engineer with plenty of contacts in the heroics field. It’s best to let the pros handle it, both figuratively and literally.

“If Frosty really is a mole, then it does concern us because they’re interested in Deku,” Satoshi argues. “What if they try to contact us in the future? We need to have a plan.”

Again, reasonable. A mole is bad enough, but a mole that’s been following Deku’s career a little too closely for anyone to be comfortable? A mole with a wide and varied following of sketchy people? Awful, horrible, the actual worst. A contingency plan is the bare minimum they need.
“We have no definitive proof,” Mei points out. “If anything, we should determine who exactly we’re dealing with, and then find out who they’re working for.”

Reasonable once more. All they’re doing right now is pulling conclusions out of the dark. They have data and evidence, yes, but they’re still reaching for something that might not exist. With more investigation, more research, they’ll be able to work out exactly who they’re up against and figure out if they need to get Frosty arrested, and if they do, how to get Frosty arrested without getting arrested themselves.

Izuku stares up at the ceiling desparingly.

How have the craziest people in the room become the most reasonable? Is Izuku the only one who feels like he’s been abandoned by God?

Then Shinsou heaves a sigh, deep and heavy, and then Izuku remembers that not all hope is lost.

Sasha frowns disapprovingly. She crosses her arms and narrows her eyes; a scene Izuku’s very familiar with, given that his own mother uses it to silently say, *I am your mother, I know more than you, and I know that you are doing something very foolish right now.*

Apparently it has the same effect on Mei, because she bristles. “It’s my algorithm,” she says. “We’re going to get to the bottom of this!”

“This isn’t just some puzzle,” Sasha warns. “I’ll help you, and I’ll support you, but I won’t let you do something when I know you’ll get hurt.”

“You underestimate me.”

“I think I’m estimating you just fine.”

As beautiful as it is to see that Sasha truly cares for Mei and isn’t a pureblood madman, it’s also immensely worrying to see the two of them argue. They’re in a workshop in which half-finished weapons and tools are scattered around haphazardly, and Izuku really doesn’t feel like blowing up today.
“How about this,” Izuku says, picking himself off the ground and placing himself in between the two engineers. “We won’t devote all our time to this since we have more immediate problems, may I remind you of magic cards and the police—”

Sasha grins. Mei glares.

“—but we will investigate, since it doesn’t only affect us; it’s also a huge issue for the pros. I know that Deku – I know that I’m not a huge fan of collaborating with the authorities, but I don’t want to be the one responsible for whatever fallout might come from this mess. If we do have a mole, then we won’t just sit on our hands and wait to see what happens.”

Sasha frowns. Mei brightens.

“To clear things up, we’ll talk to Zing—” A glance and a nod to Satoshi, who returns both – “because if there’s anything who should know, it’s her.” Izuku pauses, then looks around at his audience. “Does that sound okay?”

Mei sighs, disappointed. “I suppose it’s workable.”

Sasha shifts, clearly unsure. For a moment, Izuku’s worried that she’ll shoot him down, but instead, she sighs as well.

“No investigating while I’m gone,” she says firmly. Upon Mei’s protest, Sasha narrows her eyes. “It’s with me or not at all. Am I clear?”

“Crystal,” Satoshi says. He looks at Mei expectantly, giving her a not-so-subtle nudge with his elbow.

Grudgingly, Mei nods. It’s a sharp jerk, not at all sincere, but it is what it is. Her shoulders hunch and she swivels around in her chair.

“Fine,” she hisses.

And, thank the Lord, Sasha finally looks satisfied.
And so they all scatter, leaving to return to their own problems. Sasha’s the one that herds them out, saying something about doing some more research before kicking it up to eleven, while Mei ensures that she’ll multitask as hard as she can to bring her vision of grappling belts to life.

Satoshi promises to talk to Zing and to text them everything soon. In a surprise twist, Shinsou also says that he’ll try to get some answers out of Eraserhead.

Izuku leaves as well, steeling himself to interrogate either Yuto or Plume in hopes of getting word from the source. Everyone else is doing their parts; it’s only right that Izuku throws himself into this mess as well.

Then he remembers that he promised to meet up with Happy Sharkboy Kirishima. The only reason he doesn’t walk straight into traffic is because it’d be a real hassle for everyone. You know, corpse in the street and all.

He’d love to relax. At this rate, the only time he’ll ever be able to have peace is when he’s dead or arrested. And really, what kind of shit hand is that?

By Kirishima’s suggestion, Izuku ends up making a detour to a nearby park for their first meeting.

It’s a very nice park, with plenty of open space for whatever activities park-goers might desire. There’s even a pond and a little shrine. It’s a beautiful day, really. Almost enough for Izuku to forget the hell he just crawled out of, but alas, he never forgets.

Izuku finds a bench and fires off a quick text to both Kirishima and his old phone at home. Kero’s probably getting a little antsy; it’s been a few hours and Izuku hasn’t updated him.

And, because Izuku can never avoid it, he swipes into his to-do list after a brief moment of hesitation.

**THIS LIST WILL NEVER BE EMPTY, WILL IT**

1. find new story to tell Yorihiko’s demon children, this time w/o so much violence, they’re so scary oh god
2. convince faculty to move extra help periods to a larger room, how easy do you think classics is?? huh?? fuckers
3. get more Fancy Beans for Mira, which means another trip to Ginza, how wonderful
4. probs should pick up some stuff for Kero as well? lmao should bring him to Akihabara and watch his tiny head explode
5. scout out “the competition” for Sasha, literally why, Eri’s place is in Kyoto, what kind of competition is there
6. pick up Fancy Dice because someone threw the last ones out the window, just bc you suck as a bard doesn’t mean you get to defenestrate anything you want, Riku
7. restock on dog treats, goddammit Rin control your Good Boy, do you know how much food Hiro’s stolen off me, what the hell
8. check in on everyone affected from the Fight fight, lmao Fight fight that’s funny, but seriously do i need to organize another fundraiser
9. help Ms. Kino repair her bike again, how much does she use that bike if it keeps breaking so often
10. fucking Watanuki. fucking favours something something price something something might as well just kill me now
11. give coupons to Tsubame, jesus christ how many coupons does one woman need, at this point you’d better be getting stuff for free

And many other assorted items about running around and doing favours, paying back favours, getting involved in even more activities around the city, etc.

Yes, that sounds about right.

“Hey! Are you Midoriya Izuku?”

And there’s number 12 on his list: Kirishima’s private training sessions, which sounds so outlandish and ridiculous that Izuku has to remind himself that yes, his life really is as awful as he makes it out to be.

At least Kirishima’s having a much better day, if his brilliant smile and cheerful demeanor are any indication. Izuku squints, and not just because it’s sunny out. “Yes, that’s me.”

Kirishima’s smile widens. “Awesome! Zing’s told me a lot about you, but it’s great you finally meet you in person!”

Ah. Of course. Even though Izuku’s met Kirishima before, Kirishima hasn’t met Izuku before. He’s met Deku, and Izuku and Deku are most definitely different people, no resemblance at all, any similarities are just tricks of the mind and nothing more.
Izuku clears his throat as naturally as possible. “I – yes. It’s... nice to meet you too.”

Wow. Don’t sound too excited, now.

Fortunately, Kirishima’s the living embodiment of sunshine, so he simply smiles brightly. “Yeah! So how much has Zing told you about me?”

“Oh,” Izuku says, leaning in to get a better look. “Not just your standard hardening, then?”

Kirishima shrugs. “I’m not sure what ‘standard hardening’ is, so I have no idea.”

Hardening isn’t really the best description of Kirishima’s quirk. Standard hardening would consist of reinforcement by changing the density or composition of one’s body, which obviously is great for defensive options, but not so versatile for offense.

But Kirishima’s arm sure looks sharp as hell, and if Izuku’s hypothesis about the scar above his eye is right, then this Hardening quirk is a rare middle ground between offense and defense that Izuku rarely sees.

“I’ll be honest with you, Kirishima,” Izuku says, backing away. At Kirishima’s fearful expression, he
cracks a smile. “You have incredible potential to outdo most of the pro heroes on the scene today.”

The sheer elation that bursts onto Kirishima’s face is so stunning that Izuku has to remind himself that people can, in fact, feel immense joy unrelated to the alleviation of suffering.

“As I was saying,” Izuku continues, “it might not seem like we have a lot to work with, but the simplest of quirks are always the easiest to work with. The better the foothold, the better the climb.”

“Wow,” says Kirishima, eyes sparkling. “That’s – that’s such a good quote. Bro, that’s such a good workout quote. I’m going to write that on a poster and put it up on my wall.”

Because Izuku feels like he needs to say something in response, he settles for, “Oh. Sure. Okay.” Then he immediately wants to lop his tongue off.

But Kirishima looks like he’s feeling all the joy in the world at once, so Izuku summons his best impression of Zing’s hardassness and Watanuki’s careful realism.

“The better the foothold, the better the climb,” Izuku repeats. Kirishima nods along enthusiastically. “But don’t get me wrong: the climb gets better, not easier. Working with quirks is hard no matter how talented you are or how powerful your quirk is.” Clenching his fist, Izuku thinks of inheritance and incredible and power and how much of an absolute burden it all is. “You’re lucky to have not only a straightforward quirk, but an incredibly versatile one as well.”

There’s something about the way that Kirishima’s staring that makes Izuku a little uncomfortable. It’s too reverent, like Izuku’s the one and only true god, and it’s so misguided that Izuku has an urge to do something incredibly stupid to make it clear that he’s really just a mess of a human being.

Before he can decide on a course of action, Kirishima says, “But your quirk is pretty awesome too!”


“The circle thing,” Kirishima elaborates, and Izuku feels like he’s just stuck his head in front of a passing train.
Underneath him is a very familiar circle. Moon, sun, star, pillars, kanji – it’s all accounted for, which means that Izuku’s currently giving Kirishima a front-row seat into his secret identity.

In a furious motion of stomping reminiscent of an elephant attempting to kill a snake, Izuku manages to get the circle to dissipate. He has no idea how it appeared, why it appeared, and how he dismissed it, but his attention isn’t exactly focused on those issues at the moment.

“Ah,” Izuku starts, struggling to get a cap on the bubbling panic he feels underneath his skin. “That. It’s just.” He pauses, frantically searching for a logical explanation. “You see–”

“I get it,” Kirishima says.

Izuku almost swallows his tongue. “You what?”

Nodding, Kirishima crosses his arms. He seems quite satisfied with whatever conclusion he’s come to, which sort of makes Izuku want to leap off the nearest bridge.

Izuku’s just about to prepare yet another convoluted explanation into how he and everyone around him as a tendency to get dragged into the whims of fate when Kirishima laughs, loud and bright. “Your quirk’s really similar to Deku’s magic, right? That’s why you prefer to go as quirkless.”

“Um,” says Izuku.

There’s something horrible about the way Kirishima manages to create the illusion of a quirk for Izuku. Avoiding prosecution and arrest is wonderful, yes, but watching Kirishima delve deeper and deeper into his delusion is strikingly similar to watching a cat run itself into a glass door over and over again.

Perhaps they’re all just cats, running themselves into glass doors. That’s one hell of a metaphor for life: a carousel of glass doors, just waiting to be run into by some stumbling fool.

In an impressive act of philosophizing his way out of a moral crisis, Izuku clears his throat and shifts his stance. There are many things he could say, but he decides on, “It’s... complicated.”
"I get it," Kirishima says, so earnestly that Izuku feels the Blade of Good pierce his bleeding, grey heart.

Luckily, this isn’t Izuku’s first rodeo. Sure, it makes his heart clench up to stack yet another lie onto the Leaning Tower of Deceit, but it’s better than telling a hero-in-training that he’s one of the most notorious vigilantes in recent memory.

“My quirk’s ridiculously complicated and difficult to use,” Izuku lies, putting on his best smile. It falters, shaky and most definitely unsure, but he pushes onward. “And, as you can probably tell, using it nowadays is just asking for misunderstandings.”

Kirishima looks devastated. “Oh man, that sucks. I’m so sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Izuku says hastily. “But enough about me. Should we get started?”

After repeated reassurances (yes, I’m fine, it’s fine, everything’s okay, I don’t even use my quirk to begin with), Kirishima finally lets the subject drop.

But, for the final blow, Kirishima looks Izuku dead in the eye, burning with determination. “I really appreciate what you’re doing for me.”

It takes an incredible amount of energy not to pass out right then and there. “No problem,” Izuku says, feeling faint.

“Don’t go easy on me,” Kirishima finally demands, pulling up a full-body activation of his quirk. He looks even more fired up than before, which shouldn’t be humanly possible. “Since you’re giving it your all, I will too!”

Izuku can’t bring him to meet Kirishima’s gaze, both because he’s far too tired and too guilty to partake in such a... righteous exchange. That’s the only way to describe the aura that Kirishima gives off.

“Then,” Izuku starts, licking his chapped lips, “let’s get down to business. To defeat the U.A entrance exam or something, ha.”
Kirishima laughs good-naturedly despite Izuku’s awful attempt at humour. “I guess so!”

Jesus Christ, how has Izuku dug such a deep grave for himself?

“Oh, merciful God, I beg of you, smite me down with your holy light. With haste, please.”

Satoshi cocks a brow. He rests his baton over his shoulder. “I didn’t think you would be so pious.”

“I pray to God in an attempt to wrest any mercy I can from his all-powerful hands,” says Izuku flatly. “And then I curse him for willing me into existence when I don’t get anything back.”

“Sounds about right,” Satoshi laughs, picking up a book and placing it back onto the shelf.

Breaking into the Musutafu Public Library (Central Branch, not University Branch, god, that would’ve been a nightmare and a half) wasn’t something Izuku expected to be a byproduct of being a cardcaptor, but he’s in the process of understanding that nothing that happens in his life can be predicted in any way, shape, or form. Fuck you, determinism.

This time, though, they’re out of the public eye. Just a little break-in, a little cleanup, and no one will know they were ever in the library at all.

“By the way,” Satoshi says, looking around the room for security cameras, “I thought you said passive cards were supposed to be peaceful.”

Izuku stares flatly. “Neither of us are bleeding or broken.”

“Point taken. But you’re not fooling anyone if you try to say that the past two hours have been enjoyable.”

“Silent’s one of those cards that’s better at dealing mental damage rather than physical,” Kero says, heaving a book onto a table with considerable effort. Panting, he sags down, resting on the cover. “Between – between Silent and Time, I think you’d probably be able to drive someone insane.”
“Me,” Izuku deadpans.

“You were insane to begin with,” Kero states flatly.

“We’re all crazy here,” Satoshi quips sunnily.

Then they spend the next hour attempting to erase any traces they may have left. While Satoshi goes to scrub the cameras clean of their footage (with Mei’s guidance, of course), Kero tries his best to rearrange the encyclopedias with limited success. Izuku helps him out, mumbling notes to himself the whole time in preparation for his math test tomorrow. Or, actually, in nine hours.

And that just about sums up their screwed-up team dynamic. But hey, free soundproofing, which is a major plus to this not-so-legal escapade.

The very next day, Watanuki calls Izuku over to the Wish-Granting Shop.

“I have a job for you,” he says, then hangs up.

Izuku sighs. Kero mimics it almost perfectly. There’s really nothing they can do but comply.

“What,” is all Izuku deadpans when Watanuki opens the door for him.

“Pick up an album for me,” says Watanuki with a smile.

“I hate you,” Izuku says, slamming the sliding door shut. He feels very smug for a fraction of a second only to find that Watanuki has somehow written the title, artist, and price of the album on his right arm with what appears to be permanent marker.

Kero stares. Then he turns around and points forward.
“To the music store,” is all he provides, because really, what else can he say?

At the very least, the warming weather and pink-painted sidewalks are a welcome reminder that even in all this chaos, the world is still turning, spring has come, life is continuing as it should be for most, and there’s something beautiful and meaningful about that. It’s a sort of kinder philosophy that Izuku finds himself lacking in these trying times, and he’ll take whatever he can get. It’s the small things that count.

The trip is as anticlimactic as it can be, which means that Izuku only runs into a few people he knows. He mentally adds more points to his checklist and confirms his dog-walking schedule with a few more people before reaching his destination.

“Hello,” Izuku says the girl at the cash, nodding a little. Surprisingly, he doesn’t recognize her. A new part-timer, maybe?

There’s a brief moment of hesitation where the girl opens her mouth as if to speak, but says nothing. She closes her mouth, almost wincing, then raises her hands.

Hello, she signs back, a little slower than Izuku’s used to, and oh, that makes sense.

Hello, Izuku replies, this time in sign. Are you more comfortable with sign?

The girl blinks. She doesn’t seem very emotive, but her short purple hair, asymmetric cut, and overall goth aesthetic speak loud enough for her. And - oh, that’s interesting. Her earlobes stretch into jacks.

She signs her reply, much smoother than before. You can talk. I'm fine with that. I can hear you.

“Oh – okay. Then, um, could I ask for your help?”

It turns out that Watanuki has some pretty generic taste in music, which comes as a welcome surprise. What do all-knowing magicians even listen to? Hymns or something? Mantras? Do magicians and spirits have similar taste in music?
For a moment, Izuku pictures the Watanuki, Sylvie, Yorihiko, and the Totoro of Death at some girl group’s concert. That one image is horrifying enough for Izuku to never want to ask Watanuki anything related to music ever again.

Just when everything’s almost said and done and Izuku’s turning on his heel to leave, the girl drums her fingers on the counter. Out of habit, Izuku pauses and turns his head. He can tell when people want something from him. It’s a sixth sense he’s honed meticulously over the past few years.

The girl looks sheepish. She reaches up to fiddle with her earlobes again, averting her eyes. *Are you—*

Another pause. Izuku waits.

*Are you Midoriya Izuku?* the girl asks, fingers curling to spell out *Green Courage* in place of spelling out his name as most people would. That’s interesting.

“I am,” Izuku answers. “Can I help you with something?”

*I hear you take all sorts of requests,* she signs, very obviously avoiding the topic.

“I do,” Izuku says, a little worried now.

*I have a request,* the girl signs, hesitant. *But it’s really weird.*

“I’ve had weird before,” Izuku replies, definitely worried. “I’m sure I can handle a little more.”

The girl sighs. *I lost my voice, and I need help getting it back.*

For a moment, Izuku stares. “Excuse me?”

*Someone stole my voice,* the girl elaborates, signing slower. *Someone took it, and I need help getting it back.*
There’s a jerk against Izuku’s back that feels like Kero’s jabs, which makes everything instantly worse, because Kero jabs in a pattern of short-short-long, their silent code for oh shit, Sakura Card.

Feeling his will to live drain out through his feet, Izuku slaps on a smile and nods. Apparently there’s a card that can – that can what? Steal voices? Steal sound? Do something awful and horrible that shouldn’t exist on any plane of existence?

