It's not really a quirk (but yeah sure let's go with that)

by Asarielle

Summary

Bakuguo growled underneath his breath. After more struggling, he managed to pin Izuku down. Deku looked wild-eyed and sad. “Why are you always—” Bakugou stopped. He didn’t know what was up with Deku all the time, why he kept nuzzling him during class. Bakugou ground his teeth together as he made a small explosion by Izuku’s hip, near enough to scare but not hurt him. Deku wasn’t even phased.

“What did they do to you?” Izuku didn’t respond, staring up at him confused. “You weren’t like this when we were kids. You weren’t so touchy, and you weren’t so fucking nervous all the time.”

Eventually, Izuku answered him, small and breathless beneath the other’s looming form.
“They didn’t do anything to me. Sometimes people just change.”

Featuring: a supernatural world kept secret from quirk society, where Izuku’s a witch raised by werewolves. Izuku has a magical ability to explode things and pause time, which draws demons to him. He has many secrets he can’t talk about, but that doesn’t stop some people from figuring them out. The slow burn Dekubowl is rife with mixed signals and confusion since Izuku has no concept of personal space, and everyone keeps tumbling over themselves trying to make things work out.
The Beginning of High School

Chapter Summary

Izuku begins his first day of school at UA and has to take a quirk apprehension test with an ability that's definitely not a quirk. Also, he should probably stop nuzzling his classmates during first period.

Chapter Notes

Updated 12/5/2017, changes to explanation of abilities + 40% rewrite of the first scene, some style/format changes.

Just as a quick warning, there’s going to be a lot of references to things that happened in the past that I’m not 100% sure I’ll actually write out in their entirety. I’d starting writing Izuku’s backstory, but honestly it was going to be a lot of time before any of you got to see the other regular cast of BNHA characters, so I just decided to skip ahead and only reference it in asides. As he makes friendships, Izuku may decide to share some of his backstory, but in this world I’m creating, Izuku is sworn to secrecy about magic and his abilities. This will cause problems with teachers and students pretty soon, but it's all in good fun.

The first two chapters are shorter, but the rest are 20-30 pages long in MS Word.

Izuku Midoriya, 5 years old

For years, Izuku Midoriya will dream of the day it all began, the day where the whole world seemed to open up into something bright and new, something terrible and secret. For the rest of his life, he will be forced into secrecy, into telling half truths and trying his best to avoid outright lies. His desire to be honest and true will be at perpetual war with the code and the price unknowingly placed on his head.

The lies will forever center on what he discovered that day.

And it’s not like it was a quirk, really. He had an extra toe joint, so he couldn’t have a quirk, not like Kacchan. The doctor had warned his mom that it would be impossible for him to develop a quirk. It didn't matter how much Izuku wanted one, the many nights he lay in bed dreaming, the way he would watch his peers with wide eyes and catalog how they'd first discovered their new ability. It didn't matter how prepared he was, or hopeful, or kind, or good. Izuku Midoriya would never develop a quirk, and that was that. His mom had apologized, as though it was her fault that he was broken.

Why hadn’t she warned him? Why hadn’t she confided that, even if he never gained a quirk, he would eventually be able to do things to help people, with abilities that none of his friends even knew existed?
If only she told him where she had come from. If only she warned him not to worry about quirks or powers because he was sure to get something, someday. Instead, Izuku spent much of his time as a child wondering what was wrong with him and berating himself for something that wasn’t his fault. Useless. Unimportant. A nobody. Izuku could remember Kacchan’s face when he picked up that pail, and he’d thought he was just joking around. ‘Izuku... you really can’t do anything, can you?’ But he could, and he knew he could, and he couldn't understand why Kacchan had started trying to put him down all the time. *You can read the characters for ‘Izuku’ as ‘Deku’, and ‘Deku’ means someone who can’t do anything!*

And that had only driven Izuku’s desire to gain a quirk. He wanted to prove himself to Kacchan, to show that he could do anything, that they could still become best friends and eventually heroes together. But all the other children seemed to be transforming before his eyes while Izuku stayed the same. That one kid had been born with his wings, but each year they grew larger. Another kid could stretch his fingers longer and longer each day, and this other boy could remove his own eyeballs. The girls in class ran around in groups, blowing papers off the wall with gusts of air or controlling the shape of their ponytail. Izuku would stare around his elementary school, figuring out what everyone else could do and wondering what he had to change about his body or do with his arms in order to make his quirk appear. The teachers had told him not to force it, but he was the only one who hadn’t discovered his quirk yet.

*He just wished his mother had told him.* But he'd learned long ago, back on that day, to be careful what you wish for. He’d always remember how it felt, standing alone in the attic with nothingness breathing down his neck. He would remember trying to take deep breaths like his mom had taught him, anything that would make it so he didn’t have to turn around. Everything in him had been screaming that, if he turned around, then something bad would happen.

He was five years old; he knew that monsters weren’t real. Kacchan had told him all about it.

But Kacchan was wrong about that, too.

“Mom?” Even now, he could remember how young he sounded in that attic. Something about those vaulted ceilings made his voice echo, made the nothingness seem larger and more dangerous. The sound of his voice bouncing off the walls used to be something he enjoyed, spinning in circles and shouting at the corners of the room. The attic had been a room of discovery and fun and laughter, somewhere he he and Kacchan could play without worrying about knocking anything over. It hadn't been this. “Mom, what’s happening?”

“Izuku, go downstairs!” His mother had stood tall in the attic doorway, her hair up in a bun, holding a glass of water and a plate that must have held his lunch. The hallway light had been shining behind her, and her face looked so stern. His mother was never stern. She was always bright and happy, surrounded by the smell of cinnamon cookies and autumn leaves.

But she was shouting at him, and his young body was hesitating, joints locking in place. The darkness stretched further behind him, looming, decaying whatever joy it touched. He remembered being so scared and not wanting to turn around. Something seemed to whisper in the darkness behind him, but he couldn't seem to move away. He’d been standing in the attic for five minutes too afraid to move, and he hadn't known why. He’d looked up at his mom, eyes wide and hands shaking. Back then, he used to cry when he was scared. So did his mother.

“Mom, what’s wrong?”

He could remember her shaking her head while she continued staring at something above him. “Izuku, go downstairs, now!”
He’d never thought of his mother as brave before that day. Kind and gentle and caring, but not brave. She wasn’t a fighter. She wasn’t someone who stood up to danger. She didn't know how to punch invisible bad-guys like Kacchan; she didn't have a strong quirk; and she didn't even like to watch hero fights on the news. Plus, whenever Kacchan came over to play Hero Saves the Day, she refused to play the villain, always saying she was the victim, the innocent bystander, the one that the two of them would be saving in the future. Because they were going to become heroes together, they’d promised.

But something weird was happening, that day in particular. Whatever it was, his mother wasn't willing to play the victim. Izuku could sense something radiating from her, but he didn't have the vocabulary at the time to describe it.

When she shouted the second time, there was something in her voice and her posture that had Izuku scurrying to obey, nearly tripping over his feet in his haste to fly towards the attic door, feet suddenly unstuck from the creaking floorboards. As he flung himself through the doorway, he'd heard a haunting screeching sound, a dull roar and crashing glass, before the hallway lights flickered out and plunged him into darkness. He'd stumbled down the stairs, finding his way through the dark, and headed toward his bedroom before barricading himself in the closet.

Izuku could remember putting a hand over his mouth and trying to listen over his panting breath and frantic heartbeat for anything happening outside the door. The silence seemed to echo and made everything seem still. He had been worrying about his mom, wondering whether he should go back upstairs because he wanted to make sure she was okay. She had told him to run… but Kacchan wouldn’t run. Heroes helped people! And he was going to be a hero...

Obedience had warred against duty in his mind, his small form trembling as he covered his eyes with shaking hands. He hadn’t known what to do.

And then the bedroom door had creaked open from where he’d slammed it shut, and he was trying to hide his gasp behind trembling hands. Scooting backwards, he had curled into a ball and tucked himself into the back corner of his closet, behind his old worn All Might plushie that he’d refused to let his mom throw away. Something solid kept nudging his hip as he squinted through the dust mites falling into his eyes. The bright light of his bedroom could barely be seen through the crack beneath his closet door. At some point, the lights in the house had turned back on.

“Come here, sweeeteeeee,” a voice had cooed, much higher pitched than his mother’s own.

Izuku hadn't known what to do; he didn't know where to move or how to get away. He wanted his mom to come save him. He wanted his dad to come back. He wanted All Might to appear. He wanted not to be trapped in his closet, with someone on the other side he didn’t know, with his mom too far away, and what could she do anyways, and how were you supposed to call the heroes on the telephone to come save you when you couldn't get out of your closet because someone was out there and they were...

“Come out, come out, little Midoriya-kun.”

He could remember pressing his lips together to keep from making a noise and pushing the leggings of his All Might onesie in front of him, the bulk of the body hiding his head from where it hung above him. The material of the onesie had been so soft, and the voice had been so scary, and he'd been so confused...

And then there had been noises of rustling around in the other room as his heartbeat sped to a frantic pace. It had gotten harder and harder to keep quiet, to make sure he wasn’t found. His lips had been shaking from where he continued to press them together, breathing shaking inhales through his runny
nose. Tears were trailing down his cheeks, but all he could think about was his mom, wondering where she was and whether she was okay. The computer in the room was still playing a looped version of the All Might theme song that he had been listening to before he went upstairs. He always forgot to turn it off when he left the room. The rustling and ripping got louder, soft thumps like pillows being thrown. He could remember gritting his teeth, afraid he would scream, and pressing his face further into his All Might onesie.

Out of nowhere, the voice murmured, “Or maybe you’re in the closet, hmmmm?”

He’d shut his eyes tight, willing the voice to disappear.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are…” He could remember a giggle, slightly crazed, and a large thump on the floor.

Izuku had shut his eyes even tighter.

“You can’t hide forever, and if you try, I can always burn this whole place down around you. Would you like that, Midoriya-kun? Have you ever smelled the perfume of burning flesh? It can be so sweet…”

The voice kept getting closer and closer to the closet, and Izuku opened his eyes to look around for anything he could throw or use to get past her if she opened the door.

“I’m going to find you… right… now!” At her last word, the door was flung open, shining the bedroom light into the closet's darkness.

Izuku would never have words for that moment. The terror of being alone, of his mother not coming to find him, of there being no heroes to save him because this was happening inside his home and not out on the streets. Every time he'd cried from a scraped knee or gotten scared by the sound of a cat in an alleyway, every time he'd been left alone because Kacchan and the others had run ahead and he couldn't keep up, even that time where his mom had forgotten him in the playground and it had gotten really late and it was dark and he couldn't see and he was alone... none of that compared to this day. None of that compared to the terror he felt when some creepy lady who liked burning people opened the door to his closet, and all he had were his hands. And what could his small hands do against an adult? They'd never done anything for him before, not even when Kacchan would push him down sometimes. Izuku's hands had never stopped anything.

Until they did.

Izuku threw his hands out in front of him, half to hide his eyes from the glare of the room and half in a desperate hope to ward off whomever was searching for him. And through some luck of gods or genetics or fate, he'd succeeded.

All of the sounds in his room stopped. The All Might song was silenced; the woman was frozen in place.

The closet door remained open, a tall dark figure blocking the way out, with waist-length hair and glowing red eyes. But she wasn’t moving, not her hands or her body or her eyes. Nothing was moving. Could she even see him?

Slowly, breathing deeply, moving forward an inch at a time, Izuku could remember the feel of the wooden floors beneath his hands as he crawled underneath the woman’s legs and out into the room. He hadn't seen any movement in there, either. Even dust mites hung suspended in the air. He’d sucked in a shaky breath, looked around with wide eyes, and wondered if he had made this happen,
somehow. If he'd stopped time or maybe paralyzed everything in place.

And then he'd had enough childish wherewithal to realize *Wait, I'm in danger, and I need to get out of here*, which allowed him to make a break for it while he could, scrambling to his feet and bolting out of the room. In the hallway, he'd looked frantically left and right, not knowing where to go, not knowing if his mother was okay. He'd wanted to go up to the attic to find her. He'd wanted to leave the house. He'd wanted to know that his mom was okay and that time had stopped and no one else was going to be coming after them. He'd wanted to escape this room and this house and find a hero to save them. *Heroes always helped people*...

Before he was aware of what was happening, his feet were following instinct and flinging him to the left, down the hallway, and out of the house. He'd shoved the front door open and been blinded by the brightness of the sun, making him raise his arms to shield his eyes.

Everything outside was moving. There were a couple of adults across the street, walking hand in hand; a car passing by across the road; the sounds of traffic in the distance. Izuku hadn't understood. Nothing here was stopped; everything was moving. From back in the house, he could remember hearing a shrill scream of rage and vague growling. He'd run down the stairs, face pale, hands clammy. Despite his clumsy tripping legs, he didn't stop until he reached the bottom.

“Oh, Izuku!” His mother was shouting at him, and Izuku would never forget that moment of relief *(she was okay, she wasn't hurt, they were going to be fine)* when he turned to where they would usually take the bus together. She was standing there, waving him over, her eyes wild and filled with tears, hair frazzled out of her bun. But she was okay, and that crying concern was a much more familiar sight than her firm stance and stern voice from earlier. “Come quickly, we need to go!”

It seemed like an odd twist of fate that a bus arrived exactly at that moment, pulling up to the stop, as Izuku ran for his mother. He could remember thinking that she must have called the heroes, that maybe they were told to evacuate and get as far away from the intruders as they could, just like he'd been taught in school.

“Everything’s going to be okay, I promise, just get on the bus right when it stops, alright?” Izuku had nodded quickly, his heart still beating at a rabbit’s pace. He can remember reaching her, the firm warmth of her hand on his shoulder as she slid a backpack onto him and caressed his mop of hair. He had wanted to ask her more questions, what hero agency was on their way, who were those people, how did they get in... but her head was shaking before he could get the words out. “Once we’re safe,” she had said, and Izuku had nodded his head. He remembered thinking that, whatever was happening, they just needed to get out of there first, and then everything would be fine.

Luck was on their side that day. The monsters came, and Izuku and his mother got away in time. But no heroes arrived at the scene, and the house would lay abandoned for years.

Later, his mom would tell him that they were drawn to him. He had been practicing in the attic trying to force an ability to appear, hoping that the doctor was wrong and he wasn’t really quirkless. He’d tried shouting and holding his breath and focusing really hard; he tried jumping and running and snapping his fingers and flinging out his hands. He had done this before, but somehow on that day, something he had done must have worked because from far away, a demon and a warlock were able to sense him. They were able to sense his magic.

Because, as all tales of all Izuku Midoriya’s lives begin, Izuku was born quirkless. But in this specific world and this specific life, Izuku Midoriya had something about him that was special, and it wasn’t just the goodness that radiated out of his heart. Izuku Midoriya had magic. Just his luck, though, there were demons and warlocks that had similar abilities, and they would stop at nothing to find him.
First Day at U.A.

For the first time since he was five, Izuku woke up in a bedroom that would remain his own for the next four years of his life. He and his mom had been traveling around, never staying anywhere for more than three to six months, since he was a kid. Part of that was keeping demons off their trail. Part of it was never having enough money and always needing to travel somewhere else to support themselves.

The end result was him sitting in his bed, finally about to go to a school for the first time since he was five years old. He was fifteen, and while he wanted to be looking forward to his first day of school, he ended up finding himself carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders. Or maybe that was just the weight of the secrets his mom insisted they had to keep.

Making new friends at school was going to be hard. He wondered if anyone was going to ask about his life and where he’d been, why there were only the barest of formal records, why he had these scars or even the scales on his arm. If he was going to be changing in a school locker room, he really needed to think of some excuses before someone asked a question he couldn’t answer. Izuku didn’t want to lie. He hated lying. Maybe he would just… shake the questions off somehow? That might be best.

His mother knocking on the door distracted him from his thoughts, her soft words echoing through the wood. “Izuku, dear, I made breakfast for your first day of school.” There was a pause. “I… I’m so proud of you. I’m worried for you, of course I’m worried, but… you’ll be fine, won’t you? You’re my strong little boy.” There was silence, and he heard a sigh before her footsteps signaled her walking away.

Yeah. Yeah, he’d be fine. It was just school, after all, and they were going to teach him how to be a hero.

He hadn’t been to a school since he was five, only showing up for official proctored exams so he could get good enough scores to apply to U.A.. He’d been dreaming of going there since he and Kacchan knew what heroes were, and that dream had never left him—to be a hero, to stop villains that put innocent lives in danger, to make sure that normal people could walk around and feel safe—although it had changed.

Everyone used to say he couldn’t be a hero because he was quirkless and you needed a quirk to become a hero. But he’d had these abilities for nearly a decade, and they didn’t feel much different than he imagined quirks felt. They had downsides, just like quirks, certain times when you could and couldn’t use them, laws that shouldn’t be broken, people who never appeared but were always watching to make sure you stayed inside the lines the rules gave you, those who misused their abilities and the consequences. It was just like having a quirk, only instead of “not being allowed to use strong quirks in public” because of normal city-wide regulations to protect against accidents and lawsuits, he wasn’t allowed to show anyone because they weren’t supposed to know that magic existed.

But how would he be able to fight villains with powerful quirks without using his abilities? He did well enough on the entrance exam, but he was lucky no one noticed and he got the circle set up in time. At school, someone was bound to notice him throwing stones around at some point, but he needed those in order to—
Izuku knew he either had a time limit until people at U.A. discovered that his abilities were more than just a quirk, or he was going to have to change how he fought. He already knew a lot of judo and savate, and of course he had learned to be faster than his pursuers from all that time sparring with werewolves. Still, while he knew going to U.A. wasn’t going to be easy, there had to be a way to hide what he was and still become a hero. There had to be. His mother wouldn’t have allowed him to go if he hadn’t promised to find a way. She still might take him out of school if he couldn’t manage to stay hidden, as well, or as hidden as a future pro-hero could be.

Izuku turned over to look at his wall of posters—well, three posters, he wasn’t used to living anywhere long enough to decorate. The fewer things he owned, the easier it was to run away if demons found him and his mom again. And that was usually his fault, being found. He couldn’t stop himself from using his powers sometimes, if he was in trouble or if someone was in need. Whenever he used his powers without a circle, demons and warlocks could sense it. He remembered how he used to call anything that came after him “the bad men” in his letters to Kacchan when he was younger.

He stopped sharing information about them a while ago, his mother’s scolding shaking him to his core. He wondered if Kacchan even remembered all the things he’d told him or if Kacchan thought he was crazy or something. Izuku would understand; it had been years since they had seen each other, after all, and months since Izuku had received a letter back.

His Eraserhead poster glared down at him, the largest poster of the three, with a picture of the hero jumping away into the darkness of an alley. ’Keep yourself secret,’ it seemed to say. ’Don’t let anyone know what you can do. No one can stop you if they don’t know you’re coming.’ The poster had taken him months to track down after the hero’s ‘debut’ (he was never a highly publicized figure, after all), but Izuku looked up to him as a symbol of what kind of hero he could become, how he might be able to still protect people with powers like his.

His All Might poster served as a dichotomy to the first, the hero standing proud with a smile, saving everyone, being a symbol to humanity that allowed everyone to feel safe because he existed and could protect them. *But how can you be a symbol and keep a secret like this safe? Maybe Izuku’s primary ability could be passed off as a quirk, but its power was two-fold, and he had other spells he could use that acted like some citizen’s quirks… those definitely had to remain secret if his primary ability became public.*

“**Izuku!**” he heard his mom yell from down the hall.

Right, he should probably get up. As Izuku started getting ready, washing his face, brushing his teeth, slapping his cheeks to wake himself up and make his mind focus, he began running a mental tally of everything he needed to have for school. He had already packed his bag the night before and —he checked the list on his desk—yeah, he checked off all the boxes for what forms and clothes and such he needed to bring. That just left him getting together some lunch, eating breakfast, and putting on his shoes before he left. He had roughly thirty minutes to get that all together and leave, so he should be fine. Right?

…

Forty-five minutes later, he was cursing his luck. What use was a familiar who didn’t come when you called them and got picky about your hairstyle right as you were trying to run out the door? And he meant ‘picky.’ His neighbors probably thought he was some sort of freak, now, with a raven pecking at his hair and him waving his arms around above his head like a crazy person. He just knew this was going to be one of those days.

“**Popsicle, stop it! Go hang out with Avis if you’re going to be prickly!**”
Stupid bird. How did he even end up with a familiar that was a bird? Weren’t most familiars cats?

“Stop talking back to me, and leave my hair alone. Picking at it isn’t going to help anything! Ow!”

Popsicle must not have liked his shouting, because Izuku’s scalp ended up stinging all the way to the train. He wondered if any of his future classmates actually lived near his neighborhood or even in the city. Surely everyone came from all over. It would be nice to walk to the bus with someone, though. Aaaand yeah, there went Popsicle, right on time to dodge the bus. Friggin’ psychic.

With the timing between Popsicle’s pecking, the bus route being on time, and his rather frantic walk-jogging pace toward the gates of U.A., Izuku managed to make it to his classroom door with over two whole minutes to spare. Sweet. Okay, now he just needed to go in and maybe chat with people if there were time or… wait a second, were there raised voices inside? And didn’t that voice sound like...

“Don’t put your legs on the desk! Think of how disrespectful that is to your classmates. And to the school! It’s school property! These hallowed halls have had famous pro-heroes—” A stricter voice seemed to be talking emphatically. It sounded familiar, although Izuku couldn’t place where he had heard it before.

“Disrespectful to my classmates? Why the hell would they care? Tch, what kind of middle school were you from, you two-bit extra?”

Izuku’s heart stopped in his chest. It had been years since he heard the voice, but wasn’t that… Kacchan? Izuku began reaching for the door, hearing the other person continue from inside.

“I’m from Sumei Junior High School. My name is Iida Tenya.”

“Izuku, Midoriya!” He grinned slightly, ignoring Iida’s outstretched hand, and leaned forward to brush his nose against the other boy's neck.
Iida's body tensed up, his hands falling to his side, his mouth dropping open. A voice could be heard from one of the seats saying 'What just happened?' while two people laughed. Another person asked if that new kid sniffs Iida.

Izuku stepped back and looked up at Iida from beneath his curly bangs, biting his lips and half-whispering, “Um, sorry about Kacchan's behavior.”

Like I'm the one acting weird? What the fuck. “Oy, Deku, I don’t need you stepping in while I’m putting someone in their place. He’s the one rambling and butting in where he doesn’t belong; needs to learn to shut his mouth.” Bakugou slumped further in his seat, jostling his feet on the desk.

“Besides, this is my desk now; it needs to be worn in.”

Bakugou threw a smirk over Izuku’s way, and Izuku found himself smiling so hard it reached halfway up his face. He probably should be upset with Kacchan for being mean to others, but everyone here was training to be a hero. They could stand up for themselves. Plus, Iida seemed like he was ready to go off on him again, anyway.

Shuffling away from the door and toward the empty chair behind Bakugou, Izuku shrugged his backpack off his shoulder. Looking down along Bakugou’s feet to where his head was leaning back against the top of his chair, Izuku made sure to catch his old friend’s eyes. “I missed you, too, Kacchan,” he said softly, walking past the scowl growing even larger on his friend’s face and snagging the seat behind him. He leaned forward to nuzzle his nose into Bakugou’s neck in greeting. Bakugou froze in his seat.

“Deku…” Bakugou growled, turning around so Izuku could see his burning red eyes. Izuku had missed red eyes indicating friendship. They usually meant someone was out to kill him.

Izuku continued on oblivious to Bakugou’s glare. “So what do students usually do on their first day of school? It’s been awhile since I…”

“What the hell were you… with my neck for, Deku?!” Bakugou interrupted him, voice beginning to sound strained. He definitely skipped a couple of words in the middle of that sentence.

Izuku blinked up at him. “Uh… s-saying hello? To my… friend?” From Bakugou’s expression, he might not have made a normal social interaction. Izuku bit his lip. How else was he supposed to greet someone? Maybe like the tengu? They nodded their heads...

“Were you raised by fucking wolves or something?” Bakugou snarled back, and Izuku hoped that he was kidding. He knew about the werewolves, didn’t he? Izuku had written to Kacchan a lot about them.

Izuku stared at his friend in confusion. "I mean, I was raised with them...?"

There was a sudden noise at the door.

The nice girl whom he had saved from the zero-pointer robot during the entrance exam was squealing as she pointed at him. Bubbly and loud, he heard her exclaim, “Oh, it’s you! Curly-hair kid!”

How she found him so quickly in his seat behind Bakugou, he wasn’t sure. Was he that easily recognizable? That wasn’t good. He subconsciously moved to flatten his hair. Why was it always the hair that got him in trouble?

“I’m glad you made it. I mean, Present Mic said you would but… I wasn’t really sure what happened, I mean everything around us just seemed to stop and… huh? What? Are you okay?”
Izuku was trying to hush her with eyes and facial expressions as much as possible, paranoid and highly aware of the room full of potential classmates and friends who were still sitting in utter silence around him. *He couldn’t believe she actually saw what was happening! But didn’t he manage to affect her with his power as well?* Before she could continue revealing one of the three things he was absolutely trying to keep hidden from his classmates—*of all the things to happen on his first day!*—another person interrupted them from the hallway behind her.

“Go somewhere else if you want to make friends. Not in the doorway, and not on my time. Honestly, you kids…” the person speaking seemed to be covered from head to toe in black and had just unzipped themselves from a sleeping bag, which was settled on the floor.

*Where had this guy even come from? More importantly, was he capable of walking in a sleeping bag? That was a cool trick.* Izuku stared down at the discarded bundle of fabric. It looked rather high-quality and seemed to have two separate zippered folds, perhaps an extra layer for colder environments?

“And if you’re quite done wasting my time…”

Izuku gulped and raised his eyes to quickly meet his… teacher’s? The guy seemed older with black shaggy hair down to his shoulders and suspiciously sparse facial hair; he also looked vaguely familiar. *Maybe he could only grow a moustache? He also has weird white wraps around his neck in the shape of a scarf. Is it a scarf? The ribbon is rather thin for providing sufficient warmth and seems to be made of a strange material and, if anything, would be more useful as an accessory for detaining—*

“It took you all eight seconds to quiet down. Not off to a good start.” The teacher finished slipping his sleeping bag behind his desk. “My name is Shota Aizawa, and I will be your homeroom teacher this year. I want you all to leave your bags and materials here. There are gym clothes in the locker to my right. Grab them, get dressed in the locker rooms a few doors down, and meet me out on the Training Fields. If you don’t know where that is, try reading your handbook. I expect you there in fifteen minutes, or you’re expelled.”

*Wait, what?*

Silence met his proclamation, although Izuku was pretty sure he wasn’t alone in his dumbfounded reaction. Three full seconds passed before everyone was suddenly rushing out of their seats toward their lockers, which seemed to be labeled by and keyed to their student IDs. Trying not to get in anyone’s way (but still having trouble because he seemed to be smaller than at least half of his peers), Izuku managed to unlock his locker, get the assigned clothes (they didn’t have size labels but seemed to be his size?), and followed Bakugou who was storming down the hallway. He’d bet all of Popsicle’s hidden candy stash that Bakugou had already memorized the school layout and knew exactly where the gym changing rooms were.

*They were all changing in the locker rooms when he heard a “Whoa, hey, what’s that on your arm?” from a handsome boy with spiky red hair and red eyes.*

*And of course Izuku was incapable of keeping cool. "Oh, uh, this? Um, nothing. Just a… skin thing.” Caused by mermaids. Who enjoy killing people like him or otherwise dragging them down to their early underwater graves.

“Well, it looks cool!” Oh spirits, his smile was the friendliest row of fangs Izuku had ever seen. *Was this kid real? And did he have a preference for eating meat, because biologically speaking sharp fangs are most often evolved for—*
Soon enough, and within the time limit set by the teacher, all the students were outside at the Training Fields, most of them shuffling around nervously while others seemed to keep their stoic cool. In particular, Izuku eyed a kid with two-tone hair (*red on one side, white on the other, how on earth do these quirk genes work*) and another who seemed to have the head of a black bird and the body of an otherwise normal boy who was about Izuku’s height (*he looks like the tengu I lived with for a couple summers! I want to be his friend! I wonder if he likes poetry*).

Aizawa stood in the middle of the field near a circle on the ground. Once everyone was within earshot and relatively settled, he spoke out. “Alright, now that we’re all here, we are going to be doing a quirk apprehension test.” He paused, non-plussed, as a hand rose in the air and stared at the attached student. “Yes?”

It was the nice brown hair girl again. “Um… aren’t we supposed to have orientation at 8:40?”

Aizawa’s face didn’t seem to change facial expressions as he continued in a similar tone as before, if not slightly more exasperated, “You’ll soon find there are very few events at this school that are absolutely necessary for you to attend, and I’m not going to waste either of our schedules on the sentimental drivel the orientation offers. Everything you could learn there is in your handbook. Or do you want us babysitting you?” There was another pause as he seemed to both try to insult his new students and challenge them… or maybe he was just contemplating which of them would actually need babysitting. Izuku had gotten to babysit a few times for people he and his mom were staying with. It never ended well. He blamed the demons. His mom blamed Izuku’s hero complex. So it was 50/50, really.

Aizawa continued once all the students were sufficiently mollified. “Now, this quirk apprehension test will give me a good idea about whether any of you know how to use your quirks, your creativity in how you could use them, and how useful you may be as a hero in general.” He paused and seemed to look at a list in his hand. “Midoriya, let’s start with you. You scored first in the entrance practical exam. Enter this circle and use your quirk to throw this ball as far as you can, no holding back.”

Izuku felt his body still, and goosebumps raised up all over his arms. His… quirk? But his entrance forms definitely verified he was quirkless, and he wasn’t going to lie and say he had something he didn’t. “Uh, um, sir… I…”

Bakugou interrupted before Izuku could embarrass himself. “Deku’s a quirkless freak.” Okay, well, embarrass himself more.

“Uh y-yeah…” Izuku continued, throwing a shaky smile at his teacher.

Aizawa was zero percent impressed and even managed a sarcastic “And I’m sure I saw the zero-pointer get its foot get ripped up just by you standing there” before deepening his no-bullshit stare. He had the strongest ability to make you feel the size of a marble that Izuku had ever met, and Izuku couldn’t help gulping around a dry throat.

“Uhhh…” Izuku managed in response. Well, his first day was definitely going well. First day at a new school, and he was already managing to piss off his homeroom teacher. Great. *Weren’t they supposed to be the students’ support structure in school? Keep an eye on them, ask about their day, make sure their home life was okay? Oh shit, was this going to be his new pack leader?*

Aizawa pulled out a phone from one of his many pockets (there seemed to be a lot, but his clothes were black so it was hard to tell). Looking down at the phone, Aizawa announced, “If you’re not willing to take this test, your score will be zero. And just so the class is aware, as an extra incentive to do your best, whoever earns the lowest cumulative score in this class will be immediately
The class seemed to tense up in a collective WAIT WHAT reminiscent of earlier, and the nice girl began opening her mouth to protest, so Izuku straightened his shoulders and walked forward. “Um, I can… throw it, sir.” He could do this. He could use his ability if he was called to do it. He just needed to... uh, where were his stones? Crap, did he dig a big enough hole in his gym pants pocket back in the changing rooms? He just needed to slide a stone through the hole and... ah! Score! One stone down.

Izuku tried to nonchalantly walk in a brief semi-circle around the area Aizawa pointed to, dropping all five stones on the ground to serve as the five corners of the pentacle he needed to imagine in his mind. Breathing in deep, he imagined lines being traced in the dirt, connecting the stones, before he activated the lines connecting the stones and the ward of protection they would offer him.

That should be a safe enough radius for him to do this.

Izuku managed to briefly meet gazes with Kacchan while tossing the ball in his hand for a moment, before he reared back his hand for the throw. Just focus on speeding up the molecules of the air behind the ball, just enough force to propel the ball, a small enough sphere of air, focus, focus… small enough sphere... if you focus on the ball, it will explode, so DON'T DO THAT.

Izuku used one hand in a flicking motion at the air behind the ball at the same time as he threw the ball with his other hand. It sailed off into the distance with a pop of sound, the only noise a soft explosion of pure air. No one saw where it landed.

“Whoa… way to go! Now I’m gettin’ excited,” shouted the spiky red-headed boy (didn’t he say his name was Kirishima?) before Aizawa held up his phone. It read 402 meters.

“This is an example of one of the tests I will be putting each of you through. You’ll have no idea what your powers are capable of if you limit yourselves to what your previous schools allowed you to do. No more. Here at U.A., our motto is "Plus Ultra!" We expect you to be able to do more with your abilities each and every day, both with quirks and physical training. Now, show me what you are capable of.”

The class shared a round of smiles as Aizawa stared out over them one final time. He then lead them over to what seemed to be the primary running area.

“First up, the 40-m sprint.”

What followed was pure insanity. After picking up his stones, Izuku tried to watch everyone at once, cataloging their quirks, including strengths and weaknesses.

Bakugou was obviously one of the strongest and most used to his quirk, able to creatively apply it to nearly every situation (how were they supposed to use a quirk to do toe-touches, anyway?).

Some short kid with purple balls on his head, on the other hand, came in last nearly every time except when he managed to quickly bounce back and forth between his balls during the side-step test. The nice girl excelled in anything she could float or fly through, and the stickler-for-rules Iida boy beat pretty much everyone in the speed-related activities.

One kid had a laser that shot out of his stomach of all places that he used to propel himself left and right (at least the central location of the laser beam provided his body stability, whereas lasers from your eyes would have caused a severe head knock-back effect—). A guy with tape coming out of his elbows used them to overextend himself during toe-touches, swing around the softball for a throw,
and increase the speed of his sit-ups.

The bird kid seemed to have a familiar-type quirk that he used to creatively solve most of the trials, never quite first but nowhere near last, although Izuku’s favorite was when he used his shadow familiar to do pull-ups. There was just something really funny about a shadow bird doing pull-ups. Some girl with a ponytail seemed to be creating stuff out of her body to help her solve each task *(and how does she do that? Sometimes, he could swear quirks were based off magic because otherwise the physics just wouldn’t account for the mass allocation—)*. And so on.

Izuku, meanwhile, was limited to using his ability to times when he could set up a stone circle, which effectively ruled out all the distance running. If the test wasn’t one for pure athletic ability (which Izuku excelled at from prior training and, let’s be honest, a life basically on the run), then he would try to find a way to drop his stones and use his ability as subtly as possible. It was well and good for the other students to think he had some sort of ability; but he didn’t want to have to lie and say it was a quirk, and he couldn’t explain to them exactly what his ability was. Every time he tried, something stopped him, a feeling of blood in his mouth and his throat choking on air. He hoped they wouldn’t ask.

In the end, using his magical ability involved blowing up air molecules during the softball throw, to give the ball more force forward; exploding the ground behind him during the long jump to give him more force forward, combining that with a diving forward motion and a forward flip to propel his legs forward; and using the concussive force of a parcel of air to speed himself forward at the beginning of the 40-m sprint. Due to his physical training, he was able to reach farther during his toe-touches than 90% of the class and finished sit-ups faster than 70% of them. His grip test wasn’t the strongest in class, but he had been practicing judo for years, so his hand strength in general and gripping ability in particular were definitely stronger than other students who had spent most of their days taking notes during school.

In the end, their teacher put up a scoreboard for the students’ cumulative scores, and Izuku tried to steady his breathing as his searched up from the bottom. Some kid named “Mineta” came in last, then Hagakure, then… the list rolled backward before his eyes until he found his face and name. “Izuku, 8th,” right behind the boy with the squirrel-like tail that seemed incredibly acrobatic during most of the exercises and could use his tail to augment his strength for a lot of the sit-up and push-up exercises. *Eighth place, not too much in the spotlight, not enough to be kicked out.* Izuku smiled. *It was perfect.*

“Mineta, go back to the classroom and pack your bag. If you want, you can go to the central office and see if there’s a place in General Studies. Otherwise, head home.”

Silence met Aizawa’s proclamation, to which he turned his flat gaze upon his students’ faces once more.

“We have no place in the Hero Course for someone who can only find one way to excel. The life of a hero is dangerous, and failing to perform your best for even a moment could cost some civilian their life. Think me cruel if you want, but I will not promote fools.” With one last glance, Aizawa started moving back toward the school. His parting words were, “Now, you only have ten minutes to change clothes and return to the classroom. Good luck.”

Once again, they all scrambled to obey.

...
use balls to become a pro-hero? Perhaps he could be a useful sidekick if someone needed to climb walls or stick a villain in place, but he didn’t use his quirk inventively enough. The boy didn’t even try.

Aizawa sighed. He probably would have expelled three more of the students, but the Invisible Girl could definitely be useful for surveillance, as could the girl with the earphone jacks. And although his quirk did seem to make him a bit of an idiot when he overused it, the boy with the electricity quirk could certainly be useful in many roles. That Mineta kid just freaked out, complained, and cried the whole time, though.

Aizawa scoffed as he thought about the Midoriya boy from the beginning. “Quirkless? Really.”

Why would anyone want to claim to be quirkless on forms? Having a quirk was basically a social pre-requisite in the modern day, and the boy obviously had something for a quirk. He wondered why it wasn’t registered and if he needed official testing for it. Midoriya’s ability seemed to allow him to give force to an object or area, Aizawa thought, reminiscing on the softball throw. But it was able to act on non-solid objects, like the air, just as well as to solid objects, like the ground. Racking his brain, he couldn’t think of a suitable quirk. Perhaps something involving explosive force? A combination of his parents’ quirks might be possible...

Uploading a folder marked “Midoriya - Class 1A” from his phone’s school database, Aizawa read off: “Izuku Midoriya, Parents: Inko Midoriya (Quirk: Attraction of small objects) and Hisashi Midoriya (Quirk: Fire Breath).”

Since fire involved speeding up air molecules, perhaps having that quirk combined with a minor telekinesis quirk, would allow the boy to…speed up the molecules of an object? It could make a sort of sense. Something still rubbed Aizawa the wrong way about the whole deal, though. Why did his forms insist he was quirkless? And that boy, Bakugou, said the same thing. Why hide your ability like that?

Aizawa tried to shake off thoughts of government plots and secrecy clearances as he wiped his phone of the data, before his eye caught on one last fact. ‘Former education: None recorded.’

Where on earth was this boy from? And how was he going to teach a boy who’d never been taught?
Chapter Summary

Izuku tries to form new friendships, learn to like rule-obsessed acquaintances, and step into the role of a villain... or maybe all three at once.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The next day, Izuku made it to homeroom with fifteen minutes to spare. A good half of the class was already there, so Izuku figured coming into class any earlier was not necessary. He was thankful for that since the bus scheduling would have gotten increasingly difficult if he wanted to come fifteen minutes earlier for homeroom. Deciding to spend his pre-homeroom time talking to other students, Izuku scanned the room and found the cute girl from the entrance exam setting her bag down several seats back and to the left.

“Hey there! I, uh, didn’t catch your name before. I mean, uh, yesterday?” Izuku figured he would get better at this talking thing as he went along. The beginning of the day always seemed to be the worst.

The girl smiled back at him in good humor, going so far as to offer her hand. “Oh, sorry! I’m Ochako Uraraka. Pleased to meet you!”

“I’m, uh, Izuku Midoriya. I think you already knew that, though…?” he trailed off, trying to remember what she said yesterday in front of the class. He only remembered a vague sort of panic, though.