“Sure,” Izuku says, because his life is a joke. “I’d be happy to help out.”

The girl looks relieved. Her shoulders slump, like the tension’s been pulled from her. Thank you, she signs earnestly. I’m Jirou Kyouka.

“Nice to meet you, Jirou. Let’s... talk a little. Or – sign. Let’s sign a little.”

Kero sighs so loudly that Izuku has to fake a cough to cover it up.

First Kirishima, now Jirou. One’s an incident, two’s a coincidence, and god, Izuku is praying that a third person doesn’t stumble into his path anytime soon, because three’s a pattern.

“The Voice,” Kero explains.

It’s a beautiful day outside. Birds are singing, flowers are blooming. On days like these, Izuku should be savouring his youth, running around the city, performing the odd job or two, getting involved in all sorts of nonsensical fun. Instead, he’s burning in hell.

Izuku can’t bring himself to raise his face from his hands.

“Out of everything it could’ve been, this isn’t that bad.” Crossing his arms, Kero settles down on a stack a sticky notes. He absentmindedly riffles through the pages with his foot. “Voice is a pretty passive card. It’s a pretty annoying one, but it avoids combat, which is great for, you know, not breaking your ribs.”
Kero’s right. Why is it always the ribs?

“This can’t be too bad,” Kero says. It’s hard to tell if he actually believes his own words. “All we need to do is lure it out and capture it.” Leaning forward, he plush puts on a smile. “Easy, right?”

Izuku lifts his face from his hands. Loosens his grip on reality. Stares Kero down with intense apathy.

“If this card proves difficult to capture, I will face God and walk backwards into hell,” says Izuku.

“Well, okay then,” says Kero.

It really doesn’t matter what Izuku thinks. He only confronts his problems when they become other people’s problems, and Voice has just taken away someone’s voice, which is kind of a dick move. Clow Reed was a madman and an asshole and it’s a miracle anyone loved him, and no, Izuku isn’t salty at all, why would he be?

“Quick question,” Izuku says, feeling the world is very unfair and that God wants him dead. “Why was Clow Reed such a dick?”

“With great power comes great responsibility,” is all Kero offers. “And god, Clow might’ve been powerful, but he had the mentality of a four year-old child in a toy store. Always.” Something fearful and empty passes over Kero’s face, like the dredges of an old nightmare. “Always.”

It’s hard to tell who’s suffering more. Perhaps the only reason Kero’s taking in everything so easily is because he’s been through this hell twice before. He’s a hardened veteran.

Whether that’s a blessing or a curse is anyone’s guess.

Izuku sighs. There’s no time to waste. “Let’s just hurry up and fix this so we can get back to figuring out who the mole is.”

Thankfully, Jirou’s pretty chill about having lost her voice.
Karaoke? Jirou signs, confusion written on her features. She hesitates for a moment, then shrugs. *Sure, I guess. Someone’s probably playing a prank on me, so I guess it’s not totally impossible for them to show up at karaoke.*

“That’s right,” Izuku says, decently surprised. Are they really on the same wavelength? Well, not the exact same wavelength, you know, quirk-versus-magic, but close enough.

Apparently, when Sakura caught Voice, she had a card called Song, and Izuku doesn’t need to think too long and hard to guess how Sakura took Voice down. Jirou must have one hell of a voice to catch Voice’s attention – but then again, doesn’t that mean that Voice only responds to real voices and not recordings?

Well, it’s okay. It’s not like Izuku’s going to get a human to sing, anyway. Not directly, that is.

“I don’t need you to do much,” Izuku says. “It’s just – the sooner you get your voice back, the better, right? It’s best if you’re there when it happens.”

*I have some choice words I’d like to impart onto whoever did this,* Jirou says, face so flat that it’s unnerving.

“Sure,” is all Izuku can say.

It takes a little schedule-squeezing and compromising, but Izuku manages to convince Yorihiko’s demon children that screaming over whether or not Hamlet really was as tragic as most people think it to be can wait a few more days. God, children are scary.

Tsubaki gives Izuku a tired look as she points to their newly rented karaoke room. “No crying hysterically,” she warns.

Izuku frowns as he slides over a few bills. “That was one time.”

“It’s disturbing and raises uncomfortable questions,” Tsubaki says flatly. Turning to Jirou, she asks, “Are you going to ask him to raise awareness for senior dogs?”
Someone stole my voice, Jirou responds, giving Izuku a strange look.

Tsubaki sighs. Whether it’s in relief or exasperation is anyone’s guess. “No crying, then.”

Jirou eyes Izuku as they make their way to the room, but remains silent. Perhaps she’s used to this kind of weird, or maybe she just doesn’t care to ask. Izuku really respects Jirou for, as the kids call it these days, staying in her lane.

(Not many people stay in their lane when it comes to Izuku’s life. God may move in mysterious ways, but you fuckers don’t have to. Looking at you, Watanuki.)

“So,” Izuku says once they’re seated and as comfortable as possible, “I, um, I think I can end this pretty quickly.”

Be my guest, Jirou signs, looking around the room cruiously.

Izuku nods. “Then I’ll get down to work.”

And then he draws Sleep’s card from where it’s tucked safely within his card holster. In one swift motion, Izuku snaps his fingers and tosses the card into the air.

“Sleep,” he commands, telling himself that he hasn’t, in fact, hit rock bottom, “if you could put Jirou to sleep, that’d be very helpful.”

Jirou opens her mouth to say something. Sleep’s tiny form bursts from the card. A cloud of pink descends over Jirou’s face. Jirou’s eyelids droop. She tilts to the side, and a few seconds later, her head collides with the plush seat of the couch.

Izuku doesn’t feel very good about this.

“That felt very immoral and wrong in so many ways and I will never do it again,” says Izuku.
“I’m down with that,” Kero agrees, giving uncomfortable glances at Jirou’s unconscious form. “Are you sure using Sleep was a good idea? She might still remember.”

Slinging his bag off his shoulder, Izuku begins digging through the pockets while keeping a monotone stare on Kero. “If she remembers, I’ll use Time and we’ll redo it.”

“You’re... pretty calm about using powerful cards.”

What’s that tone? Surprise? Acceptance? Disappointment? A bit of everything? It’s hard to tell at this point, given that everything’s a little of everything else. Good is bad, bad is good, danger is ordinary, etc, etc.

Perhaps it’s easier just to consider the fact that Izuku no longer struggles all too much to throw out world-altering magic. And wow, that has so many awful implications.

“I can’t freak out forever,” Izuku says. “I might not need to use Sleep or Time often, but that doesn’t mean I shouldn’t use them at all.”

With a sigh, Kero drops down onto the couch. “I guess,” he mumbles. Then his eyebrows furrow, and he frowns. “But I’ve never seen someone use Sleep so often to knock themselves out.” He eyes Izuku with genuine concern. “You don’t think that, uh, Sleep has any sort of addictive effects, do you?”

Izuku pauses. Thinks a little.

“No,” is the answer he hesitantly decides on. “If anything, I’d be developing some sort of immunity, right?”

That makes sense, right? Magic is a weird thing – it isn’t like quirks in terms of usage. Quirks that, say, put others to sleep are a pretty physical job, usually requiring a few prerequisites to activate. Magic is much more fickle in that a wave of the hand can put someone to sleep. So while quirks are the cliche chop-to-the-neck knockout attack, magic is more like drugs.

So... is Izuku drugging people?
Oh, nope, absolutely not, that’s a very dangerous thought, time to quarantine.

Anyway – magic induces effects upon targets, which means that there should be a certain point at which magic isn’t as effective because the target just doesn’t respond anymore. It’s like a sort of subtle conditioning; slap someone enough times, and they’ll start avoiding you whenever the hand comes up.

So, yes, magic immunity should be in the realm of possibility. But it’s always hard to tell with something as confusing and nonsensical as magical cards. Add quirks on top of that, and who knows what sort of effects superhuman genes and supernatural forces could have on each other.

And so, like always, Izuku decides on the answer that doesn’t really answer anything but doesn’t exclude any possibilities.

“Either way, I don’t think I should use magic too much on one person,” he says, feeling that his conclusion is quite reasonable. “Except maybe on me, because I really doubt a magician can develop any sort of immunity, since, they’re. I don’t know. Magic vessels or something.”

Kero’s features freeze up. Izuku swallows down a snarky remark.

“Magical immunity,” Kero repeats, as if he’s just put the pieces together. “Huh.”

This is going so poorly so quickly. “That was a very strange use of huh.”

“No, no, it’s okay.” One of these days, Izuku’s going to tell Kero that waving away problems isn’t nearly as effective as it seems. “It’s just – well, it would really suck if any of our enemies had some sort of immunity or cancelling power.”

That’s ridiculous.

Except it isn’t, because if Izuku can land himself a position as cardcaptor while juggling his apparent duties as a magician, a vigilante, a trainer, a jack-of-all-trades, and god knows whatever else fate wants him to be, then what’s to say that someone else in the big, wide world doesn’t have a few curious talents as well?
Izuku drops his face into his hands. “Why would you say something like that?”

“It’s safer just to assume the worst,” Kero answers. “But don’t we have a more pressing concern right now?”

Jirou flips in her sleep. Izuku plasters himself against the wall. Kero lets out a screech and darts upward.

The door opens. Kero pulls off one of the most impressive maneuvers Izuku’s ever seen by shooting straight up and attempting to mold into the ceiling. Tsubaki’s head peeks in. She sees Jirou’s unconscious form and sighs.

“Just so you know,” she says, voice cold and flat, “Booths are for karaoke, not private counselling.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Izuku says, feeling faint.

The door shuts. Izuku lets out a deep breath. Kero peels himself off the ceiling in an action reminiscent of scrapping a particularly stubborn sticker off a closet door.

“Let’s get on that sealing thing,” Kero says.

The Sealing Staff bursts into its full, cursed form in Izuku’s hands. “Not a bad idea.”

The thing about working with Watanuki is that you pick up on the intricacies of magic and magecraft and all things olde and forbidden very, very quickly. Turns out that most magic comes from the support and blessings of faeries and daemons and their ilk, which means absolutely nothing given that Watanuki’s magic breaks reality, Ms. Yuko’s magic breaks reality even more, and Izuku’s magic is actually Sakura’s who originally inherited it from Clow Reed, who was the most reality-breaking of them all – it’s all a big mess, and Izuku’s wrapped up snuggly within it.

So, yeah. Magic. Summons faeries and spirits and other terrifying creatures. For once, Izuku’s cursed existence spares him. Seeing things that go bump in the night is bad enough – summoning them with every little trick would be a nightmare. Like, an actual, living nightmare.
After a thorough excavation of his schoolbag, Izuku raises his prize up to Kero. “One mermaid’s comb.”

For the supposedly all-powerful and all-knowing familiar he is, Kero narrows his eyes and gives the artifact an unimpressed analysis. “What, do we need three newts, the eye of a bat, and your first newborn, too?”

“God knows I’d never spawn a mini-me into existence,” Izuku says flatly. “But no. From what I’ve read, just having a mermaid’s comb should be enough to channel the spirit of a mermaid from the depths of the sea.”

Kero’s frown deepens. “Channel. Not summon.”

Then his eyes flicker over Jirou’s unconscious form.

“Oh,” he sighs, all the breath leaving his body in a hurried, disappointed rush. “I guess it makes sense know.”

Watanuki, in his all-knowing glory, left some choice words for Izuku after yesterday’s errand.

“Here’s a fun fact for you,” he had said, the sly grin on his face a complete divergence from his heart-patterned apron, “Mermaids are very much real and so much more terrifying than you could ever imagine.”

While Izuku has developed the very useful ability of moving from shock to acceptance instantly, for once, he’d been ahead of the game. Mermaids in Musutafu waters – a fun alliteration, but a very uncomfortable thought.

And Watanuki kept talking and talking, and Izuku listened, because when Watanuki rambles, it’s less of a mash-A sort of dialogue and more of a vital-gameplay-explaining sort of dialogue, and Izuku doesn’t like getting thrown into unskippable combat sequences with no clue how the controls work.

Which is really what happens all the time, but he’s trying to improve. And that’s all that matters.
Someday, he’ll believe the bullshit what he tells himself.

“It’s incredibly difficult to befriend mermaids,” Watanuki had said, giving a small sigh that spoke of personal experience. “They’re fey, so they’re tricky, and when they don’t want to eat you they want to drown you, none of which are particularly enjoyable. So instead we channel them through weaker, human vessels who don’t have six-inch nails.”

“Claws. Those are claws.”

“No claws,” was Watanuki’s last piece of advice.

It seems that Watanuki’s tips and tricks are either entirely useless or entirely vague.

As Izuku balances the glimmering comb above a half-full glass of water, Kero sighs for the second time in a minute. “So we’re having a mermaid hijack Jirou’s body and sing Voice to us?”

“Yes,” says Izuku, pushing the glass as close as it can be to the center of the table.

“This is of questionable morality,” Kero points out, more disappointed than angry.

“Yes, I know, but we’ve already crossed the bridge.”

“And burned it.” Kero grumbles something under his breath along the lines of we’re going to start wildfires at this rate, which is incredibly accurate.

Now, Izuku isn’t any master magician, but he works for one of the most powerful magicians in existence and has read about half of Watanuki’s collection of scrolls and books.

So really, he’s only winging half of what he’s about to do, which is a vast improvement from the usual whole-part-sum.

Izuku closes his eyes. Opens his senses to the great ebb and flow of life around him. In this tiny, infinitesimally meaningless room, three souls; outside, in a not-so-tiny but still very meaningless city,
millions more.

*Over here.* As always, Ms. Yuko’s guiding hand is there to push him in the right direction. *You’ll need to be familiar with more than city streets if you want to call upon the fey.*

Reaching toward cold, dark waters – smelling salt and wet rock – a little further–

Oh. Is that it? That’s it, isn’t it?

Spinning the Sealing Staff between his fingers, Izuku takes a deep breath. Incantations and rituals are mostly lost on him (save for the ever-familiar chant to release the Sealing Staff), but surely even he can rhyme some simple sentences.

“Sing loud, dance bright, let my voice now lead you; dance bright, swim quick, and when you come I’ll see you; one ripple makes a pretty sight but thousands may consume you, so come to me and here you’ll see a pretty gift just for you.”

A simple, lively chant, for a simple, lively faerie. Izuku doesn’t need an eldritch demon from the depths of the ocean. All he need is someone who likes to sing.

With a wave of his staff and a steady step-step-step to the beat of his words, Izuku claps his hands together. “If you’re here, step up; if you aren’t, step down; but if you’re here, welcome, and welcome all around!”

The glass of water shivers, shakes, and bursts into tiny pieces. Kero yelps in surprise, then quickly snaps his mouth shut as he watches the water collect itself into a neat little ball.

“Well, good morning to you, too.”

Izuku turns just in time to watch Not-Jirou push herself up from the couch. She opens her eyes, and – oh, yes, those are certainly blue eyes. Very blue indeed.

Not-Jirou yawns, blinking a bit. Then she pauses and clears her throat. “Oh? Did little miss punk rock poke a sprite the wrong way?”
“More like a sprite poked her the wrong way,” Izuku says flatly. “If you could help us, that would be nice.”

Humming a simple noise of confirmation, Not-Jirou tucks her hair behind her ears. “Yes, well, that’s what I’m here for, right?”

“Yes, please.”

With a lazy stretch, Not-Jirou’s glowing eyes land on the glimmering comb now resting on tiny, crystalline shards of glass. She reaches out in one fluid, slow motion and holds the comb up to the light. “Not a bad gift at all. Smells a little funny, probably one too many years on a shelf, but then again—” Radiant blue eyes shift over to Izuku, and a wide smile stretches into existence on Jirou’s face, working muscles that really shouldn’t be worked. “I should expect nothing less from the Shopkeeper’s boy, hmm?”

“You know where to find us,” is all Izuku says, too tired to provide any other sort of reaction. “But now that you’re here, would you kindly give us a short song?”

Not-Jirou laughs, and that’s when Izuku finally notices the strange lilt in her voice. It’s like – it’s like if someone ran their fingers down a harp inside the body of a bell. Every single sound that escapes her lips resonates with unnatural frequency. That haze of heat on a hot summer’s day, the rippling beams of sunlight from underneath the water – that’s what Not-Jirou’s voice is.

Kero says nothing as Izuku hands him a pair of earplugs. He does, however, scrutinize Izuku in a strange way.

So maybe Izuku isn’t a typical cardcaptor. But so far, there’ve only been two people before him with the title Master of Cards, and only one who was an actual cardcaptor. The sample size is too small to tell if Izuku’s really as strange as Kero thinks he is or not.

And so Izuku takes a seat beside Kero as they watch Not-Jirou curl her legs beside her body and open her mouth.

From Watanuki’s journals, a mermaid’s song is supposed to sound like the best thing you’ve ever heard and will ever hear. Some say that mermaids weave illusions with their songs, while others say that their songs are really just incredibly intricate illusions.
From what Izuku can tell, it’s probably the former.

The earplugs really are very good – that’s one more favor Izuku owes Watanuki – but every so often, a few notes will slip past, and the air will look like it’s shaking. It shivers, shakes, and falls apart, like grabbing handfuls of sand only to have it slip from your fingers.

From the way Kero’s brows furrow every now and then, it’s probably the same for him.

They sit there for a while, waiting. Not-Jirou sings and sings and keeps singing for what must be at least half an hour without once taking a break, which makes Izuku question how long their songs are supposed to be. He feels bad; Jirou’s throat will be killing her once she wakes up.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, a tiny movement of pink.

Izuku’s up on his feet just as Kero hops onto his shoulder.

Not-Jirou’s eyes fill with mirth as she watches the tiny, winged card descend curiously toward her. The card hovers around Not-Jirou’s head, undoubtedly confused by how a person can have two voices.

It’s cute and innocent, but Izuku’s tired and wants to go home and take a nap. So he lifts the Sealing Staff above his right shoulder, then swings it like he’s the world champion of Wii Sports baseball.

The collision is really a lot less dramatic than he envisioned. Voice’s tiny form smacks against the TV screen, then slides down an inch before Izuku can remember his own voice.

“Voice,” Izuku says, then winces as the card’s miniscule form hits the floor with a rather comical plop. “I command you return to your form confined. Seal.”

It’s an enormous relief to feel the sleek card beneath his fingers. This is what Izuku hates most – when cards mess with innocent civilians. His problems are bad enough. Making his problems everyone else’s problem... it just sucks. It really sucks.
As Izuku tucks Voice’s newly captured form into his pocket, Not-Jirou grins. “Not so bad for a fledgling magician. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other matters to attend to.”

And with that, Not-Jirou closes her eyes and flops back down onto the couch. The comb in her hands is nowhere to be seen.

Kero hesitantly moves toward Jirou’s unconscious form and prods her a little. “So... should we just wait until she wakes up?”

It’s not like they have anything better to do. Plus, Izuku isn’t going to ditch Jirou here. He’s been rude enough; the least he can do is wait around a bit longer.

While Izuku finds tissues to wipe up the water, Kero collects the glass fragments into a neat pile. They move quietly and quickly, both of them being very well practiced in the art of cleaning up after small disasters and all.

A soft groan catches Izuku’s attention instantly.

“What the hell?” Jirou’s confused, strained voice is another weight of his chest. Everything worked out okay, Jirou has her voice back, that’s one problem crossed off the list. Everything is fine.

Clearing his throat, Izuku says, “Um.”

Jirou’s no-longer-glowing gaze turns to Izuku. She gives him a confused look, then raises a hand to her throat. Her expression grows from simple puzzlement to utter shock.

“I think you need to get a little more sleep,” Izuku flat-out lies like the scum he is. “You... sort of passed out a few minutes in.”

“I–” Jirou pauses, clearly struggling to find the appropriate words. She’s in that state of mind that all non-magical patrons of the Wish-Granting Shop find themselves in when they leave: utter blankless going one way, with the fleeting feeling of did I forget something? going the other. “I guess... I guess I did. Weird.”
The follow pause and scrutiny makes Izuku want to bury himself in hole for the rest of eternity.

Eventually, Tsubaki walks back in – and right on the minute, as well. She spots the pile of finely-crushed glass, the strangely stiff plush bear with half a twitch in its eye, and a disoriented Jirou.

Tsubaki sighs. It’s so disappointed but not all at once. Izuku knows what thought is going through her mind right now: what did I expect?

“I – I swear I’ll replace it.”

A dismissive wave of the hand cuts off anything else Izuku wants to say. “Don’t bother. You and I both know that you don’t have the time. I will, however, remind you that this facility is not, in fact, a counsellor’s office.”

Izuku deflates like a month-old balloon. “Yes, ma’am.”

“It’s fine. Just...” Running a hand through her hair, Tsubaki huffs out half a laugh. “The day you come here to actually do karaoke is the day my patrons learn to stop spilling drinks.”

So, like, never. But Izuku doesn’t say that out loud.

The speed at which Izuku and Jirou shuffle out is almost impressive. They both give sheepish glances toward Tsubaki, who simple throws back a flat look and makes her way back to the front. It’s a breath of relief when they step outside – literally, because Izuku and Jirou both exhale loudly the moment the door closes behind them.

Silence. Then, monotonously: “I was told this would happen.”

Izuku’s knees go weak, but by some miracle, he stays upright. “Sorry?”

“They say strange things happen around you,” Jirou explains. She clears her throat again, coughing a little. It’s probably an excuse to avoid looking Izuku in the eye, which is very reasonable and understandable. “I’ve heard things about you, like how things just happen to blow up around you, or how you’re a trouble magnet. You know.” Waving her hand for emphasis, Jirou shrugs. “The
Ah, yes. The usual. Fuck the usual.

It takes a good five minutes for Izuku to wrap up his apology. He watches as Jirou apparently goes through the stages of grief, then he bows for good measure. Kero makes a muffled noise as all the contents in the bag shuffle.

“I’m so sorry I caused so much trouble for you,” Izuku apologizes like it’s the last thing he’ll ever do in his measly, pathetic life. “I – I’ll never bother you again, I’ll just be on my way, ha ha–”

“Midoriya,” Jirou says, with so much weight and gravitas that it makes Izuku slap his mouth shut. When he looks up, Jirou’s expression is one he’s quite familiar with: faint amusement coloured with a hint of confusion and some foreign expression that, do this day, Izuku still can’t place.

Izu just stands there, frozen, like he’s center stage and without his lines.

“Or, I guess, ’Green Courage’, huh?” Signing the words in tandem with her voice, Jirou cracks a smile. “Well, weird things might happen around you, but at least you’re a cool person.”

“A cool person,” Izuku repeats vacantly. The lights are on but nobody’s home. No one’s been home for at least eight months.

Jirou simply nods. “Yeah. I don’t really get what happened, but you got my voice back, right? And that’s pretty awesome. So...” Sheepishly lifting her phone, Jirou looks away. “I don’t know. We can trade numbers and talk sometime, I guess.”

In the end, Izuku stumbles away from the karaoke bar with a task crossed off his list, a new contact page, and a funny feeling that fate is writing a very strange joke right now, and Izuku may or may not be the punchline.

First Mei, then Shinsou, then Kirishima, and now Jirou. There’s something about them that’s strange, almost different, but Izuku doesn’t know what it is. They’re interesting personalities, yes, but... is it just a coincidence that they’ve been pulled together like this?
As usual, Izuku doesn’t know. He knows Watanuki and Yorihiko would cite something cryptic about destiny and fate, which would be nice if it actually answered any questions.

Well, whatever. People can come and go as they please. For now, Izuku has more pressing concerns.

[11:08] nyoom:
okay lesbians let’s go
what did everyone figure out

[11:12] burble:
so mr i know fucking everything eraserhead insists that underground heroes are super professional bitch apparently not

[11:12] nyoom:
lmao

[11:14] hatsumeme:
He’s a biased fool
Tell him that next time you see him

[11:14] burble:
no thanks, don’t want to die

[11:15] hatsumeme:
Coward
Anyway I did some more digging and I can confirm we’ve got ourselves a mole!!
I think I know who it is even!!

[11:18] nyoom:
wait seriously???
i mean i asked zing and she said underground heroes go through some pretty intense psychological tests
so any active underground heroes should be legit

[11:20] izuku:
so this is what i come home to
wonderful

[11:21] nyoom:
there he is!!
man of the hour

[11:24] izuku:
wow i feel so appreciated
anyway
i have a hypothesis
what if they’re being blackmailed?
[11:25] hatsumeme:
Oh!!! What a twist!!!!

[11:25] burble:
i don’t think it’s entirely impossible
but then again we have no way of knowing, so it’s safer to assume we’re actually dealing with a mole here

[11:28] izuku:
i mean yeah
but
you know
goodness of the human spirit and all

[11:30] nyoom:
citing ur interview like a badass, i see
they grow up so fast........

[11:31] izuku:
i’d like to pretend that the interview never happened
in other news i am very tired
i’m going to bed

[11:31] nyoom:
“other news” he says
news flash: you’re always tired
but going to bed at 11:30???
good on u for sleeping early!!

[11:32] izuku:
yeah i’m pulling an all nighter tomorrow so i need the sleep now

[11:32] nyoom:
you tricked me and i will never forgive you for it

[11:33] burble:
mood

[11:35] hatsumeme:
mood

[11:35] nyoom:
all of you will die early

[11:36] izuku:
what else is new
anyway if u need me u know where to find me
probably in my room, crying, like the loser i am

[11:37] burble:
m o o d

[11:38] izuku:
well
goodnight lesbias
and for the last time
stop sending me twitter posts
u really think i want to see myself on the news
no.
i don’t.

[11:40] nyoom:
Buzzfeed Japan on Twitter
“Confused about this Deku business? Don’t get the new wave of memes? Well, it’s all quite simple, really: our friendly neighbourhood vigilante, Deku, is a small fish making big waves in the sea! It all started when...”

[11:42] izuku:
i
i’m going to bed
if i’m lucky i won’t wake up again

[11:43] nyoom:
lmao

[11:43] burble:
lmao

[11:43] hatsumeme:
lmao

[11:44] izuku:
god i hate this family

[3:07] hatsumeme:
Whoops!! Looks like I forgot to give you all a name!!
After digging through everything I could find, I’ve found our dumb little mole!!
Sasha told me not to tell you guys just yet but she’s a fool so here it is:
So...
Any of you know the pro hero that goes by Absolute Zero?

(I know that it’s hard.

I know that it’s confusing.
I know that you’re hopelessly lost.

It seems that, even with help, fate is too tightly bound to you. To us.

I... I should apologize. It’s not my place to force you down the same path.

I can’t. I won’t. Please don’t make the same mistakes I did.

If you do – if my choice was a mistake–

If history repeats itself–

If you make the same choice–

Are we trapped like this?

No.

I have faith.
You have people guiding you. You have people who will always stand by you. I’m no magician – ha, or am I? – but magic is a wonderful thing.

My mother used to tell me stories of magic. True magic comes from courage of the heart, she’d say. Be ambitious. One step can change the world.

You’re doing well. You’re doing better than I ever did.

Be brave. Be strong.

But – when the time comes–

Whatever happens, keep walking. Keep moving forward.

It’ll be okay.

After all–

You’re here, aren’t you?)

Chapter End Notes

god, it's been so long. lots of changes: i'm now taking on the full brunt of a engineering co-op program, yes, i am suffering, midterms are the devil, what else is new.

notice a difference in spacing? i changed it up to make things easier to read, but oh god 16k words just gets longer with double the spaces.......

lots of developments this time! you though i was done making izuku's life a living hell? not by a long shot. as i write, it's becoming more and more apparent that izuku really is living the full person 5 experience - wake up, go to school, some casual vigilantism for lunch, reforming society as a snack, go home, help every living soul in the city, dinner with watanuki, sleep (note: that last one's optional). so, what's the moral of the story? i don't know. learn how to manage your time, i guess. i've been writing this for a year and i still haven't managed it.

i actually planned for jirou to be targeted by voice long before it was revealed that she's
actually an amazing vocalist, which is a huge bonus. but wow, another familiar face so soon. makes you wonder if any more interesting characters are going to show up eventually.

to those of you who have been eagerly awaiting some more bakugou-izuku interaction: don't worry. you'll be seeing more of him soon. maybe even a fast boy or a floaty girl. and yes, i would like fries with that.

it's been a year since i first started writing brilliant lights! at first, it was just a fun idea, but now, it's grown into something so much bigger. thank you all so much for reading and following for this long!
Chapter Summary

A meeting, a plan, and Float. A new ally, and old friend, and
the remnants
of something
that was.

Chapter Notes

before i say anything. look at this amazing art of my boy deku by twig-the-epic. he's so beautiful and elegant and i am feeling many emotions

shinsou: did you hear a voice just now

izuku: i hear a minimum of four voices in my head at all times shinsou, get with the fucking program

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Supporter here! Is everyone safe, preferably in one piece?”

Heavy breathing. Ragged breaths, unsteady steps, the sound of boots clacking against pavement.

“This is Hijack. I’m safe, but I can’t talk right now. I’ll be at the rendezvous point in ten minutes. See you then. Hijack, out.”

The heat of open wounds against the world. Pain, not unbearable, not nearly, but pain nonetheless.


“Well, that makes two out of three! What about you, Deku?”
Quiet breaths.

“Don’t you dare answer that, you piece of shit.”

“What was that? Come in, Deku. Do you hear me?”

Static.

“Deku? Are you okay, Deku?”

And then–

A fist grabbing his collar, so close to a chokehold, blistering heat against his wrist, furious red eyes burning away the cold of night, a scathing voice in his ear, someone who abandoned him long ago–

“Deku,” Kacchan snarls, all fire and rage. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

(No. Not yet.

Let’s rewind a bit, shall we?)

It’s only after a week has passed that Izuku hears back from Sasha.

In that week, all of them have been making frequent visits to the workshop – or, more accurately, home base. Slowly but surely, they’ve been molding the inconspicuous room behind Sasha’s shop into a place between two worlds, where they can be Japan’s most notorious vigilantes and junior high students in peace.
It’s kind of beautiful, in a strange, illegal way.

“I guess it’s about time we address the elephant in the room.” Sighing, Sasha taps her hand on the whiteboard behind her. Scribbled in dry-erase marker are comically cute drawings of Absolute Zero and some miscellaneous villains. There’s a crude arrow with dumbass written above it pointing to Absolute Zero, but it’s difficult to guess who drew it. “We’ve identified the mole. And it was Absolute Zero, of all people.”

Sasha pinches the bridge of her nose. She takes a good five seconds to inhale, and another five to exhale. Shinsou grimaces. Mei continues mashing away at whatever she’s doing.

“So,” Sasha says, clearly trying very hard to be the mature one in the room, “let’s discuss how we’re going to operate from here on out.”

Silence. It seems like nobody really wants to bite the bullet on this one.

Which means, of course, that Izuku will just have to do it.

“We don’t really have many options,” he says, shifting uncomfortably in his chair. “I can’t just stop sealing the cards.”

Kero nods fervently. “It’s your magic-bound duty. You’re the cardcaptor; if you don’t seal them, no one will.”

“And we can’t just stop helping people,” Satoshi adds on. He sits forward in his bean chair – or, that is to say, he folds into himself, legs curled up against his chest. “If we stop now, we’ll just be one more hero that talks the talk but can’t walk the walk.”

Silence. The only sounds that permeate the veil of discomfort hanging over the room are Mei’s typing and the faint hum of all the tech in the room.

“We’re taking action.”

Shockingly enough, it’s Shinsou, the most reluctant of them all, who makes the decision for them.
It’s an interesting thing that Izuku has noticed recently, that new steel in his spine. Perhaps Eraserhead is more competent that Izuku thought him to be.

Snatching a dry-erase marker from the desk, Shinsou moves to the whiteboard. He uncaps the marker and brings it down with a soft squeak. Every single one of his actions, no matter how insignificant, are not without purpose. His eyes are cold but not uncaring.

He’s changing. He’s moving ahead.

He’s...

(Just like he always is.)

“Let’s break it apart,” Shinsou suggests, writing problems on the board. He draws a circle around the word, then branches it off into another bubble: magic cards. “Our most obvious problem is the one that our leader has been facing since last fall.”

Leader. Wow. That’s a terrifying thought.

With a small hup, Kero bounces up, grabbing a marker of his own. Shinsou pauses for long enough to let Kero smudge magic away and replace it with Sakura. “And don’t you think they’re going away any soon! Just so you know, the entire set consists of 52 cards.”

And god knows how long that’s going to take. The problem lies in the fact that it’s impossible to tell when a card will show up. Sometimes they’ll appear one after the other, forcing Izuku to sprint all over the city, while other times there’ll be an extended gap between one card and the next that makes Izuku so on edge he’ll think he’s going insane.

It’s the classic dilemma: rip the bandaid off, or peel it off slowly?

At this point, it’s too early to guess what choice the cards have made.

“Both branching off and connected to the cards, we have the fact that we’re vigilantes.” Shinsou adds definitely illegal vigilantism to the board, heaving a sigh afterward. He rubs his eyes a bit,
obviously exhausted. Seems like his training’s going well. “We’ve been doing spectacularly so far, given none of us have been arrested before.”

Izuku raises his hand. Shinsou glares at him. Izuku puts his hand down.

“As I was saying,” Shinsou continues, “Vigilantism. Without support–” Sasha and Mei give identical victory signs, even though they’re across the room – “we’d definitely be screwed. For better or for worse, we’ve now involved two underground heroes, a freelance support engineer, an in-training support engineer, and the entire civilian population of Musutafu.”

While Shinsou writes down everyone on the board, Izuku buries his face in his hands. “Did you have to bring that up?”

Shinsou scoffs. “Ignorance is bliss until it slaps you in the face. And by now, Midoriya, I would’ve expected you to know exactly how that beating feels like.”

Oh, Izuku knows. He’s very familiar with the metaphorical bat that fate carries around with Her at all times. He doesn’t like it very much.

“There’s also the issue of your personal trainers,” Sasha adds, chewing absentmindedly on the back of a pen. Her free hand drums on the table as her leg shakes up and down. Looks look they’re all as stressed as each other. “As helpful as they are, it’s incredibly risky to run around the city like you’re doing right now.”

Shinsou grimaces. “Not a problem for me. I’m stuck in a warehouse at the edge of the city.”

Izuku freezes. A warehouse at the edge of the city?

That sounds... uncomfortably familiar.

Praying that it’s just a coincidence, Izuku clears his throat loudly. All eyes turn to him.

“Um,” he begins. His voice cracks, so he coughs into his hand. “I – I don’t think it’s as big of a problem as it seems.”
Sasha quirks an eyebrow. “How so?”

“For Satoshi and I, we’re probably safer with Zing than we would be on our own,” Izuku explains. He’s... probably right. Maybe. Hopefully. Eh. “She’s an incredible teacher and more than willing to protect us.” Izuku looks to Satoshi, who nods in agreement.

“Oh, how wonderful! I recently got in touch with my trainer as well!”

For the first time since the meeting started, Mei’s attention is focused somewhere rather than her computer. She smiles brilliantly, pushing off the table and allowing herself to be wheeled toward the group. Her chair collides directly with Satoshi’s bean bag, and the collision sends Satoshi sprawling to the ground. He looks very unimpressed.

Shinsou’s expression is an interesting one. There’s surprise, clear as day, as well as faint amusement and worry. All three are very valid emotions to feel around the hurricane that is Hatsume Mei.

Sasha, for one, brightens. It’s a nice change to see her back to her usual self and not, you know, contemplating the fact that she’s housing four of the most notorious vigilantes in Japan in the same building that she sleeps. “Oh, yes! Zing introduced us to a very talented hero. Her hero name’s Bubble Girl.”

There’s a small pause as Izuku filters through his ever-growing mental list of pro heroes. Bubble Girl, Bubble Girl... what agency does she work for again?

“Oh,” says Izuku when it finally clicks. He snaps his fingers just as the final cog slots into place. “Bubble Girl from Nighteye Heroics Agency?”

While Kero mumbles something about bubbles and how they’re a menace and something equally as incomprehensible, Sasha turns the full brunt of her smile on Izuku. She ruffles his hair with her calloused hand. “That’s the Izuku I know and love!”

While Izuku curls into himself under Sasha’s friendly gesture, he runs through everything he knows about Bubble Girl, which is, admittedly, not a lot.
Bubble Girl. Quirk: Bubble. She can make bubbles containing scents that she’s smelled before. Not the most transferable skill to pro heroics, but her extensive training in martial arts more than makes up for it.

To anyone else, it would be a strange choice. Why Bubble Girl, of all people? Why a sidekick and not a pro hero?

For once, Izuku knows the answer: because Zing chose her. Zing, Charlatan the Untouchable herself, chose Bubble Girl out of her plethora of contacts.

That’s that. There’s no better indication of trust.

“I’ll be aboard the SS Secrecy too!” Mei seems awfully chipper about that not-so chipper fact. She swings an arm over Shinsou’s shoulder, laughing boisterously. Shinsou tries to shrug her off, but as Izuku’s learned, that only makes her grip stronger. “Since Bubble Girl’s part of Nighteye’s agency and all, I’ll have to watch my mouth.” Mei’s expression scrunches up into a pout. “Working with smart people is fun, but working with smart, straight-laced heroes is the worst!”

“But Bubble Girl’s a real fun character,” says Sasha, still smiling. She must know Bubble Girl personally, then. “One of my friends helped design the first variation of her costume back when she was in school. I met her a few times, and I can say she’s a really good person.”