Uraraka continued smiling at him in her own personal ray of sunshine. “Yeah, I asked about you after the exam. I wanted to thank you for saving me, so I tried to give you some of my points, but Present Mic said you didn’t need them.”

Izuku scratched his head. He doubted he would have needed them. “Er, yeah, I’d already gotten some, um, villain points, and then I guess they gave me hero points or something on top of that?”

“Ohhh that would make sense,” nodded Uraraka. She settled down in her seat and folder her fingers together in her lap.

Izuku continued talking with Uraraka up until class began. He wasn’t able to learn much. She was a girl, she had a quirk that allowed her to change the gravitational effect on objects or people, and she lived in an apartment with both of her parents in the city. Oh yeah, and she loved mochi. Izuku told her about how he tried to feed his raven some mochi ice cream, since he usually loves popsicles and cold things, but he hated it. She seemed to find it funny that he fed his raven human food. ‘Doesn’t that make them sick?’ She had a nice laugh.

The homeroom bell rung overhead. “We have nothing for homeroom today. Just keep quiet and sit in a seat,” announced caterpillar Aizawa from the front of the classroom, causing everyone to change seats to find a new friend to talk to. Izuku had returned to his seat behind Bakugou, and he stayed there as the red-headed, red-eyed boy from yesterday plonked his butt in the seat next to them.
“Hey, I’m Eijiro Kirishima! You’re Bakugou, right?”

Bakugou’s typical sneer was back in place. “What do you want, hair for brains?”

“It’s Kirishima,” reminded the boy.

“That doesn’t describe anything,” Bakugou parroted back.

Izuku suppressed a smile. *Kacchan never uses people’s names until they’re close friends. Sometimes, not even then. Guess some things haven’t changed since elementary school.*

“Anyway, man, I wanted to get to know you.” Kirishima stuck his foot through the side of the chair and leaned over its arm-rail. “Your quirk is really awesome. What else can you do besides blast yourself forward and explode things to make them go fast?”

Now, Bakugou was many things in his life. Proud, strong, determined, *(and loyal, whispered a part of Izuku’s mind that he would never share aloud)*, and he definitely possessed some anger issues. But Kirishima had just lucked out—because if there was a way to get into Bakugou’s good graces, it was by telling him how awesome he was. Or having him win something against you, to prove said awesomeness, but that ran the risk of having to let him win, and if he found out you did that, he would be pissed. Izuku wondered if Kirishima had sensed something about Bakugou’s pride, or if he just naturally knew how to make people feel better. He’d only talked to Kirishima twice, and both instances took place in the locker room yesterday.

“Man, that was rather harsh, don’t you think?” Kirishima asked, shrugging out of his gym shirt while simultaneously peeling off his shoes foot-by-foot.

“What was?” Izuku turned curious eyes his way, wary to keep only his front showing to his classmates as they all changed clothes together.

“I mean, he just expelled a kid on their first day of class,” snorted Kirishima.

“Oh, does that not normally happen?” Izuku had just finished pulling on his shirt and was now struggling with pants. He had almost finished up his zipper when the boy next to him whistled.

“Dude, what type of school did you go to?” That was the boy with the electricity quirk, if Izuku remembered correctly. Kameri? Kami? Kamenina? And he was kind of staring at Izuku now.

Izuku saw Bakugou storming out of the locker room. “Uhh… gotta hurry back to class!”

“The rules clearly state that running in the hallways—” Iida again.

“Got it!” shouted Izuku behind him. Whew, one confrontation down. Maybe he’d just chase after Kacchan when people started asking questions? That sounded like a viable plan.

There seemed to be a bell that went off between classes to let the students know they had ten minutes of freedom to mill around their classroom, get settled back down, and figure out whether to talk to the same people as last period or new ones for a new class period. Kacchan seemed temporarily Done with people in general and had headed off to use the bathroom (and Kirishima had wisely wondered off to talk to the lightning guy when Kacchan’s hands started sparking), so Izuku looked around for one of the other people he’d tagged in his head to stalk for friendship. Spotting the boy with the bird head, Izuku headed over toward him with his hands shoved in his pockets and his smile a bit shaky.

“Hi, my name is Izuku Midoriya. I, uh, I was wondering, what your name might… be?” That
sounded about as formal as his introductions with Kirishima and Uraraka. He hadn’t seen anyone else conducting intense stare-downs followed by casual neck-sniffing, like werewolves did, so he figured that might not be normal. Maybe. He could always try it again?

“Greetings, I am Fumikage Tokoyami.” The nod that the bird guy shot back seemed par for the course from Izuku’s previous experience with birdlike creatures. He had spent several summers in a row with tengu in this mountain region with his mom, and although they seemed more birdlike than humanlike (whereas Tokoyami seemed to be mostly human except for some feathers and a beak; he even had teeth!), Izuku bet they had similar mannerisms.

Izuku smiled. “I lived with several people with, uh, bird-related abilities for a while, so I thought it would be really cool to, um, talk with you? Is that too much information? You look like a really cool guy.” Izuku forcefully focused on making his mouth not move for the few seconds it took for the bird guy’s head to move from a reared-back startled position to a more relaxed slight head-tilt.

Progress!

“You seem to be earnest in your intentions. I hope the skies meet favorably on our meeting.” Izuku beamed a smile back in response. That sounded like a ‘we will soon be best friends forever’ to him. Bird guy—uh, Tokoyami—tilted his head in the direction Bakugou had stormed off to. Kacchan really had a problem with storming. “You seem to have former relations with some of the students.”

“Huh? You mean Kacchan? We were friends when we were kids, but I haven’t actually gotten to see him for years. I had to move around a lot because of, uh, my mom.” Izuku rambled to a stop, unsure of where to go from there. He generally tried to avoid lying, and that was mostly the truth so far. He settled on saying something else he knew to be true. “He’s going to be a great hero, someday.”

Tokoyami turned his piercing red eyes on Izuku. What was up with all these students with red eyes? Was it secretly a characteristic of heroes? ‘Must have demon eye colors to enhance ironic dichotomy?’ That would be stupid. “Why does he call you ‘Deku’?”

“Oh, uh, you heard that?” Izuku tried to chuckle, but it quickly fell to silence as he tapped his fingers against the desk he was sitting at. He decided to just go with the truth. “When we were kids he gave it to me as a nickname because my, uh, the kanji of my name could almost be read like ‘Deku’ or, uh, you know kind of useless? Because I didn’t have a quirk.”

Tokoyami looked back at him passively. “But you have a quirk.”

Izuku forced a laugh again, smiling as he thought back to his childhood. “Well, I mean it’s kind of a joke now? Because I’m not a deku? But... I guess in a lot of ways, I am useless. I can’t—” Can’t be a hero, the way that I want. Can’t be like All Might and stand up in the light of day to protect the innocent. I have to be in the shadows. Izuku shook his head to stop those thoughts from bringing him down. “I don’t know, I guess it doesn’t matter. I’m not insulted by it, though! I think he’s more embarrassed that I call him ‘Kacchan’, honestly, but it just feels weird to call him ‘Katsuki’ now.” It went unsaid that they were definitely on a first-name basis, which was atypical outside of family and very close friends.

Tokoyami seemed to stare at him intensely in response, and Izuku briefly wondered if he had shared too much. It had been a long time since he tried to make new friends. How honest were people with each other during first meetings? What kind of things did friends talk about if not past experiences? Oh wait, he knew!

Izuku smiled over at Tokoyami after checking that they still had five more minutes until their English
class. “So… do you like poetry?”

A couple minutes before the next period, Izuku went back to his seat behind Kacchan. He wasn’t following him around! He just knew how Kacchan was with people, and it generally wasn’t very friendly or placative, so having Izuku around might help things. Plus he smelled good, like gasoline, which made Izuku feel awake every time he was near enough to sniff him. It was better when he nuzzled his neck, though, so Izuku leaned forward and ran the side of his nose along Kacchan’s neck, smiling. Bakugou grunt-growled in response. Izuku bet that Kacchan would totally intuitively understand werewolves.

Izuku leaned over Bakugou’s shoulder so their cheeks grazed one another. “Hey, Kacchan, is it okay if I sit behind you again? Are we supposed to switch our seats up between classes, or do we just stay in the same chair?” Technically, Izuku had already gotten settled and firmly decided this is where he wanted to sit way back in homeroom, but he was open to negotiations. You know, for the sake of friendship.

Bakugou bristled and his hands started sparking in the way that meant he was happy. Or angry. Or upset. Honestly, Bakugou used to just blow things up a lot when he was a kid; it didn’t matter which emotion was attached. Izuku wondered if that had changed much with puberty.

Bakugou then proceeded to tilt his face to the side and outright snarl-smirk in Izuku’s face. “Are you gonna keep putting your fucking nose in my neck?”

Izuku leaned back in his seat and looked at Bakugou. “Yeah, why?”

This only seemed to make him angrier as he whipped his head around. “You’re supposed to ask for permission for shit like that, you stupid Deku!”

“Like for what?” Izuku blinked innocently back, as Bakugou started to fully turn toward him.

“For things where you get inside my space!”

“Oh, okay. Can I have a permission?” asked Izuku.

“No!” Bakugou hissed at him, fulling facing backward now.

“So can I still do it then?”

“NO!” Bakugou yelled. “What the fuck do you think I mean when—”

“Class, settle down,” projected someone from the front of the room. By the non-Iida-like voice, Izuku assumed this was to be their next period teacher. The teacher continued on, exasperated, “Yo, there should be nothing warranting yelling on the first day of class.”

Bakugou whipped back around toward the front of the class and slumped down in his chair. “Fucking Deku better not get me fucking detention for drilling him on PDA…”
Apparently, roughly every Tuesday and Thursday during their Foundational Hero Studies class would be spent doing some sort of hero simulation.

Class 1-A had lucked out this year: All Might, the number one hero, had come to teach at UA for the first time, and he was going to teach their Foundational Hero Studies class. Izuku was doing his best not to fangasm over the thought of All Might teaching him how to be a hero. *THE hero teaches us hero behavior! Even if I’ll never shine as bright as him, I still want to try my best to protect people. There’s so much darkness in the world, and I know that more than most. But All Might stands for something; just his existence makes everyone feel safer. And even if no one can ever know my name, I hope I can do my part to make them feel safer as well. And to have him teach me how to be a hero—*

All Might announced to the class that they needed to change into their hero costumes, located in their storage lockers, before meeting him out in front of Training Ground Beta. Since that was roughly a ten minute walk from the classroom itself, they were lucky that the changing rooms were only a few doors down from their classroom. Everyone rushed to get their hero costumes as quickly as possible so that they would have the maximum amount of time for whatever their training exercise was going to be.

Izuku hadn’t initially known how he should design his hero costume. For heroes, your costume defined what sort of hero you wanted to be. Someone who needed to engage in physical combat wouldn’t want a cape, for example, while someone who wanted to hide a physical quirk may find one useful. This meant you had to decide before you even entered high school what sort of gear or armor would best suit your quirk.

Izuku, of course, didn’t have a quirk, and the abilities that he did have were not something he wanted to show off. As long as he had access to his stones, he could find a way to create a circle if it became necessary, but he would prefer to only use his abilities when he was forced to. In his dreams, he saw himself as the sort of hero who came out of the darkness, so fast you couldn’t see him coming, before taking down villains with a single throw. From experience, he knew it wasn’t that easy, and he generally ended up doing a lot of dodging and swinging his legs around in an arc in order to get near enough to his opponent for a throw-down. That meant his costume needed maneuverable shoes, pants that he wouldn’t trip on, some sort of shirt without sleeves that couldn’t be grabbed onto, and preferably some elbow and knee pads since he often ended up on the ground.

Drawing his inspiration from Eraserhead, Izuku had kept the design that he submitted with his UA application to a minimum, keeping everything colored black with only splashes of yellow while making sure to have enough clothing to hide his face and hair without impeding his field of vision. He’d been stalked down and found by a demon before because of his hair color, and while he could dye it, he would rather people not be able to see it at all. His final design ended up asking for a sleeveless black shirt with a hood and a cloth mask that could be pulled up over his nose, black pants that went to his kneecaps and were loose around his upper thighs for optimum movement, fingerless gloves with a polymer around the knuckles for extra strength and protection if he needed to punch something, and a pair of savate boots (no extra heel, hard on the sides and the soles, maximum flexibility and movement). The only color on his costume would be the yellow details on his elbow pads, knee pads, and gloves' knuckles. When he first drew it, the whole design screamed ‘scrapper ninja during the apocalypse’ to him, which appealed to Izuku’s more melodramatic side.

When he finally got to put on his costume for the first time before the hero exercise, Izuku knew he
had made the right choice. While some of the other students around him had to struggle into their uniforms *(a metal breastplate in addition to gauntlets, really?)*, he was able to quickly change into his pants and sleeveless hoodie, slide on the pads for his joints, and then shove on the fingerless gloves at the same time as his boots. Everything fit perfectly, although he knew he would need to wear in the boots to conform to his feet. In the briefcase with the rest of his costume, he found a pair of wristbands that seemed to have some length of hard plastic tucked inside that could be used a bit like a zip-tie. Izuku smiled, thinking of his request for something easy-to-access that could be used to tie up or restrain villains. Wristbands worked for him. However, his favorite part of his costume were actually the fingerless gloves. He’d sketched a small skeletal-like design on the gloves, but he wasn’t sure how the Support Course would decide to incorporate that. It ended up looking somewhere between a skeletal hand design and Eraserhead’s goggles, all in a yellow hard carbon that—Izuku tried punching himself in the leg—yeah, ow, definitely hurt.

Jogging out of the locker room and down the hallway *(‘Running in the halls is prohibited on campus!’ Seriously, Iida, poking your head out of the locker room for another lecture?)*, Izuku found that he was one of the first ones to the training ground, along with a girl with really long earlobes *(Could she lengthen and shorten them, or were they a set length? What were those plugs on the end?)*, the quiet half-white/half-red haired guy *(Why does his costume seem half-covered in ice? And why is his eye glowing? Did he get a sensor installed so he can see through walls, or—)*, and the girl with the ponytail who had some creation quirk *(Whoa, boobs… does she need to have a lot of skin access in order to use her quirk more effectively?)*. No one seemed very talkative, each of them checking out the city from what could be seen on this side of the separating wall.

Kacchan was the next person on the field whom Izuku knew, and he was… well, Izuku was just thankful he only had to look at his abs in the changing rooms and not on the field, because everything else was on display. He had a black and red sleeveless shirt, black pants with badass metal knee pads on top, and most importantly some huge tube things on his arms. *Maybe they’re to store his sweat? It used to hurt him to make really powerful blasts when they were kids, and that could have been an actual limiting factor of his quirk rather than something he would get better at over time.* Bakugou scowled at Izuku in what most would consider disgust or anger, but a couple seconds later found him leaning beside Izuku against the simulation city’s exterior wall.

“Trying to cover up your stupid hair or something, Deku?”

That sobered Izuku up for sure. His hair was the reason Izuku had to move, last time he had seen Bakugou. If he wore more hats or hoodies or dyed his hair or something, maybe they could have gotten to go to school together for a while. It would have been nice to have a friend nearby, rather than having to send letters to keep in touch. Izuku shrugged the memories off for another time and smiled over at Bakugou. “Yeah, I, uh, gotta mask, too. Wanna see?” Izuku pulled up the cloth mask to cover his mouth and nose, the breathable fabric not impeding his ability to take in a deep breath. “Now half my face is covered. Can you still tell what I’m thinking?” Izuku teased. Kacchan used to say his stupid face made him easy to read.

Bakugou leaned over, pulling the mask down from Izuku’s face and bringing his gasoline-smoke scent within smelling range. “I can always tell what you’re thinking, dork… because I’m the only one who knows, aren’t I?” His smirk was dangerous as he moved away.

Izuku’s breath caught in his throat, but the rapid beating of his heart wasn’t unpleasant. It was true. He had told Kacchan nearly everything in their letters. He had even shown him his ability and how he had to use the stones for protection, back when they had last seen each other. Kacchan even knew about Popsicle, didn’t he? Izuku swallowed, feeling a bit hot all of a sudden, somewhere between scared and overwhelmingly grateful. He was thankful that someone here knew. If shit found a way to hit the fan, Kacchan would be there. He could get everyone away to safety. He could find a way
to explain, Izuku knew he would.

Smiling back at his childhood friend, Izuku tugged on his hood to cover more of his hair and the blush creeping up his neck. “Yeah, just you and my mom.”

“Oh? Not the wolves?” Bakugou sneered.

Izuku was starting to get the feeling Kacchan didn’t like werewolves. Or maybe he was jealous? “No. I mean, they knew the, uh, witch thing but not what I want to be, none of the hero stuff.”

Bakugou leaned one shoulder against the wall, a smirk half-formed on the left corner of his mouth. “Didn’t trust them?”

Izuku wondered what he was trying to get at and shrugged in response. It wasn't that he didn't trust them, they just wouldn't have understood. And more importantly... “It wasn’t their place,” he responded softly.

“Tch. And what’s my place, then?” Bakugou’s voice had a bit of a warning in it as he leaned in, eyes the color of blood and promises.

Izuku was confused. He felt a bit hot underneath his hoodie and a lot like running away. “What’s mine?” Izuku parroted softly, part in challenge and part in fear.

Bakugou’s red-red eyes drilled into him. “Beneath me,” his smirk melting back to dangerous, “when I stand at the top.”

And the funny part of it was, Izuku knew his place. There were many places in the world—important ones, hidden ones, supportive ones, illegal ones. There were places you stayed and places you went to and places you could never belong. There were many places in the world, but none of them were or could be his. What Izuku was... they were always forced to live outside of society and never as a part of it. He supposed that explained why Kacchan’s offer, which should have sounded insulting, only tempted him instead. Because it would still be a place, after all.

“Alright, students, gather round!” boomed All Might’s voice. “They say that clothes make the pros, and you all are the proof! Take this to heart. From now on, you are all heroes in training! In fact, you’re getting me all revved up because you look so cool! Now, shall we get started, you bunch of newbies?” Everyone stood around in their hero gear, checking each other out and wondering what the next exercise would bring. They all had excited, anticipatory smiles on their faces.

“It is now time for combat training!” announced All Might.

Iida raised his hand, ever on top of a situation. “This is the fake city from our entrance exam. Does that mean we’re going to be conducting urban battles again?”

“Not quite!” All Might smiled. “While most publicized villain fights are in the streets of a city,
statistically the highest number of villain attacks occur inside buildings, whether home invasions or secret lairs. Intelligent criminals know to hide themselves in the shadows, where it is harder to be found. I will be separating everyone here into teams of two and then further separating you into heroes and villains. You will then fight two-on-two indoor battles!"

“But we have an uneven number of people in our class…” started the ponytail girl.

“And isn’t this training a little advanced for our second day?” pointed out the frog girl.

All Might kept his hero’s pose while pointing his finger in the air. “The best training is earned on the battlefield, where you can test the mettle of your quirk against your opponent’s. And…” he paused before pointing out at the group of students, “the uneven number will be dealt with by having one three-person team!” The class groaned at the unfairness, but Izuku figured that was more like real life than anything else. You never knew the numbers of the enemy. Honestly, he was more used to four-on-one, with him inevitably being the overwhelming minority.

The ponytail girl went to ask another question. “Sir, how will the winner be—” before Bakugou interrupted over her, “How much can we hurt the other team?”

Izuku mused that statement was Kacchan-speak for ‘Am I allowed to get serious?’

“Are the losers getting expelled, again?” Uraraka asked nervously. It wasn’t until she suggested it that Izuku realized that could be a potentiality. So far, it seemed like Aizawa was the only expel-happy teacher at UA, but maybe he was wrong? This was actual fighting they were about to do...