Huh. Networking is truly a terrifying ability.

Having managed to escape Mei’s chokehold of a hug, Shinsou steps back to the whiteboard. “Right. So. As I was saying, keeping our entire support team lowkey is going to get harder and harder. The authorities are sure to catch on eventually, and we’ll need a plan when that happens.”

Oh, Izuku has a plan. It involves sprinting into shops and hiding under the counter while the cashier points in a random direction and herds all the police away.

“That’s easy to do,” Kero says, grinning. He throws a knowing look Izuku’s way. Before Izuku can tell Kero that Shinsou probably won’t appreciate his suggestion, the plush proudly declares, “we’ll get the civilians to give so many conflicting reports that the police won’t have a clue what the truth is!”
Silence. For a brief moment, Mei looks surprised, only to burst out into laughter. Satoshi gives a
breathy laugh. Sasha gives an exasperated sigh, shaking her head. Shinsou’s glare turns on Kero,
who holds his gaze.

“Don’t look at me,” Kero chirps, lifting his chin. “It’s not our plan to execute. People are willing to
go to great lengths to protect Izuku.” After a pause, Kero adds, “Like, outrageous lengths. It’s, uh,
sort of creepy, sometimes.”

Perhaps creepy isn’t the better worst to describe the surprising generosity that Izuku finds himself
running head-first into all over the city. It can be very surprising when crowds of civilians purposely
shuffle into formations to inconvenience the police when they’re chasing after Deku, or when
crowds part for Izuku when they see him sprinting at full speed, Kero on his shoulder and baton in
his hand, like it’s second nature. But it’s also incredibly kind of everyone not to go off running to the
police.

Just the other day, Izuku overheard someone whispering: hey, doesn’t that stuffed animal look a lot
like Deku’s pet?

Five people turned at once, blank looks on their faces: what stuffed animal?

And the simple response: oh. I see.

Okay, so maybe creepy is accurate. But only sometimes.

“So our plan is to rely on the people’s goodwill and pray that it all works out,” says Shinsou,
probably very close to smashing his head against a wall.

“I’m open to suggestions,” Kero fires back.

Shinsou and Kero engage in a stare-off. Shinsou loses.

“Fine,” Shinsou hisses, moving on to the next issue. In one smooth movement, he slides the upper
board down with a sharp clack. “Let’s move onto something we can actually control.”
“New equipment!”

Mei launches out of her seat, grabbing the marker out of Shinsou’s hand. She begins scribbling on the board immediately, all while wearing an A-grade supervillain smile. Sasha scurries off as well, returning a few moments later with a very intimidating, definitely more than five-inch binder. It drops onto the workbench and sends screws and other miscellaneous items rolling to the ground.

Satoshi leans to the side just in time to dodge a giant, wide sweeping motion, courtesy of Mei. In fact, he looks more comfortable in the workshop that he’s been anywhere else, with the exception of Zing’s gym.

To be fair, Mei and Sasha have very animated personalities. Everyone could use a little bit a fun in their lives, and – that’s a flamethrower Mei just drew on the board. No, hang on, that’s a flamethrower attached to a paraglider. Why does a paraglider need a flamethrower? Is it for escape or attacking? Why combine a paraglider and a flamethrower in the first place?

“Wouldn’t it be hilarious if someone says, what’s that? And someone else goes, it’s a bird! It’s a plane! No, it’s...”

Mei gestures toward Satoshi, who blinks confusedly. He narrows his eyes in confusion. “A... prototype dragon mech?”

Before Izuku can ask why on Earth would Satoshi think that, Mei cackles. “Exactly! Of course, it has to be functional, so we’re starting off simple with a very familiar design. After we do some test runs, we can start building some truly magnificent creations!”

“Oh my god,” says Izuku.

Shinsou watches despairingly as Mei doodles a very impressive robot dragon next to the flamethrower paraglider. He lets himself be pulled along by Sasha as the so-called professional flips open her massive binder and asks Shinsou for his input.

Impressively enough, Shinsou manages to give coherent responses. It’s nice to see that all this crazy is beginning to grow numb. It’s better this way. It’s healthier.

“Hmm.” Kero frowns, crossing his arms. He looks like he’s honestly considering Mei’s idea, which
is a very dangerous road to go down. “Cool idea, but you don’t really need it. Not after you seal Fiery, that is.”

Considering how troublesome Watery was to seal, Fiery doesn’t sound very fun.

In a frantic attempt to bring the crazy levels in the room back down to something acceptable, Izuku flails and sputters, “But – I – what about the, um, grappling guns?”

Mei’s in Izuku’s personal space before he can step back. “Of course! Of course, how could I forget? You haven’t had the chance to test out my babies yet! What a tragedy!”

Then she proceeds to drag Izuku toward the back door, and wait, what about the strategy meeting? Isn’t that important?

“It’s been pretty stressful for all of us as of late,” Sasha says, herding Shinsou and Satoshi to the door as well. She flashes a brilliant smile, all teeth, and hands them off to Mei. “You kids should go and do something fun, get that nervous energy out of your systems!”

“What about Absolute Zero? And the media boom?”

Sasha laughs. “Let’s leave tomorrow’s problems for tomorrow’s you, okay?”

“They’re not even tomorrow’s problems,” Izuku screeches.

The door slams in his face. He might as well be screaming into the void with how useless his cries for help are.

“I’m not a kid,” Kero says weakly.

Too late.

Lo and behold, all four of them turn to face the Devil Herself: Hatsume Mei.
Raising up a the wire attached to what Izuku assumes can only be the grappling guns, Mei grins an evil grin. It’s a bright and sunny day out, yet the chills that assault Izuku’s spine say otherwise.

“Just think of all the wonderful data you’ll be able to collect,” is all she says as she marches up to Izuku and clamps down a strange contraption around his arms. “You’ll be pioneers for science!”

Izuku looks to Satoshi for help. He simply holds out his arms and allows Mei to slap the grappling guns onto his arms. When he catches Izuku’s gaze, he smiles. “Fun, right?”


There’s no stopping the storm that is Hatsume Mei, especially not when she’s in the middle of testing. After throwing them all their own pairs of gloves (strangely well-padded for skidding and handling sharp edges, which is very ominous), Mei ties her unruly hair up, pulls on a jacket, and slaps her goggles down. Then she dashes off to a ladder that leads up to the top of the building, grabbing the rungs. She looks back and cocks her head.

“Standing there is incredibly detrimental to testing,” she says, beckoning them to climb. “Come on! Let’s see how everyone finds my marvelous babies!”

Satoshi’s the first to pick up the pace. Both he and Mei fly up the rungs while Izuku and Shinsou scale with more caution. Or any caution. Kero hovers by Izuku’s shoulder, looking around nervously.

Once they’ve reached the top of the building, Mei has them all stand around her as she explains how to operate the grappling guns. It’s far simpler to use than Izuku imagined, which means that it’s just that easy to bring havoc on the unaware, innocent city.

After Izuku’s done everything he can to minimize the amount of danger the device will put him in, he takes a deep breath. Holds it. Lets it out. At least Mei was kind enough to give them all protective goggles. Why she gave Izuku his Deku visor is anyone’s guess.

“Okay! Everyone on!” Mei shuffles them all onto what appear to be giant springboards. They’re on the side of the roof that faces the downtown district, and wait a second, this is hero patrol prime time, isn’t it?
When Izuku voices this fact, Mei laughs and rubs her hands together excitedly. “Excellent! Then we’ll be able to recreate the conditions you’ll actually be working under!”

It’s hopeless. They’re all screwed.

“Sasha’s friends have been testing my babies, so we’ve set up checkpoints all over the city for you to reach, with the last one being back here, of course.” She kicks the springboard under her feet, where a large X is labelled in white. “And, for some incentive...” Mei gives a brilliant grin, which really belongs on the face of a serial killer, not an engineer. The sunlight reflects off her goggles to glint forebodingly. “The last person to arrive back at home base will be the designated tester for my dragon prototype!”

Well then.

Satoshi whistles, then readjusts his grappling guns. “You’re awesome, Mei, but even I have to draw the line somewhere.”

Shinsou’s head twists around with inhuman speed. He stares Izuku down with the coldest eyes he’s ever worn. “I’m so sorry for you.”

“Don’t say something like that when you know it’s not true,” Izuku says miserably.

Kero grabs Izuku’s face and looks directly into his eyes. “Do not blow this for us.”

That’s the very definition of easier said than done.

As Mei holds the whistle up to her lips, Izuku whispers a frantic prayer to whatever god might be listening. Please, please don’t abandon him to the Devil.

“On your marks! Get ready! Aaaand... go!”

The piercing sound of a whistle rings out across the street as four totally-not-vigilantes and a totally-
Mistakes have been made.

“Who has – Satoshi! I see you, you bastard!”

“Oh? Do I look just as stunning as I always do?”

“You look like a splatter on the goddamn pavement, asshole!”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you over the fact that I have the flag!”

“You piece of–”

Izuku doesn’t know what he expected.

The current scene looks something like this:

Kero, who has decided that his helping Izuku is unfair, is acting as referee, eagerly darting around all four of them as he narrates every action. He kind of sucks as MC, but to his credit, he sucks as MC for everyone, so his impartiality is doing great.

Satoshi bounces off roofs and walls like he’s been doing it all his life (when in reality it’s only been a few weeks), his baton in one hand, a giant flag in the other. Said flag is really just a banner advertising some sort of department store sale tied haphazardly to a long metal rod. Izuku can’t remember where the banner came from. At this point, he doesn’t want to know. Regardless, Satoshi swings across streets and over buildings with a grace none of them can replicate.

Behind Satoshi, Shinsou swears violently, throwing his arm forward for the wire to latch onto the side of a building across the street. He throws himself off the building with no hesitation whatsoever for someone who just started sprinting around city rooftops. His movements are smoother and more confident than Izuku’s ever seen them; Eraserhead must be one hell of a teacher. And, curiously
enough, with every leap Shinsou takes, a cushion of wind is always there to propel him up and soften the landing. Very interesting.

Mei, for one, has nothing to lose, so she shouldn’t be that involved. Alas, Mei is Mei, so it comes as no surprise when she pulls out a gun that shoots glue in the form of nets. Her wild laugh rings out whenever she lands a hit or the flag is snatched back into her possession. Though she doesn’t have the reflexes or training that the others have, she makes up for it with her undying enthusiasm, unlimited stamina, and vicious streak disguised as infinite curiosity.

“What a heart-pounding race! Here we have it, folks: the last leg of the Trial of the Grappling Guns! It’s been an exciting ride so far, but who could have predicted the introduction of the omnipotent Bail Flag? You heard me right: whoever makes it back with the flag will automatically be pulled out of every testing session for the next month! What an offer! What a deal!”

A deal indeed.

So what should Izuku do?

Satoshi’s casually using his quirk to return the flag back to his hands given nobody else has touched it since he last did, Shinsou’s laying off his quirk but utilizing his wind magic to great effect, and Mei’s cheerfully shooting out her copyright-infringing web-slinger gun all over the place. All three of them are doing incredibly well, with the flag never remaining in someone’s possession for more than two minutes at a time.

So a few harmless cards shouldn’t be that unfair, right?

“And our favourite god-forsaken vigilante pulls out the big stops! Hang onto your hats, folks, because Shadow’s just entered the playing field!”

Satoshi lets out a cry of outrage as Shadow slaps the flag out of his hand. With one quick summon of Jump, Izuku leaps forward and catches the rod mid-leap.

Shadow’s tendrils grab onto Izuku and snatch onto the roof, allowing Izuku to stand on the side of the building like a physics-defying badass.

“Oh, look at you, being so cool and using your overpowering magic cards,” Satoshi coos from the
“Is that how we’re going to play from now on?”

“I will do many things, but I refuse to be a martyr for Mei’s experiments,” Izuku says, expression flat. He holds Satoshi’s gaze, careful to keep an eye out for Shinsou and Mei.

“How strange. You’re always the first to play the role of the martyr."

“I’m willing to give my revered position to you this once.”

“That’s very kind of you. Could it be... oh! Don’t tell me — Izuku, are you crushing on me?”

“Why crush on someone when you can crush them instead?”

“I see,” sighs Satoshi. He twirls his baton between his hands. “What a shame.”

The instant Satoshi quirks a smile, Izuku throws himself forward and toward the next building – and good for him, because Satoshi’s baton just barely misses him, leaving a nice friction burn down his arm. The weapon returns back to Satoshi’s hand, and a rather dangerous cycle of toss-dodge-catch begins.

“Satoshi isn’t having any of that magic nonsense!” Kero cries. “He’s about to prove that brute force works just as well as magic!”

It’s times like these that Shadow really shines as a card that can do almost anything. Its tendrils protect Izuku and hinder the others, its body rises from the ground to take on Mei’s strange ammunition, and its vast reach means that Izuku’s always protected.

Except–

“One, I give to my mother, two, I give to my father, three, I give to my sister, the last, I give to myself; four in total and yet four short; give to me, o Summer Court!”

Oh, shit.
Izuku leaps up just in time for giant pillars of thorn to shoot out from underneath his feet. The foreign magic is an assault on his senses; Shadow’s steady, grounded beat stutters and fails in the presence of the high-pitched giggling and ear-piercing cacophony of wind instruments that rings in Izuku’s ears.

“But what’s this? Shinsou, our resident newbie magician, has pulled out some arcane magic that’s probably super evil and mysterious! Looks like two can play at that game!”

It takes an incredible amount of effort to catch himself from landing directly in a patch of those evil, strange thorns. Unfortunately, the flag falls from his grasp and into a mess of vines hanging below.

Izuku stares at Shinsou in shock. Did he just – he couldn’t possibly be that foolish, right? “You – that was an incantation!”

Shinsou snorts. “Don’t worry. Only people as paranoid as the two of us would be able to work out deals with them.” He snaps his fingers, and Izuku has to hop up and over a bed of skull-shaped red roses.

The vines deposit the flag safely into Shinsou’s hands, and Izuku feels his worldview shift dramatically.

Just how much has Shinsou discovered about the world of magic? What has he been doing all this time?

“Oh ho ho! You two look very cool and imposing! It would be a shame if someone happened to ruin that image!”

Izuku and Shinsou look up just in time to witness Mei drop down from the sky and toss an entire basket of familiar, marble-sized objects on their heads.

Shinsou blinks in confusion. Izuku yelps and dives off the building.

“Watch out, now! If you lower your guard, mad scientist Mei will swoop in and leave you in the dust! Those bombs are definitely weapon-grade and shouldn’t be allowed to see the light of day, but here they are, and here she is!”
Izuku almost feels bad for Shinsou as the marbles make contact with the roof, detonating in all sorts of horrendous manners: miniaturized sparklers, glue and sparkles, smoke bombs, flashbangs – it’s the whole package deal, all unloaded happily onto Shinsou’s head.

Yeah, Izuku feels pretty bad for him.

While Shinsou’s still suffering the brunt of Mei’s surprise bombs – seriously, how long do those things keep going off for? – Mei sprints in, shoots at both Shinsou and Izuku, grabs the flag, and swings off to the next building with a clap of laughter.

“And just so you know,” she shouts, her voice fading with distance by each passing second, “if I win, you’re all my guinea pigs!”

Shit.

Kero claps his hands together in an excited frenzy. “Ohhh! What a plot twist! Mei introduces a surprise variable that nobody wants to touch with a ten-foot pole! What will our contestants do now?”

How many cards can Izuku use without passing out nowadays? Surely Time isn’t overkill in a situation like this, right?

Izuku doesn’t know anymore. All he knows is that he really doesn’t want to die today.

Kero grins at all four of them as they stumble their way back into the workshop. “That was a pretty exciting conclusion, huh?”

Of all words Kero could’ve chosen, he settles for exciting? Really?

Most of it was Mei and Shinsou’s fault; one too many misfires and accidental bomb drops in tandem with thorns everywhere, like seriously, everywhere, and you have a very worn-out group of up-and-
coming vigilantes.

But even Izuku couldn’t have predicted the trainwreck of a finale they managed to pull off. Sure, maybe summoning Wood and Watery at the same time was little overkill (apparently Wood does a little too well with a water source, which would’ve been nice to know beforehand, Kero), but it was all very reasonable given the fact that Shinsou started tossing his lethal wind blades everywhere. Then Mei pulled out “gloves that launch compressed air! Still a prototype, of course, but aren’t my babies lovely?” Perhaps pelting Satoshi wasn’t a very bright idea, because everyone knows that when Satoshi gets hit, he hits back, and that baton of his isn’t exactly a toy.

At some point, the struggle for the flag devolved into a dogfight. Then the pro heroes started to up, so of course they all scrambled to tear the flag into pieces and use the remnants of glue from Mei’s horrid glue gun in order to create makeshift masks.

As for who got back first – well, they all sort of got stuck as a giant wad of disaster during their thrilling escape, held together by nothing but the bonds of friendship and Mei’s glue from hell.

Perhaps such a conclusion is just what the universe intended to happen. The Law of Conservation of Crazy may run them all in circles, but it still has to return to where it began in the end.

So here they are, struggling to detach themselves from each other, covered in glue and sparkles and thorns. As usual, of course.

Satoshi’s still picking confetti out of his hair as he drops his baton on a nearby workbench. He winces, removing a thorn instead. He stares at it for a good moment. “God, Shinsou, what kind of demon did you contract with?”

“Faerie,” Shinsou corrects, peeling dried blue off his clothes. “And I don’t really know. We don’t talk much.”

“It’s better if you don’t talk at all,” Izuku deadpans. His visor’s a mess; he’ll have to get Mei to fix it. He throws a wayward glance toward Shinsou as he rubs a finger down a particularly large scratch. “Faeries are half evil and half really evil.”

“What a shock,” Shinsou says, not particularly shocked at all.
In typical Mei fashion, the moment all of their thorough ravaged gear is off and on the floor, Mei hounds them, shooting off rapid-fire questions.

How was the user experience, Mei asks.

I felt like I was dying every time I used that goddamn thing, Shinsou says.

Speak for yourself, Satoshi chirps. I had a great time. It was like parkour, but way more illegal. But the chafing – yeah, not so fun.

My arms burn, Shinsou says.

As Satoshi and Shinsou give their input, Mei nods aggressively and scribbles everything down in her notebook. Izuku’s input is really kind of invalid, as he’ll only need to use the grappling guns in a worst-case scenario. In contrast, the others are a more or less stranded on the ground. Shinsou may have wind magic, but flying and being propelled by a particularly strong breeze are two very different things. Satoshi’s essentially stuck on land, so he doesn’t really have any other option aside from using Mei’s gadgets.

You know, unless he grows wings or something. He’d be like an angel of death, which he’s already alarmingly close to becoming. At this point, Izuku doesn’t even want to consider the possibility.