Iida raised his hand again but asked before he was called upon, “Are our skill levels or quirks considered when choosing teams?”

“Quiet down!” All Might shouted. The class settled as All Might pulled a notebook out of his pocket and began reading from it. “Your situation is the following: the villains have a nuclear missile hidden somewhere in their hideout. The villain group will get to choose this location. The heroes must try to foil their plans. To do that, the hero teams must either capture the villains or recover the missile by touching it. Likewise, the villain teams succeed by either capturing the heroes or preventing the heroes from touching the missile before the end of the round.”

Before All Might could continue, Izuku raised his hand. “Uh, sir? What happens at the end of the round in this scenario?”

“What do you mean, my boy?”

Izuku lowered his hand and shuffled his feet. “I mean, uh, at the end of the round, does the missile go off? Like, does it launch or just blow up? Or does backup for the villains arrive, and that’s why there’s a timer?” More importantly, do both the heroes and the villains sense they are about to die if they stay in the building with a missile that could go off at any second?

All Might searched through the notebook for an answer before seemingly giving up and inventing a response. “Ah, good question! The scenario is, uh… the timer on the missile is about to go off! When the round ends, the missile explodes! Now, we will choose the teams based on lots!” All Might pulled out a box labeled ‘LOTS’ that had everyone firmly worried about how this would turn out. What if two people who had similar quirks were placed on the same team, or their quirks clashed? “Let us draw!”

Which seemed to mean him. He would draw.

To Izuku’s dismay, he found himself paired with Iida acting as villains in the first round. He didn’t
dislike Iida, per say, but the other boy had spent the better part of their 24-hr acquaintance shouting rules in his face and karate-chopping the air. The other teen was too stiff for Izuku’s preference, but he supposed there were likely tons of heroes like that out there who Izuku might have to learn to work with. And if he really wanted to be a nighttime hero—which was his current plan—then he would definitely be fighting alongside heroes with stranger quirks. Everyone knew that the nighttime hero shift was filled with less-flashy quirks and more out-there personalities.

By the time Izuku and Iida had reached Building A, where the fake missile was hidden on one of the upper floors, the rest of the class should have reached the observation room. All Might had given each team a pair of headsets that would allow the onlookers to hear everything that happened. There were also cameras set up around the building that were controlled by an AI that automatically zoomed in on people when they entered the hallway. Therefore, everything they said and did from here on out would be recorded, seen, and heard by everyone in the observation room. Each round would have a Most Valuable Player and a winning team, but the two weren’t mutually inclusive.

Izuku took a deep breath, steeling himself for what was to come as they walked up the stairs to the second floor. He may not know how to talk with people in normal situations, but stuff like this? He thought back to his time with the tengu. He could do analysis, and he could fight. He’d been doing both for years. Izuku decided to turn that analysis on his teammate. “So… you have a mutant-type speed quirk, right?”

“Yes, it is called Engine, due to the engine-like protrusions on my leg. They allow me to move forward at great speeds, which is useful but perhaps impeded by the environment we are to fight in,” Iida answered.

“Oh yeah, the rooms around here don’t seem that big,” Izuku pondered. “And, uh, what about unilateral movement? How fast are you at turning?”

“While I can pivot sufficiently, my speed does work laterally, so I am most useful along straight lines or gradual curves.” Izuku hummed back in response, debating something for a few seconds before Iida interrupted his thought process. “What about your quirk?”

“Oh, I, uh, I don’t have a quirk.”

“I have seen you multiple times use a sort of ability that causes a great force in the air that affects objects. Do you assert that this is not a quirk?” Iida’s voice rang out from his helmet, and although Izuku couldn’t see his face, the tone definitely sounded accusing. Plus, if Iida had noticed that, it meant he had definitely been watching Izuku.

That was worrisome. Izuku was trying to draw a fine line between 'succeed in school' and 'don’t get noticed', and it seemed that he was 100% failing at the latter.

Izuku scratched at the ear beneath his hood and tried to think of an explanation. “I mean, I don’t have the quirk toe-joint, so it’s not…” he trailed off and switched gears. “Anyway, doesn’t matter. Uh, in this situation, though, you can count on me to be able to explode things like the ground or a door.” It didn’t matter where his power came from, only what he could do with it.

Iida nodded his head. “Hmm. What about using your ability against our opponents?”

“Uh, that’s a negative,” responded Izuku.

“How so?”

“I haven’t found a way to use it on an actual person without killing them,” Izuku answered. They
were both silent for a few seconds as Iida processed that bit of information with a taken-aback jerk of his head. “Or dismembering them,” Izuku clarified. "Not that I’ve actually practiced on, you know, people—just on, um, targets.” It wasn’t like he’d actually practiced on people, but he knew the radius of his explosions, and he hadn’t yet gotten them down to clothing-only without harming what was beneath the fabric. Maybe it would work on a metal suit like Iida’s, though, without harming the person beneath? He only needed about an inch of thickness...

Iida swallowed. “Alright, then, possible defenses?”

Reaching the top floor landing, Izuku opened the door for Iida. “I don’t know. We’re up against a guy who can form ice and another who has mouths and ears on his hand. I’m not sure about either of their physical fighting abilities, but I, uh, would guess that each of them likely has focused primarily on their quirks and not on, um, physical fighting? That tends to be where I excel, so if I can get under their defenses…” he trailed off. There was a chance he could beat them, but he wished he could be more certain of their odds and what could tip said odds in their favor. He shifted nervously as Iida nodded his head for a few moments without speaking.

“You would have to get past the ice…” Iida eventually hummed.

Izuku chuckled in agreement. “Yeah, past the ice, then I should hopefully be able to either capture him or knock him out cold. Same for the other guy.” When his partner continued to be silent, Izuku awkwardly ventured, “What about you?”

Iida seemed to shrug from inside his armor. “I am at a bit of a disadvantage, but I could use my speed to rush the enemy, either to capture or detain them.”

“So sounds like a plan,” Izuku agreed. He looked around the room with their fake missile inside of it. “There doesn’t seem to be anything around here to block the door, but do you want to try moving this thing into the corner? That way, it’s the farthest from the entrance.”

“So sounds like a plan,” Iida smiled back. Izuku’s lips quirked in an abortive smile as they both got in position. *I was an okay guy to partner up with, Izuku mused. He was less rules-obsessed once things got going. In fact, most of his usual persona had faded away. He wondered how many of their classmates were like that: one way in class, another on the battlefield.*

A minute later, the fake missile was in the far corner of the room, which had multiple pillars interspaced from entrance to end. *What would be the best way to avoid the ice? Honestly, Izuku hadn’t seen either of their opponents use their power at full potential, so he couldn’t really plan for the upper or lower limits of their abilities. *Did the ice boy need to be in the same room? The same floor? The same building?’*

“Hmm… if we are to be villains, then we should try to get into character.” Iida seemed to be thinking out loud. “Ha-ha! I am a villain!”

“I, uh, not sure that’s how villains talk?” Izuku interrupted. “And I would worry more about thinking like a villain than acting like one.”

“And how would you separate the two?” questioned Iida.

Izuku hadn’t really thought of that. When he thought of acting, he thought of movies and plays and things, putting on a show that wasn’t real. *And what if they were going to be graded on how well they accepted their role in this game? The more villainous you act, the more points…?*

Izuku leaned against a pillar as he pondered. “Well, I mean… how many villains have you seen in
person? How many have you actually studied their actions and behavior?”

Iida stroked his metal mask in thought. “I have seen multiple battles on television.”

Izuku disregarded that. “But those are recorded from far away. I mean… you need to consider how they would think. We’re supposed to be villains guarding a missile that’s about to go off at any moment, right?” Iida nodded. “And there are heroes that are coming to stop us. So, I guess we need to think about what our goal is.” That made sense, right?

The blank face of Iida’s suit offered no response, so Izuku continued. “I think, if I were a villain, I’d be ready to give my life to see this thing go off. That’s why I’m stationed here and not some other villain who’s going to run off at a sign of danger. I probably believe in a person or ideal I’m fighting for, otherwise I wouldn’t be here. I probably know that I’m going to die, and I will stop at nothing to stop some hero from getting to our missile.”

In Izuku’s experience, demons and evil magic users typically fell into one of two categories, suicidal or disloyal. They were either stupid enough or loyal enough to a cause for which they would die fighting, or they turned tail and ran at the first sign that their life was in danger. Thankfully, he typically only had to deal with the stupid ones.

“To stop at nothing…” wondered Iida.

Izuku smiled at him. “Just like a hero, right? Except heroes fight to protect people, and we’re just fighting to protect this missile.” He wasn’t sure how they would be graded on this exercise, but it was probably on more than merely who won. The more he considered it, thinking through your role and how you would use your abilities in that role to achieve a certain goal had to be an important part.

“I see your point,” agreed Iida. Rather than forming a villainous posture as he had planned before, he stationed himself at the far side of the room, as if to ready himself against an attack.

Izuku took his own position halfway up the room, asking Iida if he would check the window to see if their opponents were nearby.

Iida looked out the window and quickly resumed his ready stance, nodding at Izuku. “They’re here.”

Izuku had only a second to breathe before—“Aaaand he just froze the whole building.” He sighed and turned the upper half of his body toward Iida. He nodded at both of their feet, which had become frozen to the floor. “So… how do you feel about me exploding the ground beneath you?”

“It sounds… logical,” Iida sighed, obviously not enthused.

Izuku laughed in response, but it didn’t quite settle Iida’s nerves; the resulting grin seemed to have a bit too much devil-may-care and too little sense.

By the time Todoroki made it to the top floor, he expected expressions of frustration on his opponents’ faces. If they were especially self-destructive, he also expected his opponents to have torn off bits of their costumes in order to extract themselves from the ice covering every wall and floor in
the building. But they were unlikely to be well-organized with so little time to get out of the ice. Therefore, he was not quite prepared for the blur that rushed toward him from behind a pillar and shoved him against the wall. The speedster? Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of the capture cuffs in Iida’s hand as it arced toward his own arm, where he had it braced against the wall. That was careless of me.

However, Shouto Todoroki hadn’t gone through years of intense training under his father for some speedster to capture him on his first day of hero training. Side-stepping under Iida’s arm, which was attempting to pin him to the wall, Todoroki grabbed his opponent’s arm and iced it to the surface behind them.

“Almost,” Todoroki said. He wasn’t smiling or smirking or laughing or any normal emotion really. He just stared at Iida. He must have stared half a second too long because another figure appeared in his blind spot at his back, and in the next second he was choking, the crook of an arm held flat against his neck in the front while both sides of his neck were constricted. His tongue hit the roof of his mouth, and he tried to swallow or breathe—

Instinctually, his hand reached behind him and started freezing the first thing it contacted. Something hard… a hip?

“Midoriya!” from his right.

“Don’t worry, Iida,” Todoroki heard above him. “He should lose consciousness in 4… 3… 2…”

The sound of someone screaming pierced his ears, just as the world around him began to darken. He began falling to the floor, legs tangled beneath him, gasping for breath. Spots danced in his vision, and Todoroki tried to shake his head while he raised his arm. Midoriya had been behind him… if only he could freeze him to the wall...

Reaching his hand up, he encountered skin. A leg? He froze it on contact, visualizing a large chunk of ice that stretched and stretched. There was more screaming.

“Midoriya!”

“...I can’t blast it off my skin—”

“The bomb!”

An explosion rang in his ears, mere seconds before an alarm blared, signaling the end of the round. Todoroki tried to shake his head, his ears ringing, lungs burning with the cold, vision blurry. His ice still covered the floor, and his fingers slipped as he tried to stabilize himself and get to his feet.

“Are you alright?” That sounded like his partner, the guy with the strange arms and a useful surveillance quirk. He sounded like he was coughing. “I’m sorry, I couldn’t get to it in time.”

Todoroki’s world suddenly shifted into focus, and his bad eye burned. He hoped he would not need another eye exam after this. Todoroki found himself on all fours, choking on his own breath, as he shook his head. The frozen ground was beneath him. His partner was crouched beside him with a hand on his back, warm, on the right shoulder that always stiffens with cold. He looked up, and the world was a greyish white. Grey floors, grey walls, grey pillars. The scattered remains of some black metal littered the floor.

“Hey, are you okay?” His partner’s face filled his vision. There was blood on his right eyebrow, black dirt on the left side of his face.
Todoroki coughed words that sounded like a confirmation and struggled to stand up. His partner offered a shoulder beneath his arm, lifting him, and Todoroki gained a sudden hindsight as to what happened. The blasted metal, the screaming, his wounded partner… he looked behind him to see Midoriya and Iida both frozen to the wall. *He had managed to freeze Iida’s arm to the wall. And Midoriya—he must have frozen him while he was being choked from behind.* Midoriya’s whole midriff from hip bone to shoulder was frozen in a large chunk of ice to the wall, the ice chunk extending all the way to his elbows. His hands were free, Todoroki noticed, and he wondered if that was what caused the blast.

Midoriya coughed up a bloody smile at him, a piece of shrapnel stuck in his left cheek. “So.. who won?”

And Todoroki was not sure whether to be impressed by the boy or to stuff him in a coffin, so as not to prolong his sheer idiocy. After all.. who would be so suicidal as to destroy the bomb?

“*Now, students! Who would you say was the Most Valuable Player in this round?*”

None of the students had an answer. Everything had just seemed to go to shit in thirty seconds flat.

“*Uhm… ha ha ha! Let’s move on to the next round!*”

Chapter End Notes

Alright, just a quick rant. The BNHA fandom typically ignores this, but CLASSES AT THIS INSTITUTION MAKE NO SENSE. Starting out, Aizawa teaches homeroom, and he tells them they can skip the orientation to take this quirk apprehension test of his instead. After that test, which should have taken at least an hour (which equations to Homeroom + First period), Izuku says “well, I made it through the first day.” He’s only been to one period, not the whole day. Next episode, All Might does the hero training exercise. That’s not in the same day because we’ve already seen Izuku get healed and go home, so that must mean the “first day” was only going to homeroom, orientation, and then being let out of school.

So I’ve decided to follow this formula for the class schedule: Homeroom, 1. English (Present Mic), 2. Modern Science for Hero Work (Ectoplasm), 3. Modern Literature (Cementoss), 4. Modern Hero Art + History (Midnight), Lunch, 5. Foundational Hero Studies (All Might), and 6. Field Rescue Work (Thirteen). I only made up the class names/teacher for 2 and 6. Thirteen is said to teach Field Rescue Work, so I gave them that, and then I guessed that Ectoplasm is their other teacher because he’s the most involved teacher with Class 1-A that is not already listed.

Tl;dr I’ve decided to make my own class schedule because what the fuck is why.

Also, this chapter was supposed to be 2x as long, but the ending was too good to pass up. Next chapter is almost finished and contains: Izuku meeting more people, repeatedly making a fool of himself, and having dinner with his mom.
Battle Trial Fallout and Intruders Enter UA

Chapter Summary

All Might discusses the Battle Trial with other faculty, Izuku tries to make friends, and someone breaks in to UA to a little bit more fanfare than expected.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Midoriya stood towards the back of his classmates for the rest of the battle trial. The desperate ending to his first match had seemed to inspire the others to do their best, although it may have been the sight of Todoroki using his ice powers on the whole building. *If I were anyone else, Iida and I may have been stuck to the floor that round. We were lucky we won.*

All Might had decided that, due to the missile’s explosion, the heroes had failed, necessitating that the villains had won. He did warn that the victory came at the cost of the villains’ lair and their lives, although Izuku pointed out that their lives were sacrifices anyway and at least they took down some heroes with them, as well as any evidence of future villain plans held at the base. All Might had no comment. Izuku tried not to think of the small cottages left burning in his mother’s and his wake. *She was the one to tell me, wasn’t she? You don’t leave evidence behind. There are too many people who could find a way to make use of it.*

The next match started with Bakugou and Uraraka as the heroes - an interesting combination personality wise. They seemed to get along well enough when she took away his gravity so he could speed forward with his blasts. He didn’t exactly seem happy that she helped him, but their hero team won the round against Ojiro and Hagakure, the squirrel-tail guy and the invisible girl. Bakugou seemed happy to have won, but the amount of glaring and snarling he sent Ojiro’s way suggested he didn’t appreciate the multiple times the other boy tackled or tripped him. Uraraka had ended up winning the round by floating herself to reach the rocket while Bakugou pinned the invisible girl with small blasts and warded off Ojiro’s martial arts and strong tail.

Izuku guessed that Bakuguo’s currently constipated face had to do with the nature of his win. He’d probably wanted an all-out victory where the villains were down on the ground whimpering as he held the rocket aloft like a prize above his head. Izuku smiled at the thought. At least Bakuguo got the Most Valuable Player award for the round, by distracting and subduing his opponents while his teammate took care of the missile. That had to be a balm for his pride. Of course, the looks Bakugou kept sending Todoroki also suggested he was just pissed at anyone with strong quirks or fighting experience.

At least he was only smirking at Izuku and not acting angry. Maybe he agreed with Izuku destroying the missile and committing villain suicide?

The uneven match of ear-jack girl and Kamenina (Kameni? Kameri? Ugh he hated his name) against three villains was really fun to watch. The girl who created things out of her skin put a blockade up in front of the door while her partners (the rock-face guy and the tall muscled guy) stood between the missile, the window, and the door as protectors. The ear-jack girl was able to use her ear-jacks for surveillance, finding what room the villains were in, before marching up there with her partner and blasting the door down, blockade and all, using her boots, which amplified her heartbeat
almost like Present Mic could amplify his voice. Then her partner ( Kamenima? ) electrocuted everyone in the room while she hid in the hallway. With their opponents twitching on the ground, they finished the round by both walking over to touch the missile.

Honestly, Izuku was surprised the lightning guy knew a voltage that was safe enough that it downed the villains without causing any health problems. He's lucky no one had heart problems; that could have been lethal. The heroes won, and All Might announced Jirou ( that was the ear-jack girl’s name, Jirou ) the Most Valuable Player.

The last battle ended up being a match with 3 heroes vs 3 villains using the remaining members of the class, because All Might was bad at math. He’d announced that there would be one group of three people to make up for the discrepancy in Aizawa having already expelled one student from a class of formerly twenty kids. But him making the schedule up on the fly created four rounds instead of five where only two were 2x2 battles, one was a 2x3 battle, and the other was a 3x3 battle. Heroes vs villains-style. It all worked out in the end because it let the students see how differing numbers of heroes and villains could affect the outcome and dynamic of a battle. Still, Izuku had no idea how All Might was going to score them, now. Personal effort? None of the other villain groups had gotten as “into” the exercise as Iida and himself...

By the end of class, everyone was pumped. They had all gotten to use their powers in a battle simulation similar to future fights they would have as heroes--well, more or less. Some had lost before being able to use their abilities, like the rock-head guy and the guy with large muscles and big lips. Izuku had not expected to use his ability, but after the whole room had been iced, he'd set up a stone circle for protection just in case. He was glad he did. His choke-hold of Todoroki had been an improvisation based on not wanting to use his quirk on the boy, and Todoroki’s back had been turned so it was his own fault that Izuku managed to sneak up on him. Still, he hadn’t expected the octopus-armed guy to nearly break his arms while prying them away from Todoroki’s neck. That guy was really strong.

After their hero class, they all went back to change out of their costumes and reconvene for end of the day remarks. Once again, Izuku kept a running tally of how long it took the other guys to change out of their costumes. Laser boy’s and Iida’s seemed so impractical with all the heavy metal that had to be slotted into place. Speaking of costumes, Izuku wondered if he could bring his gloves home from school and wear them 24/7. They were so cool and practical. He wanted to practice hitting things with them more. The carbon on the back of his knuckles felt tough, but he wondered what its limits were.

Could I punch concrete without breaking my hand? Is there anything that would wear away at the material? And were the gloves fireproof like I designed? Maybe I could piss off Kacchan enough to blast me in the knuckles and see… nope, he’s storming out of the locker rooms. Again. Crap.