As Mei continues to ask questions, Shinsou continues to provide as much snark as he can possible manage while Satoshi cheerfully encourages Mei to change or add features to make the experience more exciting. For a disaster squad, they really are quite in sync with each other.

“Oh? You guys back already?”

Sasha’s return feels oddly like a herald of doom. Perhaps it’s nothing; everything seems like bad news these days, so maybe–

“Excellent!” Sasha claps her hands together, positively glowing. “I got in touch with some of my contacts, and I managed to get you guys volunteering positions at the agency Absolute Zero works at!”
One of these days, Izuku will learn that getting his hopes up fools nobody but himself.

While Izuku astral projects, Mei cackles gleefully. “What a twist! Who would’ve guessed we’d be infiltrating a pro hero’s agency to spy on them? How exciting!”

Shinsou looks like he’s considering seeking out the Totoro of Death. “Of all words, you choose exciting?”

“It’s accurate,” Satoshi says, the fire of rebellion burning bright in his eyes. Or they could be the fires of wrath. It’s anyone’s guess.

Sasha, for one, seems very pleased with both herself and their rag-team team of disasters. “Regardless of how it goes, I’m sure you’ll gain some valuable experience. It’s only a week long, but it’s a week longer than nothing.”

Izuku was worried before. When Sasha pulls out a hefty folder and drops it onto the table with a resounding thud, Izuku’s mood jumps up to suspicious.

As usual, Mei’s the first one to dig in and scan over the papers. Her eyes flicker over the words with incredible speed, her brilliant mind spinning all the gears that no one else has. When she’s absorbed a sufficient amount of information to have a decent understanding of the situation, she hands the papers over to Izuku.

The paper is warm; recently printed. Izuku takes a deep breath and steels himself.

What he sees isn’t surprising, but a punch in the gut nonetheless.

“Pre-heroics junior volunteer at... Endeavor Hero Agency.”

Silence. This discomfort in the room is palpable.

Satoshi’s expression is too blank to decipher. “Endeavor,” he repeats, as if testing the word on his tongue. He opens his mouth as if to continue, then shuts it. “...Huh.”
“The flaming bastard,” Shinsou says, in a tone a voice that’s so confident and sure of himself that it might as well be Endeavor’s name. “I have nothing but respect and love for him.”

“You brainwashed him and made him march in the opposite direction while the two of us took down Freeze,” Izuku helpfully reminds him.

“I gave him some helpful tips on how to improve his reputation as a hero and not as a tyrant,” says Shinsou.

Denial is the first step to villainy, they say. They’re wrong. Denial is the brain’s way of jumping ship when things breach the realm of Okay, This is a Bit Too Much For Me.

“Regardless,” Sasha says, gesturing toward the papers in their hands, “this is an excellent opportunity. Absolute Zero isn’t exactly a veteran at Endeavor Hero Agency, so it’s unlikely she’ll be called out to the field too often.” With two offending thumbs-ups, Sasha grins. “That’s where you come in! Or, to be more accurate, two of you!”

Satoshi and Izuku both glance at each other at the same time. Sasha raises an eyebrow. She has the audacity to clear her throat and pretend to be crossing out people when in reality, there were only ever two choices.

“Knowing Shinsou’s history with Endeavor, he’s out—”

“You couldn’t pay me to work under that asshole.”

“And Mei’s eccentric nature is pretty off-putting to anyone who isn’t used to her—”

“I don’t particularly care about Absolute Zero’s opinion of me, but okay!”

“So, by a simple process of elimination, the two lucky contestants are Satoshi, the closest we’ll get to having an actual spy on the team, and Izuku, because why not.”
Because why not seems to be the leading cause as to why Izuku constantly feels like his heart rate is at least thirty percent higher than normal, but at least Sasha’s being honest about it. Besides, Izuku can think of a very long list of reasons not to send him off to his managerial doom, but nobody would listen and nobody cares anyway, so he keep his mouth shut.

Satoshi sighs and drops back down into his bean bag chair. “Am I right to guess that we’ll be reporting in via DekuCom?”

“Every two hours for general updates, ASAP for emergencies,” Sasha confirms.

“What about security checks?”

From her chair, Mei snorts. It’s loud enough to cut into the conversation. “Oh, please. You think Endeavor does security checks?”

“No security checks,” Sasha says. She ruffles through the papers, then slides forward a sheet labelled Security Measures. Izuku takes a quick look through it; all it does is emphasize how capable the heroes in the agency are. “Regardless, the DekuComs look enough like metal pins for you to get away with it, though I can’t imagine Endeavor’s agency would throw a hissy fit over a few accessories.”

The discussion takes a good hour or so before Izuku feels a bit better about himself. Sure, he’s throwing himself into the fire in a painfully literal way, but this isn’t so different from his usual habit of getting himself into very strange situations. All he needs to do is keep his composure and everything will be okay.

“I’ll text you the details later today,” Sasha tells them as they’re disbanding. “Remember: be careful, take things slowly, and above all, stay safe and healthy.”

Then she smiles, a little different, less lopsided, a softer expression of something like happiness or gratitude–

And then Sasha pulls them into a tight hug, all four of them, clumped together haphazardly, flush against each other’s skin, because they’re a mess, but they’re her mess.

“You know,” says Sasha, voice thick with that emotion Izuku can never pin down, “I had a friend
who was a pro hero.”

Shinsou’s wriggling pauses. Satoshi’s eyes flicker off to the side. Mei simply blinks.

“Back when I wanted to be a hero, when I thought I was more talented and more brilliant than anyone else, she’d tell me, *Stars don’t shine upon the chosen like they used to. Don’t mistake the spotlight for a blessing.*

“We all have our moments, you know? Those moments when you think, yeah, I can do this, I can do this forever. I’ve got an awesome talent, or a powerful quirk, so I’m going to dive into the prime of my life because it’s meant for me.

“And you know what?” Sasha’s grip around all of them tightens ever so slightly. It feels more like a flinch than anything else. “It turns out a lot of kids go running toward their futures like they’ve got nothing else to live for. And the future isn’t always pretty. Especially not for heroes.”

For all Izuku says about the current state of pro heroics, it’s indisputable that all heroes make sacrifices that others don’t have to.

Identity, opinions, naivety–

What is being a pro hero but growing up under the spotlight?

Finally, Sasha releases them all from her hug, leveling a glassy gaze that sees far past the now and the then and into the future.

“Just remember that, and you’ll be okay.” Turning to Izuku, Sasha smiles something subdued and bittersweet. “You’ve done so much for others. Don’t forget to take care of yourself.”

And with that, Sasha waves a gentle goodbye and shuts the door with a faint click.

For a moment, the four of them stand there, unsure of what to say. Shinsou looks at the ground, Satoshi looks at the sky, Mei looks at the walls, and Izuku closes his eyes.
The calm and chaos of the city washes over him. The wind is blowing, people are living, nature is moving forward, always marching into the future at a steady pace, pulsing with a heartbeat that reminds him that every day is just like the rest yet not at all.

The future is uncertain. Is this fate, or the spotlight?

Izuku doesn’t know.

The wind is blowing, sweeping across the city with carefree laughter, and whether it be in one hundred years, one thousand years, or one million years, the wind will remain, laughing, dancing, even as the city is no more, when all its inhabitants are nothing more than soil and stardust.

And–

Well.

The future may not matter to the wind, but for the four of them, a group of children with incredibly confusing fates, the future is priceless.

Slowly, surely, they go their separate ways without speaking a word.

What is there to say?

The youth of my life.

The best I ever lived.

The best I ever had.
But who was I to know it back then?

If I could do it again–

If I could go back–

Would I?

I don’t have much to give. All I have is what remains. What I could’ve been.

If I could go back–

The price would be–

Your destiny.

Your friends, your loved ones, everything you’ve accomplished and everything you ever will accomplish.

In a way, you will lose your very existence.

Well? What say you?

Is it worth the cost? Would I risk it all over again?

Would you?

I don’t know.
Give to a brighter future – one where everyone lives – one where things are different—

*Is that so? It’s your fault, you know. You wouldn’t even fix it if you had the chance?*

What would I even do? It wouldn’t make a difference! You can rewind a tape, but it still plays the same song.

*Ah, but it was a good song nonetheless, no?*

Wouldn’t you like to hear it again?

I...

No.

We need a different song.

This world doesn’t need me anymore. I wasn’t much use alive, and I won’t be much use dead.

I couldn’t live for the future. At the very least... I want to die for it.

I want to scatter the seeds of the future.

*That’s still the same song, you realize.*

But it’s a different voice.
And I – he – they – will be so different that it’ll make all the difference.

Or will it lead to the same conclusion?

What horrible irony that would be, seeing you, but him, in ten, twenty, thirty years if he’s lucky, making the same deal, crying the same tears.

Consider than for a moment.

I know it’s dangerous.

I know it’s risky.

But any future is better than one that doesn’t exist.

You’re sure.

I have to be.

Please.

Then I’ll grant your wish.

Your price will be your destiny – your very existence, your fate, your accomplishments, but not your failures.

In return–

Pass to – – – child – – – potential–
And you — one day — fade —

The risk — repeat — bargain — accept?

This... is the last I can give to a world I’ve failed.

It’s the best I can give.

It’s all I have left.

Then the deal is—

oh!

i’m so sorry. am I interrupting something?

i didn’t mean to intrude, but...

i don’t have much time left, either.

but i can see that our wishes align quite well with each other. what a pleasant coincidence!

i suppose fate is a heavy burden across all worlds.

regardless…

may i trouble you for a double deal?

Oh.
I see.

Well, this is very interesting.

It all went wrong.

If I could change everything that went wrong all if it went wrong how did it go so wrong I'm sorry I let you down I'm sorry I couldn't keep my promise I promised I promised but it all went wrong and I can't fix it

I--

You--

we are

i am

not created equal

have to

dreams can

live up to

become reality
it’s

so kind

your power

blinding

live to see

that moment

tell the world

i’m here
i'm sorry.

once paid, a price cannot be returned.

but don’t despair.

everything

will

surely

be

alright.
IZUKU: Hello? Zing? Mei?

MEI: Oh ho! Is it already time for our first check-in?

SATOSHI: It’s been two hours and I’m already bored out of my mind.

MEI: Do tell me about your riveting experience so far!

IZUKU: It’s been pretty standard fare. We got a short tour of the agency, but since everyone was so busy, they kind of let us wander around by ourselves for a bit. We managed to find Absolute Zero’s office, but other than that, there isn’t much to talk about.

SATOSHI: We asked around a bit about Absolute Zero posing as her fans, and we got pretty normal reactions.

IZUKU: I’ve heard so many people say the same stock phrase of “Absolute Zero is a great hero with a lot of potential” so many times my head hurts.

SATOSHI: You’ve had a headache since yesterday.

IZUKU: Yes, well, it’s not getting any better.

MEI: What, is that it? No fun stuff? No casual explosions?

IZUKU: We’re at Endeavor’s office. He’s the Number Two Hero.

MEI: The pro heroics industry has fallen into a state of disrepair and we must fix it immediately.

IZUKU: I am so, so scared of you.

SATOSHI: Anyway, nothing interesting has happened so far. Looks like we’ll just be helping with small tasks here and there, which puts us in a great place to ask questions and see the building. If we’re lucky, we’ll run into Absolute Zero soon.

MEI: You’d better! I don’t want my sticker trackers to go to waste!

IZUKU: Wait, those stickers were trackers? Why didn’t you tell us earlier?

MEI: I did. I told Satoshi.

IZUKU: Of course you did. Don’t mind me. I’ll just be in a corner, crying. You know. Like always.

SATOSHI: Not now, you won’t. We need to see as much of the building as possible before we get down to work. Come on, Izuku. Just think of all the sleep you won’t be getting.

IZUKU: At this point, it doesn’t even cross my mind anymore.

MEI: What a bore! Hopefully something more exciting will be in store for you two!

IZUKU: No. Just no.
MEI: So, what sort of juicy intel do you have for me?

SATOSHI: I’m not sure if you can call it “juicy”. It’s kind of weird, actually.

MEI: Oh?

SATOSHI: Yeah. We’ve been really throwing down questions about Absolute Zero, and it seems like she has some sort of personal connection to Endeavor. Not familial, but something outside of heroics.

MEI: Well, well, well! You do know Endeavor’s a married man, don’t you? This is quite scandalous!

SATOSHI: I don’t think it’s romantic, either. I think it’s a lot more complicated than that.

MEI: I must say, this is certainly a reach in the dark. Back up a little bit! Give me some exposition!

SATOSHI: So you know how Absolute Zero’s not exactly a veteran at the agency?

MEI: Why, yes, I do indeed know that.

SATOSHI: It turns out that they already knew each other before Absolute Zero joined. From what we’ve heard, I think that she was scouted out because of her quirk.

MEI: She does certainly have an impressive quirk. Cryokinesis on such a large scale is a very rare skill. But it’s quite the antithesis to Endeavor’s own pyrokinesis, no? Why do you suppose he would seek out someone that would only get in his way?

SATOSHI: To be honest, I’m not completely sure. What I do know is that it seems like Absolute Zero sees Endeavor as a sort of mentor or teacher. She’s always trying to impress him, you know?

MEI: And you’re absolutely sure their relationship is purely platonic.

SATOSHI: I’m sure. Even if she goes to Endeavor’s house every weekend for some unknown reason–

MEI: What’s that now?

SATOSHI: –I asked her what she thought of Endeavor, and her response was, “He’ll be among the greats. I have nothing but respect for him.”

MEI: Hmm. Still quite vague, I’d say.

SATOSHI: It’s genuine. I’m a lot better at reading people than you might think, and my conclusion is that Absolute Zero is willing to essentially do anything to earn Endeavor’s... respect? Attention? I’m not too sure about that last detail, but I’m almost entirely sure Endeavor is a motivator for her actions, whether he knows it or not.
MEI: Oh hoh! That’s some very interesting information. You’re very good at being the sneaky little spy you are. And speaking of spies, where’s Broccoli Boy?

SATOSHI: Izuku? He’s busy right now. Apparently someone on the admin team recognized him, so they started some sort of conversation about senior dogs. You know. The usual.

MEI: Ah. The usual, indeed!

SATOSHI: Regardless, we’ll keep digging for intel. If you could do a bit of research into Endeavor’s personal life, maybe we can piece together whatever we have once we’re done.

MEI: Why, of course! Do have fun, and try to keep Izuku from having a full mental breakdown. And slap a tracker on one of Absolute Zero’s belongings if you can; if she gets in touch with shady people, we’ll have an excellent lead!

SATOSHI: Will do.

[Day 3: Transcript 02]

MEI: Good afternoon, guinea pigs! How goes your volunteering experience at Flaming Cheeto Heroics Agency?

SATOSHI: Mei you will not believe what we found.

MEI: What’s this? Is this the voice of... excitement?

SATOSHI: Remember Mary’s Hand? You know, that big, bad criminal organization that we totally busted up?

MEI: Oh, yes, I vividly remember that operation. It was an incredible experience!

SATOSHI: It sure was. What you know what’s even stranger?

IZUKU: Absolute Zero is an executive member of Mary’s Hand.

SATOSHI: Looks like you’re up and running again. I’m glad to see you’ve graduated from the corner.

IZUKU: It’s an exchange program. Look, Mei, the details are really vague, so we don’t have definitive proof–

SATOSHI: While we were cleaning her office, we found some very incriminating notes that very few people would be able to piece together without context. Let me see... right. I ran around the pen, looking for my little lamb. And nowhere was it to be found, that precious child of mine. And so I went to bed and slept to search another day...

IZUKU: –When dawn struck down, so was my lamb, and bloody there it lay.

SATOSHI: It’s some serious speak not the watchers, draw not the watchers, write not the watchers.
stuff. Very Drakengard, if you ask me.

MEI: Oh hoh! That’s quite the poem! Undoubtedly a calling card or something of the sort, but a strange poem nonetheless!

SATOSHI: And on the other side of the note, it says, the children will not be the ones that rest. I wonder what that could mean, hmm?

MEI: Make sure you bring that note back with you. I’d like to get as much off of it as I possible can!

IZUKU: So we just pray she doesn’t call us out?

MEI: You’re two children volunteering in a very large, imposing agency. If all you told was to clean, then you certainly did that, didn’t you? Plus, Absolute Zero isn’t going to be one of your friends after this ordeal, so why even bother with making good with her at all?

SATOSHI: Wow. Logical Mei is scary.

IZUKU: God – you know what? Sure. Mei, you’re calling the shots from now on.

SATOSHI: Hey–

MEI: Really? What a joyous turn of events! Goodness, guinea pig, I can’t believe you would delegate such an important ask onto little old me! Except I can, because I am brilliant and knowledgeable in ways you will never be, but I can’t say I ever predicted this happening.

IZUKU: You’re ground control. Go and – I don’t know. Control the ground?

SATOSHI: I have to say, I’m impressed. It’s hasn’t even been three days and Izuku’s already jumping ship.

IZUKU: I’m not jumping ship. I’m just stepping down as captain.

MEI: We’re all part of the same sinking ship!

IZUKU: See? Mei gets it.

SATOSHI: Whenever I’m more concerned than you are, it’s a bad sign.

MEI: Don’t you worry about it. He was always broken. Now, shall we discuss how to proceed from here on out?

[Day 5, Transcript 03: Debrief]

IZUKU: And that’s a wrap. I... I’m so tired. So, so tired.

SATOSHI: Really? I could go for a round of jumping around buildings. That was the most boring volunteer work I’ve ever done.
IZUKU: Says the person who doesn’t live in constant fear and anxiety of being unmasked as one of the most notorious vigilantes in the country spying on the Number Two hero’s agency under his nose.

SATOSHI: It’s thoughts like those that’ll drive you insane one of these days.

IZUKU: Bold of you to assume I’m not already insane.

MEI: You two certainly seem to be having fun! Perfect! This’ll make the bad news less awful!

IZUKU: And I instantly feel like death.

MEI: I suppose it isn’t really bad news. I mean, it certainly doesn’t have good implications, but it’s very good that we slapped some of those puzzle pieces back where they belong!

IZUKU: Just rip the bandaid off in one go.

MEI: For starters, Sasha and I have more or less confirmed that Absolute Zero’s both an underground hero and a mole. She’s in a very strange position, you see, as she’s essentially a hero with two underground lives, in two very different senses!

SATOSHI: But the public isn’t aware of her existence as an underground hero.

MEI: Nope! From what I can tell, her underground alias is Yasha Shirayuki. Quite fitting for someone like her!

SATOSHI: “Demon Snow”? I guess it makes sense. She is a pretty tricky lady. But if she has experience both as an underground hero and an underground villain, why would she make such a dumb mistake?

MEI: It’s difficult to tell! Perhaps it was simply because she didn’t think anyone would bother digging too deep. Or perhaps their boss sent out a command for members of Mary’s Hand to boost Deku’s name online. After all, their members could range from high-ranking executives to informants to that nice old lady who runs that cozy convenience store down the street. Friend and foe are very difficult to tell apart, especially in the mafia. It’s a mystery!

IZUKU: But Absolute Zero is the only pro hero affiliated with Mary’s Hand, right?

MEI: As far as I can tell, yes.

IZUKU: Then maybe it isn’t as bad as we think. If she’s the only mole, then she must have a personal reason. I know heroes are supposed to be pillars of justice and all that, but... if Mary’s Hand had really approached pro heroes with promises of money and power, I’m sure there would be more moles.

SATOSHI: So Absolute Zero must’ve approached Mary’s Hand herself.

MEI: And it would make sense, because as an underground hero, she would have the sort of ability to get close with criminal organizations without being questioned!

SATOSHI: And her motive... we’ve had this conversation. Right, Mei?

MEI: Indeed! If we assume that Absolute Zero is doing this for Endeavor, whether it be for his affection, attention, or respect, then it’s safe to say that that Mary’s Hand has some control over
Endeavor’s heroics agency through Absolute Zero.

IZUKU: That’s a nightmare and a half. Any more awful revelations?

MEI: It would certainly be a staggering blow to the foundation of heroics if the public discovered that one of Endeavor’s most trusted allies is an executive member of the mafia!

IZUKU: Nevermind. Pretend I didn’t say anything.

MEI: But I wonder why. It’s strange, no? Being a well-known pro hero both to the public and underground must bring in quite a lot of money. And we all know that money can buy many, many things.

IZUKU: Regardless of her intentions, it looks like Endeavor won’t be swayed that easily. To side with villains, though? Is she still trying to impress Endeavor, or is she just that bitter?

SATOSHI: It looks like even pro heroes get a bit pissed off at themselves. The irony is kind of depressing, at this point.

IZUKU: But we’re done. We have our intel, we’re done the week, we can go home and never come back here again.

SATOSHI: Unless someone recruits you to be a hero, you end up at UA, and end up doing an internship at Endeavor’s place.

IZUKU: Do not say anything like that. I have one bitch-ass prophet in my life; I don’t need another one.

MEI: The gods are probably laughing at you. I know I am!

IZUKU: We are disasters and we will all die one day.

SATOSHI: Yeah, that sounds about right. So, shall we get dinner?

MEI: Oooh! Let me get Shinsou!

IZUKU: Even ramen can’t save me now.

SATOSHI: Tell that to Rin when you see her. Come on, Houdini. Let’s get some food and go home and sleep.

One of the most unsettling things in this world and all others is Watanuki’s gaze.

“I don’t like the way you’re staring at me,” Izuku says warily, lowering his arms.

“You don’t like a lot of things,” Watanuki points out. “Just pretend like I’m not here.”
If that worked, Izuku would be living a life of relative peace. But here he is, unable to pull himself away from the Wish-Granting Shop, contracted into some sort of twisted student-mentor bond with this strange, plain, reality-breaking man.

Nothing he can do about it now. Izuku turns around and goes back to his swords.

In one hand, he holds Sword, his trusted card and go-to whenever things go wrong. After the better part of a year and more near-death experiences than he’d like, Izuku has become quite comfortable in wielding Sword as not only a weapon, but also a tool.

This new mystery blade is a different game entirely.

It’s grand. It’s heavy. It’s made of actual metal. It’s decorated in ways that are only vaguely familiar. It leaves a bitter taste on Izuku’s tongue whenever he uses both the mystery blade and Sword in tandem.

Perhaps Sakura didn’t have a very good relationship with the mystery blade’s original owner. Perhaps she didn’t know them at all and Izuku’s just delusional. It’s anybody’s guess.

Watanuki laughs. “Dual wielding? You certainly are very ambitious.”

“Sword has proven to be very useful in helping me not get killed,” Izuku says flatly. “If I can utilize a second one properly, that doubles my chances of not getting killed.”

“Or do they cancel each other out?” That familiar shit-eating grin is back on Watanuki’s face.

Izuku’s already had this magic-cancelling talk with Kero. Watanuki’s opinion is invalid because Izuku doesn’t want it to be valid.

So he returns to his swords, wondering what Kero’s doing with Maru and Moro. Destroying some old artifacts, probably.
Anyway.

Getting back the sense of balance that Sword so happily provided is difficult, given that the new mystery sword is not only an extra weapon to handle, but also a new source of foreign magic to pull apart. All that strange magic interferes with Sword’s guiding voice, making it more like a professor trying to give a coherent lecture over a class of rowdy students.

It’s from both sides, really. Sword tries to guide Izuku one way, teach him how to do things elegantly and precisely, whereas the mystery sword tries to push him toward power and shattering barriers and all things that Sword doesn’t really preach. It’s like the two weapons are locked in an eternal argument with each other, and neither wants to let up.

So, as usual, it’s up to Izuku to find the middle ground.

Izuku closes his eyes. Opens his senses. Feels the ebb and flow of this strange, lonely realm that somehow still feels the wind despite its isolation.

Kero, a bright orb of heat and flame, burning brightly (but not as brightly as he should be), two empty husks with just enough magic to keep them moving (but not truly alive), and a strange, dark pool of magic that stretches on and on, far past the furthest of horizons and the most distant of worlds, with a mismatched gaze that peers calmly into and over all those who seek his patronage.

The wind is blowing.

Despite Izuku’s complaints about his job as Watanuki’s personal assistant, one thing that even Izuku can appreciate about the Wish-Granting Shop is how peaceful it is.

In one ear, a being of magic whispers to him, its steel and blossoms now much more subdued than it was before. It urges him gently, now a friend rather than a tool, urging him to keep moving forward, to keep walking, to turn away from those who have already failed and focus on a future that is still uncertain.

And in the other ear, a surprisingly human voice murmurs quiet encouragement, apologizing for something Izuku doesn’t understand, urging him to be careful and look before he chooses to leap, and lamenting some tragedy from long, long ago that pulls on something inside Izuku. But he doesn’t know what it is.
Izuku opens his eyes. Sighs. Flips his grip on both blades, then plunges both into the ground.

The whispers grow silent. Perhaps they’ve realized that Izuku isn’t overly pleased with their lack of cooperation.

Behind him, Watanuki chuckles. “Having some trouble?”

“These children are being very stubborn,” Izuku says. He levels a steely gaze at the weapons in front of him. “Perhaps I ought to melt them down and forge them into one.”

“Yikes. Your Ms. Yuko is showing.”

“Is it? Good. Maybe she’ll be able to solve this problem in a more efficient manner.”

“I can promise you that all she’ll do is run everything in circles until your life extinguishes. Nothing will be solved, and you’ll still be confused.”

“Speaking from experience?”

“I’ll refrain from commenting.”

“Do what you want. In the meantime—” Izuku knocks his knuckles against the hilt of the mystery blade. “A little more information about this thing would be appreciated.”

Watanuki hums, raising a finger up to his lips. He smiles, eyes glinting behind his glasses. “Well, I suppose you deserve at least that.”

“I deserve more, but by all means, continue.”

There’s a moment where it looks like Watanuki’s trying to find the best way to break the news to Izuku, which is never a good sign. The Shopkeeper looks down at the blade, pauses, then nods.
“This artifact has been through the most perilous of trials,” Watanuki says. “Its previous owner was also its first owner, but also not, depending on how you look at things, what timeline you examine, how much space-time you’d like to break.”

The only escape from this hell is the sweet release of death. “Is that so.”

Watanuki smiles. “Only if you wish for it to be so.”

Riddles again. Which means, of course, that Izuku has to interpret Watanuki’s nonsense and translate it into something coherent.

So the original owner of the mystery blade was another one of those reality-breaking, boundary-skipping anomalies like Watanuki and Sakura. Going on that same train of thought and Watanuki’s hints, they were most likely involved in some confusing, timeline-jumping shenanigans, which Izuku really doesn’t want to explore unless he absolutely has to.

It isn’t crazy to think that Watanuki, Sakura, and Kero know the original owner personally. They’re all keeping it a secret from Izuku, which is both confusing and pointless; confusing because there surely isn’t any harm in telling Izuku that yet another dead person lives in his head, and pointless because Izuku will most definitely find out sooner or later.

Oh, well. Maybe Izuku doesn’t have the entire tragic backstory, but when has that stopped him?

Izuku turns to the mystery sword. Tilts his head up, looks down.

“Look,” Izuku says flatly, “I’ll be blunt with you. I don’t know who you are, what you want, or why you happen to be so against cooperating with me, but I don’t have the time nor the patience to coax you out of your shell, so I’ll lay the cards out straight.”

Watanuki’s definitely trying not to laugh. Izuku ignores him.

“"You have two options. The first is you cooperate with Sword – and me, obviously – which I would greatly appreciate, and I can turn you into an asset and get to know you a little better. The second is you keep being a stubborn asshole, to which I will tell you I care very little for, thus leading to my throwing you back into whatever musty, old, creepy storage closet you came out of. And after my pathetic, short, meaningless life comes to an end, you’ll be stuck there forever with no reprieve and
only Watanuki and his demon assistants to keep you company. But I’m willing to wager you know that very well already.

“That’s what you have to choose between. I’m not feeling particularly kind at the moment given that I’m about to leap into a conflict that has very little room for kindness, so please, choose quickly, or I’ll choose for you.”

Silence. Sword vibrates in amusement. The mystery blade is silent.

Then, slowly but surely, a barrier falls. The mystery blade glows a little dimmer, hums a little softer. It’s good enough for Izuku.

Gripping Sword in one hand and the mystery blade in the other, Izuku closes his eyes. His magic runs freely within Sword, shifting into whatever form he commands. The mystery blade isn’t as lenient; Izuku’s magic runs around and over it like a veil rather than inside and through it. But it’s about as good as it’s going to get.

Izuku flips his grip on the mystery blade. It feels a little easier to wield now, but since it’s actually a sword and not magic made manifest, it’ll take a lot more training to get used to using it.

“That was a very unique way to approach a problem,” Watanuki says, eyeing the blade. Faint amusement lights up his eyes, as if he’s sharing an inside joke with someone.

“It’s better to rip off the bandaid than let it sit,” Izuku says, dismissing Sword and sheathing the mystery blade. “Plus, everyone else is working hard to ensure that they’re prepared for whatever storm we’re about to walk into. It’s only right that I do the same.”

A contemplative expression makes its way onto Watanuki’s face. He tilts his head and brings a finger to his lips. “Ah, yes. The storm. Things have become dramatic very quickly.”

“Have any more cryptic advice for me?”

“Please.” With a snap of his fingers, Watanuki summons that smoking pipe of his. His exhale brings forth a curl of purple smoke that dances its way across the courtyard and around Izuku. “You overestimate my abilities. No advice can help you now.”
What a wonderful thought.

Just as Izuku’s preparing to find Kero and make his escape, Watanuki snaps his fingers, as if suddenly recalling something. “Just a moment. I believe this word of caution will be of use.”

Izuku frowns. “I thought you said that I was beyond helping.”

“In relation to the storm, yes,” Watanuki confirms. He puffs out another tendril of smoke. “But this is in relation to the immediate future.”

Something cold and empty falls over Watanuki. His mismatched eyes are flat and blank like the buttons stitched onto a doll’s face; you could lose yourself in them, not in a romantic, admiring way, but in a terrifying, endless way, like pulling open a matryoshka doll over and over and over again, watching as beautiful features melt away into something inhuman and twisted but still smiling, and no matter how hard you try, you can’t stop your hands or pull your gaze away, because the first step you took was also the last.

As Watanuki stalks closer, Izuku can’t help but take a step back. He knows that the Shopkeeper isn’t human. Perhaps he was never human in the first place.

But there’s nothing to fear. Nothing at all. Magic lives in all things good and wicked and beautiful and wretched; there is no morality in magic, only those who know and those who don’t, and the more someone knows, the more twisted they become.

“How Cardcaptor,” says the Shopkeeper. His expression is a facsimile of sadness. “Deku. I am very sorry for you.”

The Shopkeeper’s voice makes the very air quiver, like he’s dragging his fingers through the threads of spacetime that hold this plane of existence together.

Izuku isn’t offended. He isn’t even confused. He isn’t scared. He isn’t. All he says is, “I don’t understand why you would think that.”

The Shopkeeper circles Izuku. He moves elegantly, fluidly, and yet Izuku can’t follow him at all; it’s
like trying to follow someone through a one-way mirror, and all Izuku can see is his reflection.

“Deku,” the Shopkeeper repeats. “You are a confusing existence. Even as fate’s chosen child, you are an anomaly.”

(So it was the stars after all, Sasha.)

“I know that,” Izuku says, keeping very still. “I’ve been told many times before.”

The Shopkeeper sighs, and the air shakes. “Perhaps. Even so, are you aware of what sort of burden you carry?”

Yes. Izuku knows. He knows that the voices in his head aren’t only there to guide his path; they’re also watching. Waiting.

“The burden of legacy,” Izuku answers. There’s nothing to fear. “The... burden of the future. The burden of making a brighter future.”

Something on the Shopkeeper’s face drops. Perhaps it’s meant to be sadness. Perhaps it’s meant to be disappointment. To Izuku, it only looks like pity. “You are cursed with a past that you will never be able to escape. Even now, as you run to a life you haven’t ruined, your failures haunt you.”

I don’t understand what you mean, Izuku wants to say. There’s nothing in my past worth running from.

But something makes Izuku stop in his tracks.

He regrets. He regrets not being able to – to do what? What is this? These aren’t his memories. He’s never...  

The Shopkeeper looms over Izuku. Was he always so tall? Was his shadow always this cold?

“I will tell you this because I do not believe that you deserve to experience the same hell again: no
matter where you may run, as long as you bring your past with you, paths will begin to converge.” Those doll-like eyes stare blankly, and Izuku has to force himself to look away. “Perhaps you thought you could leave the trials you faced in the ruins of what is left of your world. I ask you kindly to rid yourself of that delusion. All you have done is force your destiny upon an innocent child.”

The laugh that crawls its way out of the Shopkeeper’s lips is empty, and yet it resonates far beyond the mortal plane and into the realms no living being can touch.

“If you had only chosen to die,” says the Shopkeeper, tilting Izuku’s chin up to meet his eyes, “you would have spared this poor child from the weight of your failures.”

What?

(The weight of–

The burden–

The heat of the flames–

Slipping in his own blood–

Struggling–

Fighting–

Dying–)

Izuku swallows. His head is spinning, his hands are cold; he feels nauseous and he doesn’t know why. He doesn’t understand what’s going on, and yet he does.

“I see,” is all Izuku says quietly, feeling very small. “If that’s all you have to say, then...”
Watanuki grins.

All that malice dissipates into nothingness. Whatever darkness and wrongness he wore drops and sinks into the ground, and Izuku can breathe again.

Watanuki claps a hand on Izuku’s shoulder. His touch is warm. “My message to you is a little different,” he says, as if he was speaking to someone else entirely just moments ago. “All I have to say is this: have both feet on the ground. Know who your friends are.”

Silence.

What?

The sliding door slams open, and Kero cartwheels into the garden. He partakes in the art of reading the situation for a moment, then throws an acerbic glare at Watanuki.

“You said something weird,” Kero hisses, making his way between Izuku and Watanuki. He plants himself as a very tiny but very welcome wall between the two. “I bet you told Izuku some cryptic nonsense again.”

Watanuki simply shrugs. “You may interpret my words however you like.” His eyes meet Izuku’s, almost doll-like again, and he says, “I recommend that you follow your own path. Understand? You are your own person.”

Izuku understands. He just doesn’t know why Watanuki felt the need to tell him.

And so he and Kero leave the Wish-Granting Shop. Kero herds Izuku out while glaring at Watanuki, murmuring inaudible insults under his breath. Maru and Moro see them off, waving in sync and bowing when they step past the boundary.

Watanuki waves them goodbye from the window. Something strange is written onto his face, and the final smile he gives is cold.
Once they’re back in reality, Kero turns to Izuku with narrowed eyes. “So, did he give you a pep talk or something?”

Izuku laughs. Despite his best efforts, a little bit of hysteria creeps into his voice. “I wish.”

“Don’t listen to him.” Kero crosses his arms and scowls at the empty plot of land behind them. “People who know too much never give the full story to people who want it. The Shopkeeper might seem nice, but he’s taken so much and given back so little.”

Has he really?

What you want and what you need. Everyone knows the first; nobody knows the second. It’s only natural that someone who knows everything knows everybody’s second.

Perhaps there’s a reason people who know everything say nothing. Izuku doesn’t know. In this vast, confusing world, all he can do is stumble and struggle through the darkness, following the path that those before him left with their dying wish.

“Since when have we ever known what’s good for us?”

The setting sun illuminates Kero’s features as he turns to face Izuku, confused. “What?”

Izuku closes his eyes. Opens them. Looks down at his hands.

“It’s fine,” is all Izuku can say, because it’s true. He’s alive, his friends are safe, he’s armed with knowledge of the future. His head pounds, his heart aches, something deep inside him cries out no, no, you don’t understand, I have to believe.

He’s fine.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku gives Kero a small smile. “Come on. Watanuki’s given us more cryptic advice, so let’s prepare for the worst.”
Kero stares at Izuku. His eyes are blank, as if he’s seen this scene a thousand times. But he still says, “Alright.”

Something has changed. Izuku doesn’t know what. He doesn’t know why Watanuki’s nonsensical words break his heart, or why Kero’s calm acceptance of his fake smiles seems so familiar. It’s all the same, and yet it isn’t. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

It’s nothing. It can’t possibly be anything important.

(If only you had died– )

Well.

If only, huh?

[8:40] burble:
we have a situation.

Uraraka Ochako doesn’t think she’s a particularly greedy person.

Sure, she wants things, but hey, it isn’t always that simple, right?

For example:

She wishes that rent, food, clothes, utilities, living in general, wasn’t so expensive. She wishes that she was a little smarter sometimes; she needs those grades to be high and shiny if she wants to make it into UA. She wishes she could help her parents a little more. She wishes that she had a bigger dream than to just make it big and rake in the profits.
But it isn’t that simple.

Living costs money she doesn’t have, so she follows a three-step living style: sleep off the stress, tank the weather, and ignore the hunger. Studying is hard, so she puts on a smile and tries her best anyway, because giving up won’t help. And... her parents are always working so hard, so she finds a goal (money) and builds a fancy dream around it.

Ochako’s a dreamer, but her dreams are nothing in the grand void that is the universe and the endless ocean that is responsibility.

So Ochako wipes away the stars in her eyes and delves into the cosmos.

So yeah, things aren’t always easy, but as long as she keeps trying, good things are bound to happen, right?