“Wait up, Kacchan!” As Izuku rushed out of the locker room, he heard voices echoing behind him.

“Man, give him some space!”

Laughter. “Do you have a death wish? That guy’s attitude is worse than pig farts!”

“Hey, how would you even know that?”

“Midoriya, I told you that there is no running in the hallways--”
The rest of Izuku’s first day of Hero High (as he called it in his head) consisted of him trying to learn people’s names and connect them to faces and powers, see how many explosions he could get out of Kacchan that hit his costume’s temporarily appropriated fingerless gloves (verdict: the carbon knuckles could take head-on explosions without damage), and taking notes on the hero classes’ curriculum. Kacchan may have also given him another talking to about getting in his space and asking first.

If you looked at all their classes together, their class schedules were mostly set with fluctuations in mind. There seemed to be certain events staged throughout the semester that they had less classwork during, like the Sports Festival halfway through June. The Sports Festival would be a highly publicized event where their goal was to get as noticed by professional heroes as possible so that they had a chance of winning a great internship at one of various hero agencies. Therefore, assignments and exams typically finished a good two weeks before that period to allow students time to train both in and out of school.

After the festival, they had about a week before they would begin their internships, followed by another month of class and then final exams halfway through July. All put together, that meant they mainly had assignments and quizzes from April through mid-June, with homework-light classes scheduled for mid-June through mid-July. The schedule was allowed to change on the teachers’ whims, however, since the school did not promise to follow any set routine other than the timing of those main events.

Looked like Izuku was just going to have to play it by ear and try to keep on top of assignments. He hadn’t been forced to write papers and fill out worksheets since he was… a kid? Ever? He couldn’t remember doing any homework since he was five. Sure, he studied before the official proctored exams that homeschool students took, and he read a lot of books on various subjects. But he felt a bit like a sponge… he just learned whatever he read really easily. Except biology. Screw biology. He was glad UA didn’t require them to learn any more of that. One of the werewolves he and his mom lived with during the summers was British and spoke only in English, so he felt pretty confident in his speaking ability. Thinking about it, he hadn’t had much experience at all in following some sort of grading system.

Izuku decided then and there that he needed a partner to do homework and study with, at least for the first couple of months until he was sure he had a hang of this school thing. Now, he just needed to figure out who would be amenable to joining him…

“Hey, Kacchan, would you be interested in getting together whenever we have assignments and, uh, doing them together? I haven’t done homework in a while, and it’s forty percent of our grade in most classes and--”

“Fuck off,” Bakugou snarled, shoving his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders high. But he hadn’t punched Izuku, yet, so...

“...so that’s a yes?”

Glad that he settled his problem so quickly, Izuku rushed off from where Bakugou’s hands had started to smoke, running out of the front gates of UA before he could catch wind of Iida telling him off in the background. However, in his haste to exit the school, Fate reared her blind head and smacked him straight into a boy with purple hair and - ooooh were those purple eyes? With a slight
blush dusting his cheeks, Izuku tried to peel himself off the boy he’d knocked to the ground (purple eyes!) and begin apologizing with waving hands.

Of course, he forgot to completely get off the boy’s legs first, so the effect was somewhat ruined.

“I’m sorry for running into you! I was just trying to escape a, uhhhh… hi?” Izuku wasn’t sure if the boy was glaring at him or just tired, but the overall frumpy look he had going made Izuku smile. “My name is Izuku Midoriya.”

“Shinsou Hitoshi,” the boy drawled. “Can you get off my legs?”

Izuku cocked his head, gazing into the boy’s eyes. They were both a light shade of purple that matched the color of his hair, but one eye seemed more indigo whereas the other seemed more violet. Was it a trick of the light? They were so pretty. He’d never seen purple eyes before. “Shinsou…”

The boy only huffed back in response, looking pointedly down at where Izuku was sitting on him. “Yes, now, my legs?”

Izuku’s eyes widened at being caught and started rambling, “Oh, of course! I’m sorry for running into you. I said that already, didn’t I? You seem really nice. I wouldn’t want to hurt you normally…” Izuku paused. What did he even mean by that? This guy was definitely going to think he was a weirdo. A blush began working its way down Izuku’s neck and chest as he looked down at where he was crouched atop the other boy. “Err, sorry, I’ll get off you.”

In the distance, they both heard, “Deku, stop sitting on top of people and get the fuck back here! I wasn’t done talking to--”

“Oops, gotta go, Shinsou! I like your eyes! Have a nice day!” Izuku scrambled quickly off the purple-haired boy and swung his backpack up over his shoulder from where it had fallen. He scampered sideways in the direction of the bus stop and tried not to run into any more strangers while he escaped Kacchan’s sudden and, frankly, uncalled for wrath.

“DEKUUUUU!!!”

Meanwhile, Shinsou sat blinking on the sidewalk, looking off into the distance.

“...What?”

All Might walked into his first-ever annual faculty meeting centered around the first day of classes, where any issues with the students’ summers or personalities/quirks were supposed to be discussed before the principal handed down a decision on how to handle the situation. All Might hadn’t noticed any flaws amongst his students’ personalities or quirks, but there had been one thing worrisome that happened during the day, namely…

“While useful for the realism of a fight against villains, I feel uncomfortable putting the students in potential danger of explodable metal devices in the future. I ran Situation #37 with my students today, and one student exploded the missile with his quirk. There were a few shrapnel injuries, which I feel could have been avoided.” None of the injuries had necessitated an immediate departure
to Recovery Girl for aid, but they could still have been avoided.

“You are aware that we have paper maché missiles…” Eraserhead interrupted in a drawl. He hadn’t been too happy with his students being injured on their second day when he wasn’t around to properly critique (read: scold) them, especially if it was the fault of All Might not being able to read an exercise’s manual properly.

“Ah. Hahaha!” All Might laughed boisterously. “No I was not! I will make sure to request those in the future.”

“You are also aware that that specific exercise is typically slanted for use after they have had physical training for a month?” And now Eraserhead was just badgering him.

All Might had indeed read that part of the Situation Brief but had ignored it in favor of testing his students’ mettle on day one. “Uhmmm, why yes! But I wanted to give the students something to look forward to in the hero course. Showing them how their powers could be used in the future!”

Principal Nezu butted in, “I fully support introducing our new class of hero recruits to the indoor fighting exercise earlier on. I think we should treat this an experiment to see whether it emboldens them more than Class 1-B, using the Sports Festival and hero studies’ grades as comparatives. In addition, we commonly use metal capture objects with the higher years’ exercises, so perhaps we should reconsider the wording for some of those situations to avoid team suicide as a viable option. You say one of your students intentionally attacked the missile they were guarding?”

All Might coughed into his fist. “Yes, the student in question — Izuku Midoriya — admitted that he intentionally attacked the missile. I was unsure at first if his partner had suggested it, but Mr. Midoriya admitted to having it as a backup plan from the beginning. He told me I had given him the idea at the beginning of class when I told them the exercise timer indicated the timer on the bomb.”

Eraserhead groaned into his hands.

All Might cleared his throat, his eyes shifting over to Eraserhead. “Yes, well the question was asked about what would theoretically happen at the end of the exercise, and I decided that the timer made more sense acting as a missile timer than a countdown for the villains getting backup.”

“So you told a student playing a villain that his death was assured, even if he won?” Eraserhead clarified, squinting at his fellow teacher. Was it too late to make sure All Might wasn’t the sole teacher of a class? Surely there were worries about the time limit of him maintaining his hero form...

“I, um… yes,” All Might admitted, unsure why that would be a problem. The students weren’t meant to take the exercise so seriously on their first day, were they? None of the other students had this problem.

Eraserhead slumped in his seat and made another note in the file on his phone labeled ‘Izuku Midoriya’. “Well, we can assume for future activities that Mr. Midoriya will ask about mission parameters to determine how reckless he should be,” he said, sardonically, before smirking, “and that he’ll take hero exercises seriously.”

“Yes,” agreed All Might, thinking of another student he wanted to keep an eye on, “and Mr. Bakugou seemed a bit too enthusiastic when asking about the amount of damage he could inflict on his competitors. There did not seem to be any serious injuries in that fight, though.”

“He does have an explosive quirk,” tittered Present Mic. The remaining present faculty heard the *Get it, get it?* that was thankfully unspoken.
“Yes, much like Mr. Midoriya. Although young Midoriya’s file mentioned he was quirkless…?” All Might turned toward Eraserhead, who he knew was keeping tabs on the boy.

“Yes,” Eraserhead agreed, “and he said as much during the apprehension test I gave Class 1-A. Mr. Bakugou encourages this story.”

All Might hummed. “Should we be asking that he get his quirk tested and filed? Typically, all quirks are required to be registered before schooling begins.” He remembered having to go through measures to register his own quirk when he was a teen.

Eraserhead shook his head. “I recommend we keep an eye on the situation but don’t make any legal moves. I followed up with his childhood doctor, who confirmed that as of five years old, he had no quirk.”

That was strange. “And his other doctors?” All Might asked.

Eraserhead shrugged, his eyelids drooping in thought. “There are none on record. Nor schools. Nor many official records of any kind.” He typed something else into his phone.

“But he was the student who placed first during the entrance exam, correct?” All Might clarified. He thought he remembered him as the student who attacked the zero-pointer robot and saved the other girl in his class, Ms. Uraraka, after having already amassed several villain points by attacking robots with discarded robot parts.

Eraserhead hummed in agreement, his tone dubious as he drawled, “Yes, he’s smart, agile, and has a strong ability. He’s also managed to remain undocumented.”

All Might laughed, leaning forward. “You sound as though you distrust the boy.”

“Don’t read into it,” Eraserhead warned. “I’m just keeping an eye on him.”

All Might nodded, remembering young Midoriya’s comments during the beginning of the villain exercise. He was trying to get into the mindset of the villain, even from the beginning. “Hmmm… he seems like a very empathic young boy. I like him—“

“Of course you do,” quipped Eraserhead.

“—I only hope he won’t be exploding any more devices as an endgame,” All Might finished.

Eraserhead would have wished his fellow teacher good luck with that, but he kind of hated him. Only a little. Mostly when he was in his hero form.

On the third day of the school year, Izuku managed to run across the purple haired boy at lunch. Feeling a bit embarrassed about leaving the boy to pick himself up after flat-out knocking him down, Izuku decided he should go over and talk to him. No one seemed to be sitting with him, anyway. Steeling himself for the confrontation, Izuku half-marched over to the boy’s table. “Hey, your name’s Shinsou, right?” Izuku squirmed a bit, his fingers tapping on the bento in his hands.

Purple eyes met his, and Izuku felt a smile bloom on his face (purple eyes!). “My knees were bruised,” Shinsou offered in response, although the bags beneath his eyes looked more worrisome
than knee-bruising.

“Ohhh… I’m sorry.” Izuku scratched at his neck with his free hand and bit his lip. “Do you want me to get my snake?”

Shinsou’s eyebrows raised from their previously deadpan flatness. “Your snake…”

Izuku smiled. “Yeah, snakes are good at healing. Or I guess, he only ever is good at healing me? But it might work on you. I haven’t tried it yet at least.”

_Popsicle was at home, though, so he wouldn’t really be able to offer his services until the next day, plus he wasn’t certain that students were actually allowed to bring mentally advanced animals to class with them since that might affect the student’s ability to perform solely under their own ability. And Popsicle was a shapeshifting bird, as well, so they might run into troubles of having to explain magic with science and animal quirk statistics, and he was really trying his best to avoid outright lying about—_

“You’re a bit strange,” Shinsou intoned, one side of his mouth lifting in what was either a smirk or a lonely boy’s attempt at a smile.

Izuku scratched his head, chuckling. “Uh… yeah, I’ve been getting that a lot. But my mom and I move around a lot, so I’ve never really done the whole ‘going to school’ and, uh, ‘talking normally with people’ thing.” Kacchan called it ‘Deku being an awkward fuck,’ but Kirishima said he shouldn’t call him that since it had other connotations. So of course Kacchan kept calling him an awkward fuck, now.

“You’ve never been to school?” Shinsou asked, not looking up from his meal.

“Well, I mean I did when I was… five or so?” answered Izuku, sitting down across from him. “But not since then. And then I got into UA, and Eraserhead is my homeroom teacher, so I doubt I’m getting a very normal experience.” He scratched his eyebrow and quirked a smile that barely reached past his lips.

Suddenly very interested, Shinsou leaned his head forward and asked with very intense eyes, “Which class are you in?”

“1-A,” hesitated Izuku.

“And Eraserhead is your teacher?”

“Yeah!” Izuku smiled, guessing that Hitoshi must be a fan as well. _Another Eraserhead fan!_ Izuku leaned over conspiratorially. “You know, on our first day of school, he expelled a kid from our class. Everyone was making a big deal out of it, because apparently that’s not normal?” Izuku waved his hand around at that. “But we had to do this test where we use our quirks to do a 100-m sprint or toe-touches or whatever, and whoever came in last place would be expelled, and then this small kid lost. Mr. Aizawa even threatened to expel us to make us hurry to get somewhere on time. It was kinda fun, but also really scary. I mostly just try to follow one of my friends around because he’s memorized the school layout.” At that last bit, Izuku felt a blush rise up on his cheeks. He should probably get to work on finding a map and stopping his tendency to ramble, possibly not in that order.

“You should probably memorize it, too, in case of emergencies.” Shinsou seemed to think the same thing, then. But where was the map in the first place? Their handbook just seemed to have pages of rules of conduct and behavior, as well as scheduled events and quirk limitations and stuff like that.
Izuku wondered if Shinsou might know where to find the information. “Yeah, I was considering that, but I can’t seem to find a map…”

Shinsou paused, looking up at Izuku through his eye-bags and eyelashes. Tilting his head, he drawled, “Do you want me to show you?”

Izuku beamed back in response. “Yes, thank you.”

They spent the rest of the lunch period going through the sections of the student handbook useful for getting in and out of school, and they debated whether or not Izuku would be allowed to bring his pet into the classroom. Technically, his pet acted like a quirk familiar (somewhat akin to Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow) because it had its own mind and abilities that Izuku could control to some extent. On the other hand, Izuku’s quirk did not involve the creation or control of his familiar, and the familiar could exist separate from him, so it was not necessary for it to come to school in order for him to function as a hero.

Izuku was personally a bit torn between recklessly risking the unspoken secrecy laws about a witch’s familiar and the knowledge that his familiar would come to his rescue in times of great stress or need either way… and he could only imagine the teachers’ reactions if his familiar interrupted a hero training exercise without even knowing he owned a shapeshifting animal in the first place. Shinsou seemed really interested in Popsicle, especially when Izuku explained how he could understand what the animal was saying. He kept insisting Popsicle would count under the law of Familiar Quirks for their school because of that alone, but Izuku wasn’t so sure.

It was on the way back to his classroom that Izuku pondered his new friend. At least, he hoped they could be friends. Shinsou seemed really cool, but also really lonely, too. A bit like Izuku. Shinsou had something against his quirk, and he kept putting it down during their conversation, as though there was something evil about it. Izuku had known evil, though, and powers weren’t inherently evil. It was the people that used them, whether demon or human or witch, and how they decided to use them that made something evil.

Mind control could be used for so many things, and it could save so many lives. Izuku mused on his family history… there was a telepath in there somewhere, right? And that had to be more evil than mind control since it was effectively mind control plus mind reading. That was so much creepier, and she was one of his coolest ancestors. She even controlled a dragon, once… or was it a hydra? He had the blood in a vial somewhere…

“You know… mind control… that’s a really powerful quirk. You could be a great hero someday,” Izuku affirmed shyly, his voice gone soft as he peered up at Hitoshi through his curly hair.

Shinsou seemed to still in response, his eyes looking down at the table and somewhere far away. “You think so?”

Izuku grinned back. “I know it.” They could be great underground heroes together.

They had planned to meet later that day at the front gates of UA and walk to the bus together. Or rather, Izuku had said they should do it, and Shinsou didn’t disagree; and if you followed the usual trend of Izuku’s burgeoning friendships (like Kacchan), then that definitely meant yes. As he sat in his seat in the classroom waiting for everyone else to get settled down, Izuku pondered about what it meant to be a hero.

To be a hero in modern day culture, you had to have a license. The only way to get a license was to go to a school like UA and enroll in hero courses, which taught you the history, politics, and rules of
the profession as well as prepared you physically for situations that might arise as a hero. Shinsou was in UA’s General Education department, which meant he didn’t get any hero courses. His mind control quirk would be so useful in de-escalating villain situations, though, and Izuku began daydreaming of ways to get a student from General Education to the Hero Course. Surely, it just had to be a matter of finding a way to prove themselves a great potential hero…

Izuku’s first week of school concluded with three blossoming friendships (Tokoyami, Shinsou, and Uraraka), one surely best friendship (Kacchan never said they weren’t friends whenever Izuku called him one, and he knew his secret), and one acquaintance that Izuku was determined to make more of. Kirishima had begun to gravitate toward Bakugou because of how “manly” he acted during the hero vs villain exercise, as everyone should because Kacchan was going to be a great hero someday and he needed as many strong friends as he could. In return, Izuku was determined to be as supportive and friendly of their relationship as possible. He was still working on what he had in common with the red-haired boy other than their mutually terrible nicknames from Kacchan (“Deku” for Izuku, and “hair for brains” for Kirishima), a preference for rare fish and meat (he was right about Kirishima’s sharp teeth!), and their mutual gravitation toward Kacchan.

Izuku ended up asking Uraraka the best way to get to know somebody other than by spending time with them at lunch (which he had decided to share with Tokoyami or Uraraka depending on how isolationist and introspective Tokoyami was feeling), between classes (spent messing with Kacchan and chatting with Uraraka), or during the walk to the bus (which he planned to spend getting to know Shinsou). Uraraka told him that she was planning to get together with Asui (“call me Tsuyu”) over the weekend for icecream, since they lived relatively near each other and wanted to hang out somewhere away from school. Kamenina (Kameshi?) had also asked her out to a cafe sometime.

Izuku was a bit astounded. “So you just… ask them out to eat?”

Uraraka laughed, giving Izuku a sly look and wagging her eyebrows. “I mean, maybe not like that? You don’t want to give him the wrong idea.”

Izuku just looked back at her confused. “What idea?”

Uraraka scratched her head in response, a slight blush on her face, before deciding to switch gears. “Uhm, just tell him you want to hang out to get to know him better since he wants to be Bakugou’s friend.”

“Over icecream?” Izuku clarified.

She huffed back in response, rolling her eyes. “Well, you could talk and bond over anything. You could do homework together, or meet at a cafe, or yeah icecream, or uh the library maybe? You should find out what he likes and then ask to meet him somewhere that has stuff he likes!” She seemed proud of her response, but Izuku remained confused.

“But aren’t I meeting with him to find out what he likes?” Izuku asked.

“I mean, yes,” Uraraka picked at the last bit of her rice with her chopsticks. “But there has to be
something you already know he likes.”

Izuku nodded his head, getting it. “Rare meat.”

“Oooookay,” Uraraka started in a hesitant voice, “that could work. But usually you find a place to eat while you’re already hanging out,” she laughed.

He slouched in his seat in response. “Getting to know people is hard.”

Uraraka just giggled at him. “Don’t make it harder than it has to be, then! Just ask him to hang out and what he’d like to do!”

Izuku decided to follow her advice and headed over to intercept Kirishima as he was walking out of the lunch hall. The red-headed boy seemed to be trying to follow Bakugou back to class, but had lost him in one of Bakugou’s famous “storm off into the distance” sessions. Izuku seriously did not remember Kacchan doing that as much when they were kids. He strutted about, sure, but he didn’t storm off and leave people. He wondered what Kacchan’s friends had been like, what sort of people he had surrounded himself by. Did he just want to get away from them? What else would cause compulsive storming out of rooms alone? He should ask Kacchan next time he found a way for them to hang out. Speaking of...

“Izuku! Uh, wait up!” Izuku managed, fumbling with the bento in his hands. When he managed to catch up to Kirishima’s waiting form, Izuku began to wear his fingers into the indentions in the box as he searched for the appropriate words. “Um, I was wondering if you… uh, would you be interested in hanging out this weekend? I heard it’s what you do when you want to be friends with your friend’s new friends, and uh, I want to get to know you more? But I don’t know what you like to do, so I don’t know where you’d want to, uh, go hang out and stuff. But I’d like to!”

Izuku hoped that made sense because he had tried to get his and Uraraka’s entire conversation into one sentence. The one sentence part failed, but he hoped Kirishima understood his intentions at least.

Kirishima smiled with his sharp-teeth in response, eyes lighting up. “Sure thing, man! My weekend’s all free. Do you like video games?”

Izuku blinked back in response. “What’s that? Were those the things on computers, on televisions, or at the stores with weird machines?”

“Oh dude, we’re gonna have so much fun,” Kirishima smiled, almost slapping Izuku on the back with his hand and throwing his head back laughing. “You’ve never played video games before?”

“I usually play more physical games,” Izuku shrugged. Werewolf sparring is kind of like a game, right?

Kirishima sputtered and choked in response, his cheeks flushing, but they agreed on a time to meet up, so Izuku considered the conversation a win. Besides, he got Kirishima to smile, and that’s what hopefully-soon-to-be friends did, right? The warmth on the back of his neck and behind his ears told him he was right. His heart was even jumping.
katsudon is finished!” as he toed off his shoes and pulled his used bento out of his backpack.

“I’ll be just a second!” he announced back, dropping the bento off on the kitchen counter on his way to his bedroom. His mom wasn’t able to afford a very large apartment with her new job, so it was mainly just him and her sleeping in the same room with a divider between them. His three posters were displayed on his side of the wall while his mom’s side seemed to be covered with fabrics and talismans she had collected during their travels. Some string lights had been added to make the room look more inviting, but the only other belongings they each had were a single suitcase per person and a box’s worth of kitchen utensils, pots, and pans. Since the space was so sparse, Izuku tried to keep everything as tidy as possible, placing his backpack down beside his suitcase-turned-dresser. Figuring he would have time to shower after dinner, Izuku headed back toward the kitchen and leaned up to squeeze his mom’s shoulder and nuzzle her arm.

“Thanks for the dinner, mom. It smells amazing!”

“I’m just glad I was able to finish it on time,” Inko laughed, wiping her hands on the sink towel. “It’s been a long while since we’ve done this, hasn’t it?” They both grabbed a bowl and settled down around the box they were using as their “table,” the one which used to house the kitchen utensils. “So how was your first week? You’ve been rather busy each time you’ve been home…”

“Oh yeah, I’ve just been preparing. We don’t have that much homework yet, but apparently we will soon. I’m trying to get together with some others to do the work since it’s been awhile since I had to turn in anything…” Izuku temporarily set down his bowl and stood up to go get them both a cup of tea from where the electric kettle had finished boiling. “I asked Kacchan, and he didn’t explode me, so I think I’ll try working with him? And there’s this other guy Kirishima who’s been trying to hang out with Kacchan that might join us if I can convince Kacchan to stop exploding for a second.”

“Oh? Is he still using explosions instead of emotions?” his mom teased, her laughter tinkling through the opening in the kitchen.

Izuku could only smile back in response as he returned with the two cups and sat down to join her. “Honestly, I kind of missed it. You know I haven’t seen him since we came through town a couple years ago, and he’d already changed so much between elementary school and then!” He began stuffing his face with rice as he tried to rein in his smile.

He had fond memories of Kacchan as a kid, the other boy leading him on adventures through the forest or park, skipping stones by the lake, playing hero with his mom… Of course, there were also the other memories where Kacchan had started to act different, more forceful, more mean. And then it was determined that Izuku was quirkless. When Kacchan found out, that hadn’t gone as well. The meanness had been turned on him. Not long after, Izuku got an ability, moved away, and tried to tell Kacchan about it through letters. He wanted so hard to be friends with him again. Kacchan said he didn’t believe him, causing Izuku and his mom to move back to the city for a while so he could reconnect with his only friend.

Inko tapped her face as though pretending to remember. “Yes, I do remember that visit…” she began in a teasing voice. “I also distinctly remember us having to leave quite quickly despite my hopes that we could stay in the city awhile…”

“That was the demons’ fault!” interrupted Izuku, a bit of rice flying out of his mouth at his abrupt exclamation.

“That was your fault for drawing the demons,” his mom pointed out, throwing a napkin at his face so he could clean himself up.
“I put up a circle!” Izuku whined, wiping his mouth and slouching down to hide behind their box-table.

“And displayed your abilities in public.”

*Now, that was just not fair.* Izuku threw his mom a glaring pout, like the younger wolves used to do. “We were in a quirk-safe zone, and Kacchan said he didn’t believe me. I couldn’t have him not believing me, mom; he’s my only friend!”

Inko was not impressed. Izuku remembered her telling him that she forgave him, after the incident. Apparently not. “You endangered both your life and his. He even got attacked--”

“But I stopped it from hurting him,” Izuku pointed out, putting his bowl down.

His mom paused at that, thinking. “Does he even remember what happened that day?”

“Of course he does.” Perhaps the grumpy tone of voice was uncalled for, but of course Kacchan remembered. *He had to remember. He said he would stop being my friend if I didn’t prove to him that I had an ability. Kacchan is still talking to me, isn’t he? We’re still friends, so he has to remember.*

“How do you know?” His mom intoned, her sing-song tone mildly creepy under these conditions. “They clean up sometimes, afterward, make people forget.”

Izuku knew that. He knew what she meant, but--

“He still remembers,” he asserted again.

“How do you *know*, Izuku?” His mom used to be friends with Kacchan’s mom, he remembers, and now they don’t talk anymore. Was it as simple as that? His mom had said that They can do this, clean up a mess, erase people’s memories, but--

“Because he’s still my friend.” And if Izuku sounded a bit choked up when he said that, then it was no one’s business but his own. Friendship wasn’t something easy to come by, especially not with normal humans and especially not with the secrets Izuku had to hide.

“Izuku, I just--” his mom sighed. “You had a demon following you.”

“I know, mom, but it followed around every green-haired kid it saw back then; it was looking for me.” Izuku paused, staring up at her sarcastically. “What was I supposed to do, where a hoodie during summer?”

His mom smiled back in response and shook her head, letting the conversation go. Instead, she raised her eyebrows at him teasingly while pointing her chopsticks in his direction. “Hmmm, there’s an idea. No leaving the house without a hoodie!”

“Not this again…” huffed Izuku.

His mom smiled at him again, serious once more. “You know I just worry about you, Izuku.” She reached out to fluff his hair, and he batted her hand away after a few seconds. He sensed a new hoodie in his future.

He looked at her just as seriously. “Mom, you don’t have to worry so much anymore. I know what I’m doing, and I’m being really careful. Nothing is going to find us this time. You’ll see.” He smiled, trying to reassure her.
“I hope so, dear. I know how much you want this to work, and I… I want it to work because I know how much you do. We just have to be careful.” Sighing, Inko took both of their empty bowls and chopsticks into the other room.

Izuku wished he had words for how thankful he was for her support. He had been afraid, when he applied to UA, that she wouldn’t allow him to attend even if he was accepted. After all, the hero course at UA put students in the spotlight, which meant it also put them in danger. The classes themselves were also dangerous. Not just anyone could graduate from UA, much less be a top student. Added to that, the increased visibility meant an increase in potential demon attacks if someone were to guess his abilities were magical. Izuku felt overwhelmingly selfish sometimes, when he considered it; but his mother supported him throughout it all.

Izuku followed her into the kitchen, speaking quieter than before, softly as though in apology. He felt like he was doing this all wrong and making her sad, and he wanted to make it better. “Everything seemed to go well at school this week. They all just think I’m kind of lying about having a quirk, and I haven’t really said anything otherwise.” The shuffling of his feet caused his mom to smile sadly at him, but she didn’t respond as she cleaned their dishes. Izuka tried to shore up another smile for her. “Oh, by the way, can I go over to a friend’s place this weekend? He said he wanted to show me ‘video games.’”

“Of course,” Inko said, shaking her head a bit to get away from her thoughts. “Just warn me ahead of time so I know whether to prepare supper for both of us.”

While she was turned away, he smiled at her. “I love you, mom,” Izuku reminded her, leaning against the doorway. “Thank you.”

His mom smiled over her shoulder. “I love you, too, Izuku. Now,” she turned off the sink faucet to stop running the water, “why don’t you get washed up while I take care of these dishes? We could even do some reading together later?”

Izuku looked up with an excited eyes. “Can we go through one of Aunt Lilia’s journals?”

“Looking for more banishing rituals?” his mom teased. She could swear he had been reading through her Aunt Lidia’s journals on a semi-regular basis at this point. She was surprised he hadn’t memorized them.

Izuku sighed, turning his back against the edge of the doorway. He folded his arms and looked up at the ceiling, thinking. “There has to be a better way to stop demons and dark magic users than just killing them! I mean, they’re evil, and I get that, but villains are evil, too, and all of those are kept in prisons. I just keep worrying that someone’s going to find my action figures.” The box holding the action figures was safe inside his suitcase, but he figured ‘safe’ was a very relative term in this situation. ‘Made of duct tape and prayers,’ more like; and considering the figures were harboring demons’ souls, it probably wasn’t the safest of places.

“Izuku, even if someone found your figurines, no one would know something is trapped inside.” He’d lost count of the number of times he and his mom had debated this subject. Izuku may act paranoid, but he was the one they were after, so he figured he had a right to be. He just kept having dreams of them getting out. His mom kept explaining that only witches could undo another witch’s spell like that, but it didn’t really assuage his fears. That also wasn’t the point he was currently trying to get across.

Right now, Izuku was stuck on the philosophical difference between demons, dark witches, and villains. Izuku started rambling in a continuation of his former thoughts. “I mean, I theoretically understand using them for demons, but some of them aren’t demons, mom. Some of them are people,
like me, who just made different choices. And they deserve--they deserve prison, or something like it, at least. They deserve something more than being stuck inside of something unable to move. I know I would hate that.” His head bounced against the wall in frustration.

“They also tried to kill you,” his mom pointed out.

“And kidnap me,” he suggested as a counterpoint. Both were true after all.

“You’re not making a better case for them, Izuku.” Inko warned, finishing up the bowls and drying her hands. She turned toward him and leaned against the counter with folded arms. “And what would banishing them achieve? None of Lilia’s studies included a supernatural prison.”

“Well, I mean, Aunt Lilia studied souls, didn’t she? Couldn’t there be a way to make their souls, like, move on or start over or something? That would give them another chance, a new life to try again.” Izuku had started pacing as he talked, flinging out his hands to illustrate the souls moving on.

His mom smiled back in a response, not sad or disappointed, but something that wasn’t her normal happiness. Izuku couldn’t place her tone of voice. “You aren’t a god, Izuku. You can’t control their fates, and their souls aren’t your responsibility. I don’t even know if demons have souls.”

“I’m not saying I’m a god, but I already am controlling their fates! I don’t mean to argue, mom, I just… feel like I’m not being a very good hero to them.” And that was the crux of it, wasn’t it? He wouldn’t put a villain’s soul inside of an action figure and bind it to the object, so what right did he have to do this to demons and the occasional witch who tried to kidnap him? And what if they got out, something whispered in the back of his mind. Izuku swatted the thought away with another wave of his hand.

“Any other witch would just kill them, or die trying, Izuku. You are doing more than anyone could expect.”

His mom wasn’t making him feel any better about it, though. He wanted to be better than other witches, to do more than his predecessors. All of the witches he had read about seemed to live their lives just to survive, not to make something of themselves or help change the world. Couldn’t he want to be more than that?

“I just don’t like killing,” Izuku concluded, hoisting himself up on the counter.

His mom turned her body toward him. “You aren’t killing them. You’re… pausing them in time. They probably aren’t even aware of the outside world, once in those figurines. If they were, we would feel them, wouldn’t we?”

“It doesn’t seem like they’re watching us…” She was right, but--

“Precisely. I wouldn’t worry so much, Izuku,” Inko walked over and put her hand on his shoulder. He nuzzled her hand in response, and she chuckled at his behavior. “But yes, we can go through Aunt Lilia’s journals. She had a few interesting things to say about her discussions with people from the afterlife, didn’t she?” As Inko expected, that made Izuku perk up. He had almost forgotten about the seances. He and his mom hadn’t done one of those since he was seven.

Izuku wondered what other people did in their free time on the weekends. He was meeting up with Kirishima on Saturday afternoon to play video games, but he had almost a full twelve hours before then to work on anything he wanted and maybe sleep. He didn’t know why he was so obsessed with banishing rituals, but sometimes… sometimes, he felt like something was coming, and he couldn’t put his fingers on what it was or why he was so worried about it. Thoughts for another day, he
decided, turning toward his mom who then announced what was probably the best thing he had heard all week.

“Would you like to try summoning your Aunt Lilia instead?”

“Yeah!” Izuku smiled back, excited. “I’ll go get the candles!” Seances were super cool.

Inko smiled as her son rushed back into their bedroom. “I’ll draw the circle!” she called back, laughing. She was happy they had something that would always remain theirs, and no one else’s. She was glad Izuku was growing up, making friends at his new school, scheduling play dates with others his age… but she was thankful that this was something only the two of them could share. The world tried to steal things from you, sometimes, and all you could do was steal things right back. She would do whatever she had to do to keep her little boy safe, whether it was conducting seances or going through old journals that had been passed down to her through the ages or… well… she just hoped he would forgive her, someday, when he figured it out. Inko Midoriya may not be powerful, but she would do what she could, whatever she had to, to make sure her little boy was safe.

That night, Izuku woke from a dream that had him acting feverish, hot underneath the covers, sweat soaked through. Popsicle nipped at his hair as he got up to change his sheets. Afterward, he sat staring out the bedroom window until he fell asleep with his pillow against the wall and his familiar nuzzling at his hair whispering secrets that he would forget come morning. There was blood on the moon. A purple haze across the sky, indentions in the moon’s surface like fingers digging through skin, and somewhere a mad cackling and a whisper… dark skin stretching… and so much blood on the moon.

The next day dawned bright and early after a night of staring at the sky. Izuku had permanent gooseflesh on his arms that refused to go away even after a warm shower. Seeing his pale face, his mother made him rice with green tea, some salmon, and pickled vegetables. It soothed his stomach and his mind, but his arms remained prickly in worry and anticipation.

His mom tried to console him, saying, “Whatever it was, don’t worry about it,” before shooing him out the door with a bag of snacks to share with his new friend.

Hours later, he had forgotten the whole ordeal. Kirishima’s apartment was a warm array of colors and comforting smells. He couldn’t really place what they were, something earthy like soil or trees. Apparently, Kirishima’s mom had some nature tree-based quirk, and his dad could change the density of objects he touched. That somehow combined to form Kirishima’s quirk, although
Kirishima thought he inherited something from his grandparents as well that might have altered it.

Kirishima had shown him around his room, which was filled with weights and a punching bag and a ridiculous amount of physical training videos. Considering his ability to harden his skin, Kirishima’s bed was ironically soft. Izuku Midoriya found himself trailing his fingers over the desk, the bookshelf, the weights… everything he saw, he wanted to touch. He’d never been in another boy’s bedroom like this. Most of the people he and his mom stayed with lived more communally, everyone sleeping in one large room or up in parapets. And there was that one vampire with a cave—that was a really cool cave.

“Hey Kirishima?” Izuku ventured.

Kirishima looked up from where he was typing something up on his computer. He had said something about finishing some update on a post online. “What’s up, man?”

Izuku stood looking around the room. He had never had his own bedroom like this, at least not since he was a kid. He didn’t know much about decorating or what kids his age did in their rooms, but… “Uh, why do you have all this training stuff in your bedroom? Why not the other room? It’s larger.”

Kirishima laughed, so the question must have been okay. “Yeah, well, neither of my parents are really into the strength training thing or physical fitness in general. They’re more, you know, back to nature sorts, so they don’t really get the manliness of training your body to be as strong and ripped as possible.”

“Oh…” Izuku trailed off. “I like it. Your room, that is. It feels… strong, like right before a fight.” He sat down on Kirishima’s bed, testing the comforter, and laughed to himself. “Except this bed. It’s really ridiculously soft. It feels like I’m on a cloud.”

And that’s how Kirishima turned around five minutes later to see Izuku Midoriya nuzzling his head into Kirishima’s pillow while splayed out all over his bed. Trying not to feel a bit embarrassed, Kirishima told himself he was just helping a bro out. You know, with his bad, uh, back? Yeah, he should probably get Midoriya out of his bed before he fell asleep.

Hours later, Midoriya and Kirishima sat around the living room couch playing video games.

“Hey, Kirishima?” Midoriya ventured, leaning his head back on the seat of Kirishima’s couch. They had ended up hanging out at his apartment and not leaving to go anywhere because his parents had gone on a “daytime date,” so the television and video game set were free.

“What’s up, man?” Kirishima asked, still slouching on the couch, his legs beside Midoriya’s head, holding a video game controller in his hands. He was currently scrolling through his games trying to decide which one to introduce Midoriya to next.

“Can I touch your teeth?”

Kirishima stilled, his fingers pausing on the controller as he tried to decide whether or not to look over at Midoriya’s face. “...What?”

Midoriya turned around and crawled up on the couch next to him. “Your teeth are so sharp and cool. I want to touch them.” Midoriya’s smile seemed innocent enough, but Kirishima still felt like his heart was beating strangely hard in his chest while his ears were overheating. “Kacchan said I was supposed to ask before entering people’s spaces. And your mouth is your space, right?”

For a second, Kirishima had almost forgotten how weird this kid was. He acted normal most of the time, but then he would do or say something, and Kirishima would remember how Bakugou got a
big kick out of saying ‘Deku was raised by wolves.’ But did he want the kid’s fingers in his mouth? That seemed kind of personal.

Not one to back down from a challenge or helping a friend, Kirishima nodded. “Sure, uh, go ahead.” It wasn’t like Midoriya was trying to make fun of him. He was just weirdly curious and observant. Friends should let friends put fingers in their mouths, right? Not that he’d had a friend like Midoriya before, but it seemed like the thing to do.

Seconds later, Midoriya was up in his face, much closer than Kirishima expected, his palm resting on Kirishima’s cheek while his thumb began trailing over definitely much more than his teeth. The thumb started out tracing his lips (on the way to his teeth, Kirishima figured, swallowing dry) before moving to his teeth, feeling around the edges, the pointed tips. Kirishima fought back the urge to make a strange face like at the dentist’s office in order to give Midoriya more tooth surface area. That definitely wasn’t necessary; Midoriya wasn’t checking for cavities. But then Midoriya’s thumb slid beside his canines to where the inside of his cheek was, stroking softly, before moving behind his upper teeth to his gums and the roof of his mouth right behind his teeth, rubbing back and forth.

The feeling was somewhere between pleasant, sensitive, and really ticklish. Kirishima dragged in too much air too quickly and ended up coughing. Midoriya pulled his thumb out of his mouth, and Kirishima tried to laugh it off. “Wrong pipe.”

Midoriya’s palm was still on his cheek, thumb stroking a wet trail beneath his jawline. Kirishima swallowed. Midoriya smiled back at him like everything was okay, and Kirishima didn’t know what to do with his hands or face or anything what the fuck just happened. He ended up blushing, trying to breathe like everything was normal, and turning back to the game controller. He felt warm all over.