About that not-so-easy part, though–

“Excuse me! You have a levitation quirk, right?”

The city around her is falling to pieces. For all Ochako knows, this is just another villain attack that she was unlucky enough to get caught up in. And what an attack it is; cars and trucks rising from the ground and dropping on buildings, people running for cover, all while the villain watches atop a balloon high above the buildings. Ochako tries her best to protect whoever she can, slapping falling objects and debris before they can cause any harm, and although she’s beginning to feel sick, she keeps going anyway.

Ochako desperately hopes that nobody was injured, and she hopes that the heroes come quickly, because this villain has a quirk very similar to her own and it’s making her feel kind of awful.

So when a boy in a green outfit and a bunny-ear cloak drops out of the sky and down in front of her, Ochako simply stares.

“Uh,” Ochako says. Her gaze switches between the chunks of debris currently floating around her to the green-clad vigilante sitting atop what appears to be a staff of sorts with enormous wings. The people behind her gasp, apparently more shocked by the dramatic entrance than the fact that the city is kind of being destroyed.
This is a very peculiar situation.

Ochako doesn’t get the chance to finish her thought. “Listen,” the vigilante – Deku, the vigilante! Wow! – says, voice a little rushed. “I – I know this is really sudden, but would you please help me take down this villain?”

See, Ochako wishes that her sense of right and wrong was a little more aligned with the general consensus. She’s going to be a hero; she can’t be cheering for a vigilante. It’s a moral line that she needs to set down for herself if she doesn’t want to be a hypocrite, and seriously, who does she think she’s fooling?

“Sure!” She grins as Deku holds his hand out to her. His touch is warm and calloused, and he flinches a little when Ochako grabs his hand. “Nice to meet you! I’m Uraraka Ochako!”

“Deku,” the vigilante says in response. He pulls her onto the staff, giving a shy smile. “Nice to meet you too.”

The city is falling apart again.

So, in other words, it’s just another day for Izuku.

Except this time, he’s running head-first into the fray with the entire team, in full view of the public.

As Satoshi and Shinsou leap across buildings beside him, Izuku can’t help but feel that this is a little too familiar for his liking. And yet it’s so different. For some reason, Izuku feels heavy and slow, as if he’s forcing himself to action through this inky mire of a life. A strange pit of dread wells in his gut, and even when Izuku looks behind him to assure himself that he isn’t being watched, the feeling remains.

“We’ve got a lot of heroes on their way to the scene.” Mei – no, Supporter’s voice is clear and confident. “Do try your best to avoid getting captured. As exciting as it would be to put my babies up to the test, it would certainly be very annoying!”

“We’ll try our best,” Hijack says. He pulls his hood down as they run, then moves onto fidgeting with his new mask. Other than the grappling guns, the mask is Supporter’s newest addition to their arsenal. “By the way, have you even tested this thing?”

“You mean Speak no Evil? No, I haven’t! You’ll have the honour of being the first.”

Hijack’s flat expression says enough by itself.

“This damage is pretty impressive, though.” Even though they’re en route to the scene, chunks of debris float around them. Satoshi – Cheerleader, right, vigilante mentality, come forth – smacks them onto the ground with his baton. “Are you really sure this one’s supposed to be a gentle card?”

Kero heaves a deep sigh from where he’s resting inside Izuku’s safety pocket. “I was sure, but everything that’s been happening recently is starting to tell me that the cards don’t really appreciate being thrown into a weird world where everyone has superpowers.”

Cheerleader gives Kero a strange look, but continues along nonetheless. Hijack looks like he’s trying to pretend he didn’t hear anything. Supporter mutters something about parallel universes.

It’s good that nobody’s asking questions, because Izuku doesn’t have any of the answers.

“Anyway,” says Kero, clearing his throat, “Float’s acting really strange, but we don’t have a choice. Let’s split up and try to clean everything up as soon as possible.”

“I’m on evac,” says Cheerleader.

“I’ll help him,” says Hijack.

“I’ll be updating you on the situation,” says Supporter.
Izuku blinks. Right, that’s his cue. “And – and I’ll be taking on Float.” He clears his throat and glances at his allies. “Any objections?”

And everyone, in tandem, though in varying tones of voice: “Nope.”

They might be a disaster squad, but at least they’re a coordinated disaster squad.

As they approach the scene, navigating the rooftops becomes more difficult, partially because the rooftops aren’t really rooftops anymore. Float’s really done a number on the surrounding buildings by dropping things that aren’t supposed to come off the ground on top of them, like cars and traffic lights and other fun objects.

The four of them take a moment to absorb the scene once they arrive. It’s bad, yes, but it’s bad in a very strange way. There’s a lot of damage and a lot of chaos, but there isn’t much that’s actually going on. Objects seem to be floating and dropping at random intervals, but there’s no malice in the way the objects are moving, only panic. If anything, it looks more like a quirk gone haywire.

So maybe Float really is just scared and confused. That’s good. That means Izuku will be able to finish his job quickly and go help the others with damage control.

“Welp,” Cheerleader chirps, grinning something very out of place, “shall we begin?”

Everyone turns to look at Izuku. Even Supporter falls silent.

If everything goes to hell, they can now all blame Izuku for being spectacularly bad at being the captain of this sinking ship.

“I’ll finish as quickly as possible,” Izuku promises. A good leader is calm and collected, so he needs to get his head in the game, come on, why is it so hard today? What was Watanuki trying to say? “So stay safe and–”

“Yeah, we know, Mom.” Hijack’s tone is less acerbic and more sarcastic. He adjusts his mask again, throwing Izuku an expecting look. “Maybe something a bit more uplifting before we all jump to our doom?”
Ah. That’s right. A good leader is calm and collected, but also brave and powerful. What’s a good strategy if nobody’s smiling in the end?

Something uplifting? Well, in that case–

Walking up to the edge of the building, Izuku closes his eyes. Opens them. Holds his pendant out and summons the Sealing Staff in a brilliant burst of magic-lit sigils. Smells the spring and sees the fall.

It takes a single snap of the wrist for the Sealing Staff to shatter into Sword’s deadly form. As Izuku holds up Freeze’s card, he smiles.

“Go beyond,” is all he says, because words that originated from heroes need not only be for heroes. “And... well, do I even need to say what comes next?”


And Izuku turns, knowing that it’ll be okay. His team – these radiant, young, determined bursts of light in the night, these fireworks – will be okay, because no matter what happens, they have the will to keep going. To keep moving forward.

So it’s up to Izuku to play his part and make sure the path they’ve chosen leads them to something brighter.

“Freeze,” Izuku calls, throwing the card high above him, “it’s a bit of a mess here. Give me an arena fit for battle!”

In a flurry of ice and freezing cold gales, Freeze bursts from the card, showering the entire street in fairy dust only the winter months can bring. The ice koi dances above the buildings, circling the chaos below, before rising high into the sky and bursting into two paths of ice, connecting to the nearby buildings, again, and again, and again, until a criss-crossing field of shimmering ice envelops the length of the block. Tendrils of ice snap out toward any floating or unstable debris, locking it in place.
(My time has come to an end.)

Then it’s up to the Fireworks to prove that an end is just a new beginning, isn’t it?

Raising Sword above him, Izuku grins. The surge of determination he feels isn’t new or foreign, and yet it is, because with it comes something that Izuku doesn’t understand. And yet he does.

“No future is set in stone!” His voice resonates, he’s shouting now, the people below are staring at him in awe, but when has being the center of attention ever stopped him? “A pillar of peace is only human! Throwing the weight of all your hopes onto a single person is cowardice!”

(No matter what happens

I won’t ever

Never again

Let you die.)

The blade Izuku has in hand is no flag; he’s no Joan of Arc. But he refuses to watch as the world crushes one man who won’t blame anyone but himself. He’s Deku, a vigilante, and this time, he’ll make sure to protect the people he loves.

Fate is a cruel mistress, but if Izuku can’t change things even now, then he’s truly and utterly useless.
Izuku knows that people are watching him. The world is watching.

“At the end of the world,” Izuku says, looking up into the endless night sky, “the only way to keep moving forward is to become your own hero. You can wait forever for someone to save you, or you can save yourself.” Please, *please* understand. “So stand up. Be brave. Become heroes in your own way.” Don’t force the weight of the world upon him and then leave him to die. “And no matter what happens, keep walking forward.”

In the silence that follows, Izuku breathes. He turns and smiles at his friends.

“Plus ultra, right?”

And with one leap, he turns back and throws himself into the fray.

“That was a beautiful speech! I’ll be sure to edit this one very careful before posting it.”

“Thanks.”

“And before you go, you might want to grab that girl over there – no, the one in front of those two – yes, her! Uraraka Ochako, an applicant for UA’s heroics program!”

“Uraraka, huh?”

“Yes! I’m sure her quirk will be very helpful. Get this: whatever she touches with all five fingers starts floating! There’s a weight limit, of course, but it’s still very impressive!”

“It really is. I’ll ask her, then. You can go back to helping Hijack and Cheerleader.”
“I’ll do that. By the way, are you feeling alright?”

“I’m feeling fine.”

“Hmm. Just making sure.”

This is really, definitely, absolutely, undeniably super weird, and it’s also super exciting.

Maybe it’s adrenaline, maybe it’s anticipation, or maybe it’s some of the residual hype from Deku’s call to action, but Ochako can’t help but smile. She shouldn’t be so cheerful while facing a villain that can cause so much damage, but then again, a smile always makes people feel better. So maybe it’s better to slap that smile on no matter what happens!

Yeah, that’s definitely an excuse, but a victory’s a victory, and this surprisingly short vigilante will definitely win, because that’s what heroes do.

Or – that’s what vigilantes do! Deku’s a vigilante! Vigilante, not hero, there’s a difference but it’s really starting to get vague, ohhhh boy.

Ochako slaps herself on the cheeks. The sound is apparently loud and violent enough to cause Deku to take a look over his shoulder.

“Are you okay?” he asks, and even though his hood and visor covers most of his face, Ochako can see his concern.

“I’m fine!” Ochako nods fervently, giving her brightest smile. She’s here to help, not to make people worry about her. “But, um, what did you want to use my quirk for?”

As they land atop the massive ice structure Deku magically created in a more literal way Ochako would’ve ever thought possible, he holds Ochako’s hand to make sure she doesn’t slip, which is pretty endearing. Then he raises a card in the air and says, “Shield, protect Uraraka!”
A silver bubble flickers into existence around Ochako. She yelps and snatches her hand from Deku’s. For a short second, Deku’s hand reaches for hers. Then it stops, and he clears his throat.

“This shield will keep you safe,” Deku promises. As a demonstration, he tosses a small piece of rubble at the barrier. It bounces right off. “The falling debris can really be a hazard, so if you could help me keep as much off the ground as possible, I would really appreciate it.”

Oh. Oh. That makes sense.

Hey, that’s nice! Ochako was just feeling awful about her own quirk, but this is a great opportunity to prove (to herself) that Zero Gravity is a quirk for saving people, not hurting them.

Pressing the tips of her fingers together, Ochako smiles. “You’re the mastermind, Deku! I’ll try my best!”

The way Deku falters and stares at Ochako is strange. It’s kind of like when you meet someone you haven’t seen in a really long time, and you don’t really know what to do, so you kind keep your distance and try to figure out what to say, and no, Ochako isn’t speaking from experience, what do you mean?

Curious, Ochako frowns. She steps in front of Deku, and the bubble moves with her. “Um, are you okay?”

And just like that, Deku seems to snap out of it. His grip on that fancy sword of his tightens, and he quickly turns to face the villain. Maybe Ochako looks like someone he knows. “I – I’m okay. Sorry for worrying you. Let’s – um, let’s take down the villain now.”

Ochako shuffles forward to stand beside Deku. “Sure! How should we take this guy down?”

“This – this is going to sound crazy, but–”

“Crazy is fine by me!”

Deku lets out a quiet breath. For someone so outspoken, he’s a lot shyer than he looks. Then again,
from what little time Ochako’s spent with Deku, she can safely say that Deku seems like the kind of person who’s strong because if he isn’t, people will get hurt.

Some people are born with strength. Others have to find it. Ochako doesn’t know where she is on that spectrum, but she does know that she’ll be strong one way or another.

“Okay,” Deku finally says, taking a battle stance. He stands tall and proud with his sword in hand, and Ochako knows they’ve got this in the bag. “This is what we’ll do...”

Kirishima Eijirou’s no hero.

It’s not like he doesn’t wanna be one! It's just–

Man. How does he say it?

Look at Ashido. She’s no hero either, but she’s damn well gonna be one when she’s older. She isn’t just peppy and interesting and cool. She’s kind and she’s fun and she can turn any situation from bad to good because she’s just that awesome.

Meanwhile, Eijirou can’t even bring himself to move in the face of a villain.

So yeah, he kinda sucks.

But when he overhears Ashido talking about some Wish-Granting Shop that mysteriously appears and disappears on the outskirts of town, Eijirou decides to take a trip. Not like there’s any harm in trying. If anything, it’ll be a break from the monotony of school life. Everyone needs some down time, yeah?

What he doesn’t expect is, uh, for the shop to actually appear. Kinda freaks him out, actually. One moment, he standing in front of an empty plot of land, and the next, he’s staring at some sort of fancy Western-style building.
But he goes in anyway, ‘cause if the people running the place can actually grant wishes – some kind of quirk, maybe – then that would be pretty sweet.

Don’t get him wrong! Eijirou doesn’t wanna cheat his way to the top. Not really. Becoming a hero isn’t just saying that you’ll be a hero and getting there the next day. It’s about the actions and steps you take to help others and make their lives better, or to protect them from whatever’s trying to hurt them, no matter how hard the fight is.

No cheating. If anything, Eijirou’s gonna wish for some awesome training tips, or some really cool gear, and if he really, really needs to, then he’ll ask for a little boost. Just to get rid of his fear, though! Not anything stupid, like an extra quirk or super strength or something. If people could give quirks to people, that would be super wild. Also kind of impossible, but whatever.

Another thing Eijirou doesn’t expect is to see a kid, probably the same age as himself, rush into the entranceway and sheepishly introduce himself as the shopkeeper’s assistant. Guess everyone wants a part-time job these days.

At first, the kid seems shy, kinda skittish, and way more uncomfortable than the two young girls running around the place. He looks really familiar, and surprisingly enough, he introduces himself as Deku, which is a pretty neat coincidence. The kid – Deku – tells him there’ll be a price, and sure, that’s fine, that’s how it usually goes.

But when Eijirou says that he’ll pay anything to have his wish granted, the sheepish act drops and Deku’s eyes narrow. He smiles, folds his hands together, and looks at and through Eijirou like he can read him like a book.

And you know what? Turns out he can.

To be honest, Eijirou doesn’t really know what he wants. He doesn’t even know if he wants. He only knows he wants to be a hero, but what is a hero, really? It’s all a mess, it’s super confusing, and Eijirou can only sit there and vent about how goddamn useless and how much of a pathetic coward he is.

Through it all, Deku listens calmly. Those green eyes of his are almost doll-like, empty but still shiny, like a creepy picture; the more you look, the more creepy stuff you see, and no matter what you do, you can’t stop looking.
Deku asks some weird questions that seem really out of place, but Eijirou answers anyway. Embarrassingly enough, Eijirou kinda explodes at one point and slams his fist on the table without thinking about how fragile cutlery responds to that kind of stuff, but Deku snaps his fingers and everything goes floating. That’s a pretty cool quirk.

After Eijirou calms down a bit, Deku asks him some more questions. He keeps on going with the questions until Eijirou’s nice and confused, and what does this have to do with getting a wish granted?

Then Deku pulls the floor out from underneath Eijirou and asks, “does resolve mean action?”

And man, Eijirou remembers every word of the conversation from that point on.

Deku says that resolve equals action and action equal fearlessness, which makes sense, it’s all good. But then Deku points out that resolve would equal fearlessness, which is kinda the point, yeah, so what?

The way Deku weaves his words together and stitches them from random scraps to complicated tapestries is super awesome but also super confusing. Eventually, Deku has Eijirou reaching the conclusion that everyone, regardless of how heroic they are, is scared of putting themselves in danger, so nobody’s fearless.

Deku smiles. Then he says, “Heroes are afraid. They’re always afraid. It’s just that they fear the thought of leaving innocents to die more than they fear their own deaths.”

And damn, that strikes Eijirou hard and quirk and leaves him stuck in his own head for a bit.

It’s hard to get the right words out from that point onward, and it’s obvious that Deku’s getting a bit annoyed. Eijirou’s probably being super irritating, coming in for a wish and then ending up needing a pep talk. But he decides on a wish eventually, and it’s something that he’s sure he wants: someone that can help him become the hero he wants to be.

That day, he ends up leaving the Wish-Granting Shop with a two new phone numbers: Charlatan’s, motherfucking Charlatan, and Deku’s.

Kind of weird, but wow, of all people, Charlatan! Deku’s got eyes and ears and friends everywhere!
That very same night, Kirishima gets so excited planning out his new training regiment that he knocks over some old stuff off his shelf. And wouldn’t you know it, Crimson Riot’s recording shouts the exact same thing that Deku told Eijirou: that fear is universal, and to be manly is to accept that fear and charge in regardless.

Heroes have a way with words, huh?

Charlatan ends up being just as badass as Eijirou expected. She’s all action and results, telling Eijirou that becoming a hero is harder in spirit than it is in body. Then she pauses for a second, thinks, and tells Eijirou to get in touch with a person called Midoriya Izuku, because he’s apparently a genius and can break apart everything that goes into good quirk utilization in a second.

So Eijirou gets Midoriya’s number. He accidentally loses Deku’s the same day, which is some pretty awful luck, but at least he has an awesome contact now.

When Eijirou first meets Midoriya, he instantly thinks back to the Deku he met at the Wish-Granting Shop, but for some weird reason, he can’t really remember how Deku looked or sounded like. He does remember the words Deku spoke, which is the most important part.

Midoriya takes one look at him and says that he has potential. That’s way better than Eijirou could’ve hoped for.

That one meeting is enough to convince Eijirou that a hero is more than what his friends say it is. A hero is someone who can beat down evil again and again even though they’re scared out of their mind. So what if they look kinda plain, or sound cliche? A good hero doesn’t give a shit, because at the end of the way, it’s the lives they save and the people they help that make all the difference.

So when Eijirou glances at the news and sees Deku, the vigilante, pointing his sword up at the sky and shouting, a pillar of peace is only human! Eijirou slams his books closed, moves in front of the television, and watches.

Eijirou isn’t so out of the loop that he doesn’t know who Deku is. A vigilante that appeared last fall who’s been showing up the pros and the cops ever since – that’s interesting enough as it is, but everything he preaches is so in line with what being a hero means to Eijirou. So if Eijirou’s a little biased, sorry not sorry.
The way Deku stood in front of All-Fucking-Might and said, *there are heroes out there that have done so much for me, and they’re the ones that need saving. Not you.* The way that Deku throws himself into the line of fire again and again and again despite the fear of being captured or being killed. The way that Deku pulls people in with his ideals and leaves them awestruck.