“So, uh… you ever heard of vintage Fire Emblem Heroes? It’s got, um, people riding dragons and horses and fighting and stuff.” Kirishima focused on swallowing properly and staring at the television screen. His ears still felt like they were burning, and there was a cold sweat somewhere around his neck. He was overly aware of his breathing and the placement of his legs next to Midoriya’s.

“I like dragons,” chirped Midoriya, turning back toward the television, and that was good enough for Kirishima. He chose the game and handed the controller over to Midoriya.

“Alright…” he began, thinking don’t look at him don’t look at him don’t look at him. “Here’s how you play…” Did he even notice what he was doing?

The following Monday at the beginning of homeroom, Izuku stared at Kirishima in worry. He had been acting weird ever since they played that Fire Emblem game, and he couldn’t figure out why. Maybe he was getting sick? Or he had some bad memories attached to the game they played? But if they were bad memories, he wouldn’t have chosen the game in the first place. Izuku couldn’t figure it out. Kirishima typically stared you straight in the eyes and told you what he was thinking. He didn’t seem to say twenty words when five would do, like Izuku. But he still hadn’t gotten the other boy to look him in the eye, despite both of them being fifteen minutes early for class. Was he embarrassed that they had hung out? He hadn’t seemed embarrassed on Friday…
Aizawa speaking at the front of the room distracted Izuku from his thoughts. Apparently, they had fifteen minutes to decide on something called a class representative, which gives the chosen person some extra recognition to hero agencies. He zipped himself up into his sleeping bag and fell to the floor somehow gracefully, which Izuku guessed meant the students had to debate and decide amongst themselves.

Iida had moved to the front of the room to call everyone to order or something, but Izuku raised his hand and spoke before anyone else could get out anything beyond nominating themselves. “Excuse me, but, uh, what is a class representative? And what do they do? Is it something formal or does it just matter in, um, in the class itself?”

Iida elected himself the voice of knowledge. “The class representative is a very serious position, as that person will be leading others in the class. They would be responsible for bringing order to chaos, enforcing rules where there is lawlessness, considering the safety of the others students as their primary responsibility--”

Kirishima interrupted him. “Yeah, yeah, or a class rep would be someone everyone gets along with and can bring their problems to.”

“I have heard that at UA, the class rep ends up representing the class to the rest of the student body,” someone else said.

“So don’t nominate anyone boring or weak,” Bakugou interrupted. Izuku doubted Kacchan would nominate anyone but himself, so he doubted that mattered.

Izuku thought about all the qualifications for what made a good class representative and what he knew of each of his classmates. “But, I mean… we barely know each other. How are we supposed to decide who can do all that?”

Bakugou grinned back at him, smile sharp. “We know who’s weak and who’s an idiot. So don’t vote for them.”

Izuku smiled back hesitantly. Kacchan should really smile more often, even if he looked a bit like a shark.

Iida cleared his throat, still at the front of the room. “If we want to use democracy in order to elect a leader, I suggest a ballot system. The person who wins the most votes would become class representative. I urge each and every one of you to envision what the person they vote for would be like as class representative, and whether they could truly fill the role. This is not a decision to be taken lightly or selfishly.”

After roughly five minutes of writing down names, folding them, and placing them on the table at the front of the room, Iida went through all the votes and created tallies on the board at the front of the room. Izuku only really knew enough about Kacchan, Kirishima, Uraraka, Tokoyami, and Iida in order to vote for them; everyone else was mostly a big question mark in terms of personal qualities. Uraraka and Tokoyami didn’t seem like the type to lead a class, and he was 100% certain Kacchan would just yell at everyone, and that was only if he ever deemed himself low enough to consider things like rules and order. Both Kirishima and Iida would be good leaders; but as much as Izuku respected Iida as his partner during the hero vs villain training exercise, he didn’t want to give the guy even more authority to shout rules at him during class. That was already getting old. He missed Iida’s personality from the fight… or maybe he just missed fighting… come to think of it, the majority of his social acquaintances were made during fights, and he always seemed to like people better when they were fighting. Maybe he needed to look into that.
Once all the ballots were tallied up, he looked at the scoreboard and wondered what they would do now. It was highly obvious which people voted for themselves and which for others. Someone named “Yaoyorozu” had two votes, Kirishima had two votes, and Iida had two votes. Izuku, Uraraka, and someone named Jirou had none.

“Ah, well, it seems we have a tie. I suggest we all vote once more for the three winners!” Iida sounded proud of himself while Yaoyorozu sat blushing in the corner. Kirishima just smiled wider.

“Now, it’s just a popularity contest,” pointed out the frog girl. *Tsuyu? Tsu?*

Everyone voted much quicker this time, which ended up being smart since they only had five minutes left in homeroom. The scores this time put Kirishima first, Iida second, and Yaoyorozu third. Aizawa sat up from his attempt at caterpillar hibernation and announced, “Alright, it’s final. Kirishima will be the class rep, and Iida will be the deputy class rep.”

Iida beamed at being deemed worthy of the position while Kirishima just laughed and scratched his head, thanking everyone for the votes. Izuku figured that they would balance each other out. Kirishima to represent them to others, Iida to enforce whatever rules Kirishima waved off. He definitely anticipated that Iida would try to overstep the bounds of whatever this “deputy” position should be, though.

After careful deliberation that he must have done something wrong, Izuku followed Kirishima to the restroom after second period and apologized to Kirishima.

Kirishima told him not to sweat it, that he only felt a little embarrassed about having Izuku’s fingers in his mouth. And no, he didn’t want anything else of Izuku’s in his mouth right now, but you know, thanks for asking. He’d let Izuku know when he did want Izuku back in his mouth or near his teeth or whatever the fuck it was Izuku was stuttering about.

A couple minutes later, a pleased Izuku returned to class with a blushing, constipated-looking Kirishima in tow, causing Kacchan to turn around in his seat to ask Izuku what the hell he had said to “hair for brains” to put that “shitty look on his face” and now Kacchan was upset at Izuku, and *what was he still doing wrong.*

Izuku ended up spending lunch with Tokoyami so they could share a book of poetry that Tokoyami had brought from home when an alarm blared overhead. Tokoyami looked at him, and Izuku shrugged. A nearby third year student announced that meant someone had bypassed the campus
defensive barrier, so they were supposed to evacuate to a safe zone. Izuku tried to follow Tokoyami as all the cafeteria students pressed through the cafeteria doors, into a tight hallway, and toward a two-door exit. The crunch of people around him, the sweaty bodies, the heat—he couldn’t breathe. Izuku ducked down and weaved through the other students’ feet back away from the exit and toward another hallway that led away from the safety measures in place.

“Someone bypassed the wards?” Izuku murmured to himself. He remembered the handbook stating how the wards were nigh impossible to breach, and each student and teacher had an ID that linked them to the system. As long as someone had an ID or visitor’s pass, the wards would not be set off. Izuku paused in his jog down the hallway. Normal humans might not be able to get past the gates and security measures, but Izuku bet that most demons or a witch with a teleportation ability could, and he’d met plenty of both. Izuku slapped a hand over his mouth as he considered the situation. He more than knew they existed, he knew they were directly after him.

Izuku swore, ducking into a bathroom on his left. He hadn’t seen anyone in the hallway, but better safe than sorry, and to his knowledge the bathrooms weren’t monitored by the school’s camera system. Placing down a circle of stones and activating it, Izuku dug around in his pockets for something to use. Ah, one of his quartz crystals!

“Alright, come on, come on. I need a locating spell. Uh… locating spell, right.” Izuku tried to think back to his book at home. Locating spells, just like when he was trying to help that ghost find her grave. Right. He didn’t have something that belonged to whatever it was he was trying to find, but he did have his student ID, and whoever it was got to campus by not having an ID. So maybe he could just focus on finding someone that didn’t have a valid ID for the school?

Izuku rummaged around in his pocket for his student ID. He put the cap of a marker between his teeth while he wrote a rune that would help him ‘find something hidden’ on the back of the ID in small script. Considering the rune further, he also added another rune for ‘danger.’ That’s what I’m likely headed toward, after all. After putting away his marker, he placed the quartz crystal on top of the ID and began focusing his mind on where the two were connected, pouring his energy into the connection. I want to find someone who doesn’t have something like this, someone who doesn’t have an ID or pass that sends out a signal saying they’re safe to be here. I want to find whatever is putting us in the most danger. Come on, come on, whatever is putting us in the most danger… I want to find them...

The crystal seemed to hum in his hand after a few seconds. Smiling shakily, Izuku picked up his stones, turned around in a circle, and ran in the direction the quartz felt warmest towards—which happened to be down the hallway with the restroom on it, turning left, and then one more hallway and on the right. Panting, Izuku looked up to where the quartz seemed to feel like fire in his fist—and-

Izuku’s breath caught in his throat. His heartbeat stuttered, tripping over itself to acclimatize from his impromptu indoor running spree. What was --

There was someone there. A purple mist, a dark glow, something bending over a computer. The figure felt surrounded by a strange sense of polite malevolence, as though it was just as like to kill him as serve his intestines up on fine china afterwards. But it doesn’t feel like a demon. And its eyes are searching for something. Izuku took a step forward. He was still a couple feet from the door, which remained ajar, probably from someone leaving in a hurry. The crystal burned in his fist, making his fingers unclench to ward off the pain. Who was…?

In the next second, three things happened. The crystal fell from his fingers, a portal opened behind the mist, and the figure was suddenly gone. No sign of him remained in the room. The alarm, blaring
until now, was suddenly silenced, and Izuku’s gasping breaths—how far had he run?—were left to fill
the silence. What was that just now? No… who was that?

Izuku headed back toward class after the incident, trying to think it through. The alarm indicated
someone without an ID was on school grounds past the protective barrier. His spell had led him to
whoever it was because that person didn’t have a valid ID, and whoever they were had decided to
break into the rescue hero Thirteen’s office. At least that’s what the plaque said. Then they
disappeared through a portal. What did that even mean? Was someone looking for information on
Thirteen’s computer?

He spent the next two periods of hero studies mulling it over in his brain, but he didn’t know whether
to tell one of his teachers about it. Who would he even tell? He didn’t want to bother All Might, who
was always rushing out of class by the end, and Thirteen had gotten Eraserhead to cover their class.
Before he knew it, the sixth period bell rang, and classes were over. Seeing Iida about to leave the
classroom, Izuku hurried to throw his books together. Kirishima’s voice rang down the hallway from
too far ahead by the time Izuku made it to the door, but Iida was still within calling distance.

“Iida! Hey, Iida, wait!”

Iida came to a halt several feet in front of Izuku and turned around. “Midoriya… did you need
something?”

“Uh, yeah. I was, um, I was wondering…” Izuku was scratching his head and stuttering nervously
again. He hadn’t done this around Iida since the beginning of their battle trial together. There was
something about the other boy that made his tongue feel like it was tripping over itself, and he could
never seem to get his words right… except when he was in battle-mode, apparently.

Students milled around the two of them as they stood in the middle of a busy hallway. Sensing that
this might take a second, Iida grabbed Izuku’s arm and dragged him to the side of the walkway
where they wouldn’t impede the students’ exodus. Izuku smiled at him in apology while Iida tried
not to look too sternly at him in order to get him to start talking. They both had a bus to catch, after
all.

“I saw something earlier,” Izuku rushed out, before taking a deep breath and looking up at Iida
through his bangs. “I’m not sure how important it is, but I think… Mr. Aizawa said that a reporter
got on the campus, right? And that’s why there was an alarm.”

“Yes, I saw the reporter myself,” verified Iida. He had been the one to announce to the crowd of
students outside the cafeteria that they did not need to panic, after a bit of floating in the air and
bracing himself against an exit sign.

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students outside the cafeteria that they did not need to panic, after a bit of floating in the air and
bracing himself against an exit sign.

Iida’s eyebrows were scrunched down in thought, his face serious. “Hm… that does sound strange.
Even if it’s nothing, you should still report it to the teachers. I’m sure Mr. Aizawa is still in his office.
They can decide whether to look into it or not. Maybe they don’t believe it was a reporter, either.”

Izuku smiled but then wavered. “I think… I think I saw someone else, earlier, during the alarm. In
Thirteen’s office. They were made of this purple mist, and they were looking at something on a
computer, but then they disappeared through this portal, and the alarm stopped.” Izuku took a breath,
in and out. He looked up at Iida, searching his eyes. “What if the reporter was just a distraction?”

Iida’s eyebrows were scrunched down in thought, his face serious. “Hm… that does sound strange.
Even if it’s nothing, you should still report it to the teachers. I’m sure Mr. Aizawa is still in his office.
They can decide whether to look into it or not. Maybe they don’t believe it was a reporter, either.”

Izuku’s face flushed. He supposed that might be true; the teachers may be looking for another culprit
but hadn’t found one. However… Izuku sighed, looking up at Iida again. “I’m not really that
comfortable, uh, talking to teachers one on one. And Mr. Aizawa is, uh… he’s the leader of our
class, right? Your homeroom teacher is kind of in charge of you?”
“Yes,” Iida considered, weighing the words Izuku chose to use in his mind, “the homeroom teacher has more of a say in matters relating to their class of students. They are also more liable for their students’ well-being.”

*Kind of like werewolves have an alpha,* Izuku mused. “So you’re saying I should talk to the leader of our class, who’s already expelled one student, about some information that only I saw and no one else can verify and he might think I’m crazy or in the wrong even if he does believe me and what if it comes to nothing, Iida—” By the end of his rant, Izuku’s voice was strained and his eyes were glistening with the start of tears.

Iida put a calming hand on his shoulder, his face stern but supportive. “Izuku, this is what the teachers are here for: to keep us safe. We as students have a duty to report anything we think endangers our safety to the teachers. That is how authority works. This is what you’re supposed to do.” Iida wondered when the last time was that Izuku had any sort of authority figure that he reported to. He had a mother, didn’t he? He thinks he remembered Izuku mentioning one to Tokoyami the other day. It didn’t sound like he had a father, though, nor much schooling. He probably didn’t understand how the social system inside a school was supposed to work.

Nodding his head in contemplation, Iida took a breath and took charge for the second time this day. “Come, Midoriya, I’ll take you to Mr. Aizawa so you can share this with him. I’ll be right there with you.”

Izuku smiled up at him and wiped away a wet tear track trailing down his cheek. He might still be nervous about the thought of talking to Mr. Aizawa one-on-one, but… “Alright, Iida. And thank you, for helping me. And for, um, stopping when I called. I knew I could count on you.”

Iida blushed at the praise, feeling flushed with success at being able to aid others for the second time that day. He straightened his shoulders and turned around like a man on a mission, his hand still offering comfort to Midoriya’s shoulder. *This must be how heroes feel, helping others.* “Come. Most of the students seem to have vacated the area.”

They spent the next several minutes fighting against two more hallways’ worth of students exiting the school while trying to make their way back to their homeroom. Aizawa had just left, and they could both make out his figure turning the corner ahead. Izuku looked at Iida and nodded his head, so Iida led the way down the hallway, around the corner, and around another corner before approaching the door Aizawa had just finished going into. The door shut behind him.

Izuku stepped up to the door, Iida at his back, and knocked. “Mr. Aizawa? Could I talk with you, um, really quickly… before this?”

There was no response.

Izuku knocked again, repeating himself, before venturing to open the door in case his teacher could not hear him through it. However, the room he walked into was more than just a storage room or classroom like Izuku expected. Instead, there was a humongous table shaped like a rectangle with various teachers spread throughout the room sitting around it.

*Mr. Aizawa had been heading to some sort of faculty meeting,* Izuku realized, swallowing around a big gulp of nervousness. He felt Iida come to a stop behind him and called out once more, “Um, Mr. Aizawa? Could I talk with you, um, really quickly… before this?”

The bloodshot eyes of his teacher met Izuku’s own, and he felt himself flushing in embarrassment. *Why am I embarrassed? Holy crap, there are so many teachers.* Some of the other faculty around the room had quieted down from conversations with their colleagues and were staring at the Midoriya/Aizawa interaction. Izuku took another breath to calm his nerves.
“I’m in a meeting. Talk to me tomorrow,” responded Aizawa, who despite his words seemed to be tracking both Izuku and Iida with his narrowing eyes.

Izuku nodded nervously in response, shuffling backward, but he ran into Iida before he could get to the door. Iida rested his hand on Izuku’s shoulder again and spoke in a formal tone, “Mr. Aizawa, as deputy class representative, I have asked Midoriya to come here and speak with you regarding something that is time sensitive and potentially important to the meeting you are about to have. I ask that you please respect my judgement that what Mr. Midoriya has to say could be important.” Iida finished his speech with a slight bow, which Izuku stared at in confusion.

Why was he bending at the waist? He’d seen people do that before, but no one ever explained why. His mother called it ‘being formal,’ but she gave no reason for it in werewolf culture, so Izuku had never learned. He only knew one way to show respect, and it was only shown to the leader of the pack. He assumed that was Aizawa, in this case. Was this a situation where they were supposed to be showing him the respect as befitted his station? Izuku supposed the feeling of the room was different from that of class, more official. Like a gathering of elders?

“Very well,” Aizawa sighed, his voice a deadpan level of annoyed. His stare pierced Izuku’s eyes with a ferocity that had Izuku automatically moving to pay the traditional respect owed to the pack leader. Iida had bowed, so this must be a formal situation...

Izuku walked forward and kneeled in front of his teacher, tilting his neck in supplication in mimicry of his times spent with the werewolf pack acknowledging the authority of the leader. He looked up at Aizawa through his bangs and started rambling before he could make himself think his words through. Mr. Aizawa’s stare was nervewracking. “Sir, I have information for you, but I’m not sure how useful it will be to you, and I don’t want to waste your time, but it kind of worried me, and I asked Iida, and he was worried, and he said we should tell you, so please don’t be mad at me.” His tongue lulled to a stop as Izuku took a deep breath, looking from Aizawa’s left eye to his right, left to right, waiting for him to say something in response.

Meanwhile, Aizawa was wondering what the hell was going on. He’d felt his students following him, but had done his best to dodge them, assuming it was a homework question. Instead, they followed him into his weekly teacher meeting to… what? Tell him important information that Mr. Midoriya observed? Aizawa sighed. And then Midoriya started kneeling on the floor like he was groveling or something.

Aizawa wiped a hand down his face. He was too tired for Midoriya’s idiosyncrasies right now. “Fine. What did you want to tell me?”

Midoriya smiled up at him in response and launched into a tale about separating himself from his peers, walking down some hallways, finding Thirteen’s office, and seeing a person covered in purple mist and capable of using teleportation-like portals. The information, if true, was worrisome, and he sensed more than saw Thirteen log onto the school system from their phone to check if there were any security feeds in that area. Generally, teachers’ offices did not have recording devices stationed in them, but there were cameras in the hallways. Of course, if it really was a person with a teleportation quirk, they wouldn’t need to use the hallway to get into the office.

While Thirteen tried to find some recording of the event in question, Aizawa stared down at where Midoriya was still kneeling in front of him. Seriously, what was with this kid. And Iida--Aizawa looked up--yes, Iida definitely looked vicariously embarrassed for his classmate. Tapping his finger on the table from where he was turned at a ninety-degree angle toward Midoriya, Aizawa sighed, thinking. “And exactly why were you outside Thirteen’s office, when you should have been following the building intrusion safety protocols and exiting through the designated areas?”
A flush spread across the boy’s cheeks, and Aizawa sensed bullshit coming. “Because I’m claustrophobic and started panicking in the crowd?” Well, it wasn’t a lie, at least, according to his pupil response. The boy also seemed like the type of kid to look left when he lied.

“And if this was, in fact, a planned intrusion through our school’s barriers to look at classified information... do you think it would have been safe for you to see the perpetrator?” The boy was silent. “If the person in question saw you, what do you think they would have done?” Might as well turn this into a teaching exercise while Thirteen checked the security feeds. Plus, Midoriya was already beginning to give him heart palpitations. Aizawa definitely wasn’t going to be sleeping tonight.