That’s pretty goddamn heroic.

So yeah, Deku’s a mystery. He says he has magic, not a quirk, and Eijirou believes it, because how else do you explain everything he’s been able to do? But he’s also just a kid, and he reaches his hand out to people because he needs help, and people will always reach back, because that’s just who he is.

This time, it’s a girl with short brown hair that’s encased in a silver bubble. Even while facing the villain, she smiles, and Deku turns to face the music, blade in hand.

That girl? She’s gonna be a hero. Eijirou knows he’ll be seeing her at UA next year.

Eijirou leans forward in anticipation as Deku charges forward, sprinting on the ice structure he created moments ago like he was born to do this. The girl runs forward as well, fingertips pressed together. They look like they’ve been working together for years, not just minutes, and hell, they look like a real duo, Deku and the girl. Eijirou knows that’s what he wants to do when he goes pro.

When the villain starts floating shit again, Eijirou’s breath catches. But Deku leaps up, and in a motion too quick for Eijirou to follow, he thrusts his sword outward in a series of luminous flashes. Everything bursts into tiny pieces, and holy shit, what just happened? When did Deku get so good at using a sword?

The girl doesn’t let up either. When a chunk of pavement comes hurtling down, she reaches her hand out and slaps the debris. It stops in its tracks, and the girl cracks a wide smile. She throws Deku a thumbs-up, which Deku acknowledges by nodding.

So Deku’s fighting fire with fire, huh?

And damn, what a fight it is.

The villain keeps dropping shit non-stop, so Deku keeps hacking non-stop. He keeps slashing,
whatever pieces he leaves that are a little too big, the girl catches, slapping them all and then
knocking them gently down to the ground.

There’s this one awesome moment where the villain drops an entire car on top of them. At first,
Eijirou thinks oh shit, that’s bad, but Deku does something too fast for Eijirou to catch, and the car
just... freezes in space. It doesn’t float. It’s like a glitch out of a video game, where something stops
working the way it’s supposed to, and although you can still mess around with it, you know there’s
something off.

The girl doesn’t bat an eye. She slaps that car, stumbles on her feet a bit, but drops it down to the
ground below like any other hunk of pavement. Then she doubles over, looking like she’s trying real
hard not to hurl, and Deku holds a hand out to her and shakes his head. The girl looks kinda
devastated, but she nods, and from that point, Deku’s on his own.

Turns out that Deku’s a goddamn beast.

Without the girl’s help, he has to take care of everything. The ice underneath his feet begins to move
in weird ways, and it’s only after a bit that Eijirou realizes that the ice is trying to catch or at least
break the fall for the falling objects. Meanwhile, Deku advances, getting closer and closer to the
villain.

But just when it looks like Deku’s got this in the bag, the villain floats up, way above the buildings
and definitely out of reach.

Just when Eijirou thinks that it’s time for round two, Deku stops. He closes his eyes, takes a deep
breath, then swings his body to the side. He backs up one, two, three jumps, and then charges
forward one, two, three leaps, and in one giant swing, he hurls his sword up and at the villain so fast
and so strong that it pops the balloon into tiny pieces.

And, uh, the arc of the sword isn’t really an arc as much as a straight line. It kinda keeps on going
into the night sky, then disappears in a flash.

Deku snaps his fingers. The sword appears back in his hand. He says something – “Float, I
command you return to your form confined!” – and slips the villain-card into his pocket. Then he
speaks to someone Eijirou can’t see, turns around, and leaps off to help his friends.

Uh. What?
Eijirou has no idea what he just watched. He has absolutely no idea what Deku did. He’s never been the brightest kid in class, but when he looks at Deku and sees everything he’s done, Eijirou knows that Deku’s the kind of person he wants to be.

After all, what kind of person antagonizes pro heroes and cops but still gets all kind of support from the public? A person who’s been able to touch thousands of people with his words and his actions, whether they’re right or wrong.

So yeah, Deku’s a vigilante, and that’s illegal, but a person who has the guts to tell everyone no and the determination to see it through ’till the end is a badass in Eijirou’s books.

Eventually, Eijirou turns off the TV once the pro heroes arrive and Deku and his friends scatter.

He sits there for a while, staring at the ceiling, the dumbest, widest smile on his face.

Then he shoots off of the couch, slaps his books back open, and starts studying harder than he’s ever studied before.

He’s making into UA whether life likes it or not, because if there’s anything Eijirou’s learned today, it’s that if life looks like a mess, then all you gotta do is twist it into the shape you want.

And dammit, Eijirou’s gonna mold this life into something he can be proud of.

(And here we are.)

“Supporter here! Is everyone safe, preferably in one piece?”

Heavy breathing. Ragged breaths, unsteady steps, the sound of boots clacking against pavement. Izuku’s out of breath, he’s exhausted, he’s about two seconds from passing out, but he pushes
himself onward anyway. Kero’s familiar warmth against his shoulder is absent, probably with Satoshi now, but it’s fine.

Using three cards at once and then focusing all his magic into one final blow probably wasn’t the best idea. But it all worked out in the end. Now Izuku needs to get back home and figure out what sort of people he can talk to to help with the collateral damage.

He also needs to get in touch with the Uraraka and discretely apologize for getting her involved. Her face still seems strangely familiar, and although that weird feeling mostly disappeared when Izuku launched Sword into the fucking stratosphere, there’s a lingering sense of regret that Izuku can’t wash away.

“This is Hijack. I’m safe, but I can’t talk right now. I’ll be at the rendezvous point in ten minutes. See you then. Hijack, out.”

The heat of open wounds against the world. Pain, not unbearable, not nearly, but pain nonetheless. Float may have not been as violent as other cards, but tossing debris and metal everywhere leaves a wound or two or fifteen.

Izuku’s arms burn. It isn’t a workout burn, but closer to a heat burn, like he just stuck his arms into a fire and left them there for a while. It aches in an almost unbearable way, but Izuku pushes on anyway.

“What makes two out of three! What about you, Deku?”

Quiet breaths. Izuku’s grip on his arms tightens as he stumbles through the alleyways.

His allies – his friends – they’re asking if he’s okay. And he has to be okay.

Izuku opens his mouth to speak, and something tackles him out of nowhere and slams him up and against a wall. One hand pins him in place by the collar, while the other grabs his wrist. The touch burns, even more so than before.
In his magic-hazed state, all Izuku can do is struggle weakly. What? What happened? Did someone catch him? Who is this? He can’t – he has to escape, after everything, he needs to live on, he can’t stop now, because if he stops, everything stops, and of all things, that is unacceptable.

Then–

“Don’t you dare answer that, you piece of shit.”

Izuku’s blood freezes. His vision clears. His hands are clammy and he feels cold.

“What was that? Come in, Deku. Do you hear me?”

Static.

“Deku? Are you okay, Deku?”

And then–

A fist grabbing his collar, so close to a chokehold, blistering heat against his wrist, furious red eyes burning away the cold of night, a scathing voice in his ear, someone who abandoned him long ago–

“Deku,” Kacchan snarls, all fire and rage. “Where the fuck do you think you’re going?”

Oh.

This is...

Before Kacchan can say anything else, Izuku rips the DekuCom from his ear, tosses it up, and snaps his fingers. The wing-shaped accessory explodes into tiny fragments.
This is a conversation nobody else needs to hear. Least of all Kero.

Izuku isn’t afraid. He isn’t. This isn’t Yorihiko or Watanuki.

This is Kacchan, the boy who tormented him through his childhood, and Izuku isn’t afraid.

“Kacchan,” Izuku says. He tries to smile, but he’s too tired for it. “Hello. I haven’t spoken to you in a while.”

Perhaps that wasn’t the best thing to say, because the grip around his wrist only tightens, and ouch, that kind of burns, doesn’t it?

“You piece of shit,” Kacchan snarls, venomous and hateful. His eyes burn as much as his hands. “You think you can sit on your high horse doing all this vigilante shit and look down on me? You think you’re anything better than the Deku you are?”

Izuku stares. Kacchan’s in a bad mood, but eight months is a long time to let someone mull over their hate. Maybe Izuku should’ve spoken to him sooner – but no, this is Kacchan’s problem, but Izuku’s. It’s not his job to hold Kacchan’s hand and tell him right from wrong.

“You’re mistaken,” Izuku says, frowning. “I’m not looking down on you. Besides, I thought I made it clear that I want nothing to do you with anymore, so even if I wanted to, I wouldn’t–”

“Shut up!” Oh, he’s in a really, really bad mood.

As Kacchan seethes, Izuku searches for escape routes. He’s dangerously low on magic and energy, and this point, it’s adrenaline that’s keeping him conscious.

But. But. He can still see Kacchan’s lifestrings, those sparkling, thin threads.

Izuku doesn’t like manipulating someone via their lifestrings, but now...

No. He needs to finish this conversation. It seems that, even given time, Kacchan hasn’t changed. In
fact, he’s gotten worse. Before, Kacchan was violent, moody, and proud, but now, he’s all that and cruel.

“You think you can be a vigilante? Change the world and stupid shit like that?” The grip on Izuku’s collar tightens as Kacchan snarls. “You’re quirkless, you bastard! You think you’re hot shit or a goddamn hero? You’ll never be anything but useless.”

It’s just as Izuku suspected. It seems that the change in Kacchan’s personality is because of Izuku’s sudden turn to vigilantism. In a way, Izuku has stepped in front of Kacchan, doing good before him, and now, it isn’t Izuku chasing Kacchan’s back; it’s the other way around.

And for Kacchan, that’s unacceptable.

“Listen,” Izuku says, trying to word this as best as he can, “I know it’s hard to understand, but I’m doing the things I do because I have to. And I know you can see the problems the industry has. You’re smart, Kacchan, and you’re strong, but—”

A burst of heat and sound goes off beside Izuku’s face. It burns, but what else is new?

“No,” Kacchan spits out. His eyes burn, not like Kero’s, not like a hearth, but like a wildfire, out of control and all-consuming, a force of nature. “No, fuck that! I know you. I know you better than anyone ever will. You help people because you’re a fucking white knight?”

“Kacchan—”

“Bullshit. You do it because if you didn’t, you’d just be a useless waste of space.” With every word, Kacchan becomes angrier and angrier, and Izuku knows that not all that anger is directed at him. “Weak, quirkless, goddamn pathetic – that’s what you’d be! I don’t know why the fuck you’re going after these fake villain scum, but I know it isn’t because you want to save everyone. You’re just selfish fucking scum!”

Selfish?

(You wouldn’t know selfish if it slapped you in the fucking face, you child.)
Izuku raises his hand up. Grabs Kacchan’s wrist. Looks him in the eye. Feels something wash over him, not a veil of calm, but a cold, relentless fury.

And he smiles.

“Kacchan,” Izuku coos, voice silky smooth, tone melodic and sweet. “You called me selfish, no?”

“You wanna dispute that, bastard?” It’s clear that Kacchan’s expecting an answer. But Izuku isn’t kind enough to make this easy for him.

Someone like Kacchan wants to be a hero? This burning, explosive, uncontrollable boy?

Given time, yes, it’s possible. But given time, what’s to say he won’t become a villain?

(Put him in his place.)

Izuku cocks his head. He levels a glassy stare at Kacchan, who falters for a split second. And that one second is enough.

“Kacchan,” Izuku repeats. “You say that I do good for my own sake. You say that I’d be nothing without what others give me.” He pauses, watches Kacchan’s expression twist, and continues. “And you know what? You’re right. I’m nothing by myself. I learned that a long time ago.”

“And you’ll never be anything, you damn nerd!”

Izuku presses onward. Every insult, every hateful glare thrown his way, is petty and small in the grand scheme of things. So he twists his other hand out of Kacchan’s grip and grabs his wrists instead. He smiles when Kacchan makes an incoherent sound of rage.

“But now, with everyone counting on me, I have responsibility. People trust in me. People believe in me. They’ve entrusted me with their legacy. So I fight for them. I fight to make them happy, I fight to give them a voice, and I fight to keep them safe.”
“You can’t protect anyone!”

What an immature boy. Izuku ignores Kacchan’s quips and presses onward.

“So yes, I am a pathetic, insignificant thing. That’s what we all are. None of us are important in the grand scheme of things.” Do you understand, Kacchan? Do you understand how horribly small we all are? Do you understand how foolish your rage is? “In a thousand years, in a million years, we’ll all be long gone, no more than soil and stardust.”

Despite his control over the situation, Izuku’s expression twists into something more bitter and childish. This is the boy who ruined his childhood, who stepped on him instead of reaching out to him. This is the boy who needs to save himself before he can save others.

“And let me tell you now, Kacchan, that the scars you’ve left on every single person you’ve touched in your pathetic existence will have long faded by then.”

That one sentence sends Kacchan into a stunned and furious stupor. Izuku chuckles. This is all so stupid.

“You want to lecture me about greed? You want to point the finger at me? You call me selfish, useless, you throw all sorts of slander at me.” Smiling, Izuku shrugs. “Do as you like. I couldn’t care less.”

“Did I ask for your–”

What a stupid boy. “But before you call me selfish, take a look at yourself. Your eyes only look at people with scorn and hate. Your mouth only knows how to tell others they’re worthless.” Izuku presses his smiling face in front of Kacchan’s furious features. His hands are cold, his blood is cold, his voice is cold. “Your hands have only ever hurt, and to this day, Kacchan, I can still remember every single time you’ve made me bleed.”

What’s this? Silence? Has this fiery, stupid child finally burnt out?

“When have you ever helped someone, Kacchan?” Leaning back, Izuku puts on a curious expression. When, Kacchan? When? “Have you ever bothered to ask yourself? You say you want to be a hero, but all you do is bring others down. Do you know what it feels like to tell your friends, no,
Izuku cuts himself off. He can’t be like Kacchan; he can’t let his anger control him. So he takes a deep breath, laughs to himself, and gives his old friend a sad look.

Kacchan is silent. Whether he’s trapped in his own mind or caught in his own tongue is anyone’s guess.

It’s sad. It’s so sad. Why did things have to happen this way?

Why... why did they have to be even worse than before?

He – Kacchan - he’s still so young.

So Izuku reigns in his fury. And – oh, that makes sense.

So it was regret all along.

“Ah.” Izuku laughs; he can’t help it. This is all so pointless. “Why am I even asking? Of course you wouldn’t know.” He gestures to Kacchan, as if to say, look at you. “You’re the untouchable king. You’re strong, smart, and better than everyone else. But I advise you to take caution: stars don’t shine upon the chosen like they used to. Don’t mistake the spotlight for a blessing.”

Sasha, your words are more powerful than you realize. It’s a shame that the person who gave them to you is dead.

It’s all so futile. If Kacchan won’t change–

Izuku closes his eyes. He’s tired of seeing Kacchan’s burning eyes. “But why do I even bother? You know what you are.” He smiles, it’s sad, it’s tired, no more. Please. “You’re Bakugou Katsuki, and all you’ve ever done is hurt me.”

And yet–
And yet–

I’m here for a reason.

Didn’t I make that clear?

What the hell am I doing?

This is a new chance, not a replay!

So get your head out of your ass and change it!

And yet Kacchan is still so young, so naive, with so much room to grow and improve, to learn kindness and weakness and to accept himself and others for who they are.

Izuku opens his eyes. Takes a deep breath. Smiles, and this time, it’s a little shy, a little weak, but it’s also forgiving, because that’s just how it always is.

“Despite what it sounds like, I don’t hate you, Kacchan.” It looks like Kacchan wants to say something. But he doesn’t. Maybe he can’t. So Izuku continues. “I sincerely wish for your growth and success, because I know everyone has the potential to become a hero. But as you are right now, you’ll never be a hero. All you’ll ever be is a nightmare.”

(A nightmare I never want to see again.

Every time–

Every goddamn time–

I just get angrier.
And angrier.

And angrier.

But–

Not this time.

Never again.)

Pulling himself away from Kacchan, Izuku gives a shaky laugh and half a sob. He can’t bring himself to look at Kacchan’s eyes, so he looks up at the sky instead. All those stars, and he never once stopped to realize how beautiful the world was.

“You want to be a hero? Then I’ll leave you with the words of an old friend of mine.”

(I don’t know how to save you. But maybe you can save yourself.)

“If all you ever do is look down on people, you won’t be able to recognize your own weaknesses.” Izuku taps a finger over Kacchan’s heart, eyes averted to the ground. It’s the best advice he has to give. “Take that to heart, and I’m sure you’ll be alright.”

From here on out, it’s Kacchan’s job. Izuku’s given all he has to give.

And hopefully, that’ll be enough.

Having friends like Kacchan isn’t easy, but it’ll be worth it in the end. It has to be.

Without looking at Kacchan’s face even once, Izuku backs away and smiles. “Well, I should be going. It was nice talking to you, Kacchan. See you later.”
Before Kacchan can speak, before he can ask questions Izuku doesn’t know how to answer, Izuku throws his hand into those shimmering lifestrings and tugs back gently.

Kacchan falls. He’ll wake up in ten minutes or so, and though it won’t be long enough for his anger to dissipate, it’s more than enough time for Izuku to run away.

So Izuku turns. Before he leaves, he looks back one more time at Kacchan’s unconscious form.

Ha. He looks so peaceful, sleeping like that. Perhaps he'll get there someday in reality. Then he and Izuku can finally sit down and have a normal conversation.

Izuku turns to the darkness of the night and runs.

It’s all he can do.

Chapter End Notes

this chapter. oh my god. 20k words. and the formatting. oh god, the formatting.

anyway. strange things happening this time! some segments were a bitch to edit because of how scattered everything was, but i really like how everything turned out in the end.

of all heroaca characters, ochako and kirishima are two of my favourites. they're both really similar, being energetic individuals with their own unique and compelling motivations, and i definitely plan to expanding more on them both in later chapters.

so. bakugou. i've decided to take a different approach with bakugou's character. he's a super compelling character with crazy potential i plan on utilizing later on, but as they say, things get worse before they get better, and they will get better, but not yet. and to all you manga readers out there - one phrase in particular near the end probably sticks out. i wonder why?

also. some of you guys are terrifyingly good at figuring out what's going on. i think i made it pretty apparent in this chapter as to what's happening with izuku (don't worry, i'll make it really clear later), but god, i remember reading through a few comments who knows how many chapters ago and kind of just staring in awe. in particular, i remember someone essentially predicting the entire plot back in chapter 3 or 4 before i really got into things, which is just. jesus christ. that's some gravity falls shit right there. congratulations.
as always, thanks for reading!

End Notes

feel free to talk to me on my twitter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!