“Well, I mean... killing me would have raised a few flags, right? As would a student going missing. So he would have just, uh... threatened me? Maybe?” The boy was still in his weird tilted-head prostration on the floor, which made the way he answered, as though this was a typical classroom question, seem even more out of place.

Aizawa took a deep breath in before breathing out slowly to calm his nerves. What was it they discussed at the meeting last week? ‘Don’t give Izuku Midoriya information unless you want him to act as recklessly as possible within the parameters’? They were really going to need to weed that out of the boy, as well as find a way to sink into his brain that his school-time “parameters” included following proper evacuation safety protocol. And perhaps more, he considered, squinting down at the boy’s hopeful gaze... Aizawa may be overthinking this, but he had a feeling that Midoriya did not understand the concept of laws in the same way as the other students in the hero course—which is, as something that should necessarily be followed, even when personal preferences didn’t coincide. His file didn’t record any prior residential history, so where had the boy lived? If he and his mother were really as nomadic as his file and his behavior suggested, then what concept of laws did he even have?

Aizawa made a mental note to pair the boy up with Iida on a preferential basis. Maybe the deputy class representative’s rule-abiding behavior could rub off on him. Or perhaps Todoroki...

Giving no quarter, Aizawa expounded upon Midoriya’s hypothesis. “Yes, or they might have followed you after school and found your family and threatened or harmed you there. Teleportation-type quirks are dangerous, Mr. Midoriya. There aren’t many defenses against them.”

The boy nodded in agreement, thankfully not debating the sense behind his judgement. Well, Midoriya could understand avoiding danger to his family, at least. To his left, Thirteen announced that they found no recordings in the hallway of Midoriya approaching the room. Instead, Midoriya himself seemed to appear out of nowhere in front of the office after a couple minutes of empty hallway footage. That suggested either A) Midoriya was both lying and capable of teleportation somehow (not that Aizawa was putting it past the boy; he still hadn’t determined whether Midoriya’s quirk involved speeding up his own movements or just other objects), or B) the intruder tampered with the system.

But if the intruder had a teleportation-type quirk, was able to appear directly in Thirteen’s office to hypothetically access files, and then directly disappeared from the office... why would they need to delete security footage of the hallways? And it must have been deleted up to the point that the person left, in order for Midoriya to be shown appearing out of nowhere in front of the door. Maybe it was a side effect of a computer program that they ran in order to get information? Most computer information regarding students and classes was behind several firewalls for safety reasons. Aizawa could only guess they used a program to do the hacking.

Aizawa turned to the boy still kneeling at his feet. “Mr. Midoriya, we will keep looking into this.”
few seconds passed, but the boy didn’t seem to be moving. “You can go now…” he ground out, but
the boy still remained on the ground.

Aizawa looked up at Iida, whose hand was twitching at his side as he switched between staring at
Midoriya and staring at his teacher, confused and visibly panicked about why Midoriya was not
moving. Aizawa looked back at Midoriya, who looked equally confused. Could he not move?

But then Midoriya leaned forward, slowly, very slowly, until his head was almost beneath Aizawa’s
hand. He jerked his head in soft mimicry of touching his head to Aizawa’s hand, and Aizawa had a
strange feeling that Midoriya was expecting something from him. Unsure what exactly the boy was
getting after (why can’t he just use words!), Aizawa sat unmoving and continued to stare back at
him. Under normal circumstances (which these definitely weren’t), a student would speak up after a
few seconds of Aizawa’s unflinching stare. Midoriya would say something at some point, wouldn’t
he?

Eventually, after a few more seconds, Midoriya moved his head again, and-- wait, is the boy trying to
get me to touch his hair? Slightly weirded out, Aizawa lightly petted Midoriya’s hair, causing the
boy to sigh, smile softly up at him, and back away on all fours before standing. Before Aizawa could
ask what the hell was happening, Midoriya was beaming a one-hundred watt smile, waving his hand
in a casual goodbye, and jogging backward out the door. Iida stood, mouth agape, for a few more
seconds before blushing through a formal bow.

“I will talk to him about formal behavior,” Iida apologized, and rushed out of the room after
Midoriya at a school-approved pace.

Aizawa, meanwhile, sighed and looked over to where Present Mic had been trying his level best not
to let his near-full-blown laughing disturb the conversation. Aizawa rolled his eyes. “Go ahead,” he
allowed, and his friend howled in laughter, slapping his hands on the table and making a big show of
it all. “Idiot,” he said affectionately, before looking toward the now-shut door of the faculty meeting
whose beginning had been disturbed. Looking around, everyone seemed to be here, which meant
most of them had heard the information and seen him… whatever that was with Midoriya. What was
it he overheard Mr. Bakugou say about Mr. Midoriya being raised by wolves…?

Turning to face the rest of his colleagues, Aizawa stared at his hand for a few seconds before
announcing, “I really think we need to update that boy’s file.”

And then even Principal Nezu was laughing. Traitor.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! Let me know what you did/didn’t like about the chapter. I have a beta,
but she's not from the My Hero Academia fandom, so she can't really help me with
characterization.

Thank you for your support so far! I haven't written fanfiction in a decade, so I've got a
few training wheels on right now.
A Witch and his Familiar

Chapter Summary

Izuku's familiar follows him to school and various shenanigans and revelations ensue.

Also, have a bit of BakuDeku with your KiriDeku, because why not.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night after Izuku interrupted the faculty meeting, he couldn’t get to sleep. Every time he closed his eyes and began to nod off, he would see the purple mist again, yellow eyes trailing like watercolors toward a bright sky, the tinkling of glasses and strange muttering echoing around him. Then his vision would go black again, and he would wake up, breath stuck in his chest, Popsicle cawing in his ear. Over and over this happened, until Izuku decided to get up and take a bath to calm his nerves. The warm water soothed his tense muscles, lulling him back to sleep, only to wake again to the sound of explosions and the feeling of being pulled away away away. Popsicle sat staring at him from the side of the tub, leaning over to rest his beak on Izuku’s head. Tears were streaming down Izuku’s face and hiccuping sobs were lodged in his throat, but he didn’t know why. He was shuddering.

“Popsicle, I just want to sleep…” He didn’t know what his bird could do to help him, but he was just so tired. He raised his hand to pet the raven, but Popsicle didn’t seem to appreciate getting wet. There were beak marks as proof.

Sleep didn’t come easily that night, or for long. Feeling foolish, Izuku dried himself off from his bath and tiptoed back to the bedroom. His mom slept silently on her mat on the right side of the room. Would it be immature to join her? Popsicle cawed at his ear, and shivers broke out over his arms. Grabbing his blankets, he crept over toward his mother and laid down beside her. Just for tonight, he told himself, closed his eyes, and embraced darkness.

The next morning, his mom tiptoed around him seeming concerned, making him a big breakfast, helping him get his bag and books together. There were bags beneath his eyes, she said, was he sure he was okay? She trailed her hand down his forehead as though checking a fever, smiled, and kissed him out the door. Popsicle, meanwhile, wouldn’t leave him the hell alone. The bird kept following him around from one room to the next, landing on his shoulder and digging in his claws. Then the bird would be off again, flying around the room, landing again. He was also trying to follow Izuku to school against his expressed opinions otherwise.

“You can’t come to school with me, Popsicle. They don’t allow animals on the grounds.”

Popsicle didn’t care. He came swooping back down whenever he was jostled off of Izuku’s
“Come on, Popsicle. Do you want to get me in trouble?”

Apparently so, if the new scratches in his school uniform were anything to go by.

“Ugh,” Izuku groaned, completely done with the day that had just started. “Alright, alright, you can come. But you have to hide as something that they won’t see. If you’re small enough, the alarms probably won’t trigger. But no transforming once we’re there, got it?”

Popsicle flew in happy circles all the way to the bus stop before transforming into a snake.

“Seriously? That’s what you’re going to go with, a large snake?”

Popsicle shrank in size to a much smaller snake, one that could fit around Izuku’s wrist three times almost like a complicated bracelet. He retained his raven form’s black coloring and red eyes, so from afar he definitely seemed bracelet-like.

“You better not get me into trouble, or we are never doing this again. You hear me?” Izuku felt a corresponding tickle against his wrist from where Popsicle stuck out his tongue while hissing his response. Izuku sighed. It was going to be a long day.

By the end of second period, Izuku’s day was finally looking up. Present Mic had announced a class project involving both partners holding an English conversation set around a theme of the students’ choosing, due Friday morning. Izuku had been partnered up with Bakugou, and he was doing his best not to bounce in his seat out of pure happiness. It was the perfect excuse to spend more time with Kacchan and maybe start a study session with him. Popsicle hissed against his wrist in annoyance when his arm bounced against the desk too hard, so Izuku put his hands in his lap to hold them still. His smile refused to leave his face.

Between periods, Izuku attempted to ask Kacchan about when and where he wanted to work on their project, but all he got out of him was a “shut up, Deku, I’m thinking” that definitely did not shut Izuku up because Kacchan wasn’t thinking about anything. He was just grinding his teeth and making small explosions in his palms. Maybe it was some form of anger therapy? He also kept turning to glare at Izuku, which… didn’t make him feel nice. He wanted Kacchan to be happy in general, but it felt even better when he was happy with him.

Kacchan all but ran away from Izuku when fourth period let out for lunch, so Izuku sulked over to Tokoyami. Dark Shadow popped up from Tokoyami’s back and patted Izuku on his shoulder in sympathy. Both Izuku and Tokoyami looked at the familiar in surprise since that was probably the first time the shadow familiar touched another person in their class outside of battle. Dark Shadow shrugged his shoulders like ‘what?’ causing Tokoyami to shake his head in exasperation and ask how Izuku’s morning had been. Izuku then proceeded to regale his new friend with the tale of Popsicle’s morning shenanigans. It was hard to tell if Tokoyami was laughing at him (how did a beak look when it was trying not to laugh?) , but he did have his head tilted down and to the side, which was more emotion than normal.

Dark Shadow suggested that Popsicle might be worried about something and that’s why he was hovering, but Popsicle was never worried about anything. The bird was very laid back. It spent its mornings preening Izuku’s hair, its days doing who knows what, and its nights discussing magic and
school with Izuku as he settled down to sleep. Their conversations never bothered his mom when she
was sleeping because, well, no one else really heard Popsicle speak and Popsicle could hear Izuku
even when he whispered. Together, they rarely made much noise.

Familiars were cool like that, in general, quiet and calm conversationalists; but Popsicle was probably
the coolest familiar ever. Familiars generally helped you with magic by bonding with you and
offering their energy during casting spells. Popsicle was special before he was a familiar, though,
because he was naturally able to shapeshift. He’d been a black wolf when Izuku had first met him,
acting as a pet or friend of the werewolf pack that he and his mother often stayed with. Izuku had felt
a special bond with him right away, as if the wolf was someone he was meant to know. They began
bonding more, his mother discussed adopting him as his familiar, and then they shared a feast of
frozen ice treats on a summer day that led to a formal bonding ceremony. Izuku finished that night
crying because he finally had a friend who would never leave him.

Well, he used to be glad about the ‘never leaving him’ part. It was a bit annoying when Izuku
wanted to go to school without him. He wondered if Dark Shadow would appreciate the humor in
Popsicle being currently wrapped around his wrist and if Tokoyami would disapprove.

During lunch, Izuku quizzed Tokoyami on how his quirk worked. Was it able to come out of any
part of his body, or just his stomach region? Was it a familiar-based quirk? Did he have to register
Dark Shadow as a familiar since he was attached to Tokoyami? Were there different rules if they
weren’t attached? It was probably the most Izuku had ever heard Tokoyami talk, and he smiled to
himself at becoming a great conversationalist. Maybe, sometime soon, he would stop feeling so
nervous every time he approached people to start a conversation.

For his part, Tokoyami seemed to be enjoying himself. Dark Shadow would pop up every now and
then to say something before resting on top of Tokoyami’s shoulder. He was a strange form to look
at, made of shadows rather than substance, but Izuku knew the shadow could be solidified. It wasn’t
like looking at a solid form, the shading and subtle transparency an obvious clue. He wondered if
Dark Shadow felt warm or cold, whether his temperature was based off Tokoyami’s, or whether he
didn’t have a temperature at all. Shadows certainly didn’t have temperatures, but you couldn’t touch
a shadow.

Izuku debated over whether to tell Tokoyami about Popsicle being curled around his wrist. It felt
somehow wrong to be discussing familiars and the legal ways Tokoyami had to treat his familiar
while Popsicle was wrapped around Izuku’s wrist. On one hand, Izuku was trying to keep him a
secret until he determined what he should do about him while at school. On the other hand, he didn’t
want to seem like he was hiding something from his friend. Of course, because he was thinking
about it, Popsicle was thinking about it, and Popsicle tended to be a bit more proactive than he
probably should be.

One second, Izuku was chatting about how something could physically be made of shadows, and the
next second, Popsicle was slithering across the table to say hello to Dark Shadow. Seriously.
Slithering across the table in plain sight, with some unknown students sitting three seats down. At
least they were relatively secluded because Tokoyami likes to keep to himself. That was good, right?

Tokoyami stiffened, staring at the snake that had suddenly appeared from beside Izuku. Or was he
on Izuku? Izuku’s hand crept out to grab hold of the snake and pull him back underneath his school
blazer. Before he could, Dark Shadow peered down from Tokoyami’s shoulder, reaching a clawed
shadow hand toward where the snake had settled in front of them on the lunch table… and Popsicle
nuzzled it. Popsicle, in his snake form, nuzzled a shadow bird. Vague sensations translated from
Popsicle’s head and chin to Izuku, strong enough for him to gain the vague impression of solidness
that Dark Shadow’s form had.
Well, he *had* been wondering what Dark Shadow felt like.

“Come back under the blazer and stop bothering Dark Shadow,” Izuku whispered. Popsicle continued to ignore him. *Of course, he hasn’t been listening to me all day. No reason to start now. I guess the first half of classes was pure luck.*

Popsicle seemed to still be curious about Dark Shadow and had started slithering up its arm (his arm?) until it was almost at Dark Shadow’s head on Tokoyami’s shoulder. Tokoyami, meanwhile, was obviously holding himself very stiffly while trying to seem as though the snake slithering up toward his neck didn’t frighten him.

“Popsicle!” Izuku hissed quietly, trying to sound as scolding as possible beneath clenched teeth and a smile for the masses. No one had looked over yet, but there was a snake on someone’s shoulders now, and they were bound to be found out any second. Popsicle didn’t respond, but Izuku felt a clear sense of smugness through their bond. Izuku wasn’t sure if the smugness came from escaping Izuku’s grasp (probable), getting to touch Dark Shadow while Izuku couldn’t (also probable), or some weird victory over Izuku about coming to school and not following his rules (annoyingly, also probable). It could just be a strange combination of all three. Either way, Izuku was officially done with his familiar today. If Popsicle wasn’t going to listen to him, then...

Well, the good news was, Izuku had a good grasp on Popsicle. The bad news was, he forgot to ask before entering Tokoyami’s personal space, and the other boy was a reclusive person in general so that might be a deal breaker in their friendship. Especially because they were now sitting chest-to-chest with Izuku draped over Tokoyami’s lap in the middle of the lunch hall. Uraraka’s jaw dropped open from where she had a clear view at the table behind Izuku’s, and he tried not to flush as he tried to squeeze Popsicle back into submission. Seconds later, Popsicle was back around his wrist, and Izuku was trying to figure out how to crawl off Tokoyami and apologize and maybe try touching Dark Shadow himself, all at the same time. Expectedly, it ended in a clusterfuck. Izuku hit his back on the lunch table, Tokoyami tried to place his hand on Izuku’s back to help him get off the table, Dark Shadow moved a claw to help hold and prop up Izuku’s left side from falling over onto Tokoyami’s lap completely, and Izuku tried to push up and away from Tokoyami’s shoulder. This ended with the three of them, two of which were already connected by a quirk, landing on and tangled up with each other in an even more precarious position. On the plus side, Izuku could now definitely verify that Dark Shadow had the same body heat as Tokoyami. It was almost like being surrounded in a cocoon of warmth, which had him shivering in Tokoyami’s lap.

Aaaand Uraraka was definitely spitting out her soda in laughter. Great.

Taking a deep breath, Izuku smiled shakily up at Tokoyami. “Uh, hi. Don’t say anything?”

Tokoyami stared at him for a few seconds, neither of them moving from their strange position, before Dark Shadow peered from around Tokoyami’s shoulder to look at where Izuku’s wrist was braced against Tokoyami’s chest. He looked directly where Popsicle should be and asked what his name was. Popsicle, of course, could only speak to Izuku, so he had to answer for the snake that his name was Popsicle and he was his familiar. Giving in to the inevitable, Izuku let Dark Shadow and Tokoyami maneuver his body into a more seated position next to his friend. Hopefully still friend? He hadn’t meant to fall on him.

“So…” began Tokoyami.

Folding his arms on the table, Izuku shrugged helplessly at him and tried to hide his face in his arms. “Sorry about that. He wouldn’t stay at home today. He scratched up my uniform and everything.”

“What do you mean by him being your ‘familiar’?” asked Tokoyami. That wasn’t part of Midoriya’s
quirk, to his knowledge.

“Um, I guess that is to say… we have a bond? Like, an emotional, mental, and somewhat physical bond?” Izuku wasn’t quite sure what to call it in quirk-culture other than a familiar, and witch culture called such beings familiars as well, so… yeah.

“You can share your thoughts and emotions with him, and vice versa?” clarified Tokoyami. Izuku was overwhelmingly grateful for Tokoyami’s level-headedness. He seemed to have just accepted the past two minutes ago and moved on entirely. Still friends, then.

Izuku shrugged from his folded position against the table, laughing underneath his breath as he tried to find a way to explain without, you know, explaining. “It’s not like I hear him in my head or anything, but I can understand what he says. Sometimes I’ll see things he sees, or um, feel what he feels. Stuff like that.” There was a period of silence where his friend seemed to digest the information. “I didn’t think they would allow me to bring him to school, so I was trying to leave him at home... but then he followed me here today.”

Tokoyami had seemingly relaxed next to him, peering at the table in thought. “You could always register him as a familiar with the school.”

Rubbing the back of Popsicle’s scales underneath his blazer, Izuku raised his head from the cover of his arms. “Yeah, I want to do that, but it’s complicated. He’s… not exactly normal, and I don’t want it to become an issue. Plus, give a snake a cookie… I mean, uh, if he starts being allowed to come to school with me, next thing you know he will be trying to join me in battle simulations, and I’m not sure that’s… fair.” Izuku dragged out one of his hands to wave it around as a symbol of the unfairness.

Tokoyami tilted his head in thought. It was true… Midoriya’s quirk did not seem to be related to his connection with his familiar, unlike Tokoyami who only had the ability to control shadows insofar as his familiar’s form was a shadow and he could control his familiar. Midoriya, it seemed, wasn’t entirely in charge of his snake. They were more like… partners?

“You should speak with Mr. Aizawa about him,” advised Tokoyami. Their homeroom teacher would offer the best verdict on whether the other’s familiar would be allowed in school. “Unless you wish to find a way to keep him at home…”

Popsicle’s head popped out of Izuku’s sleeve as he hissed in rebellion. Yeah, that wasn’t going to work.

“I’ll speak to Mr. Aizawa tomorrow,” agreed Izuku, slightly mollified. He just had to make it until then. At least Popsicle was calming down now that Izuku had a firm plan in mind to allow his familiar to stay with him.

However, Tokoyami was entirely too observant. “Has your familiar ever done this before?”

“No,” Izuku answered morosely, thinking back. Of course, he’d only had a familiar for less than half his life, and during that time, he hadn’t attended school. Popsicle never came with him to exams (that would have required verification of him being a familiar who had to stay by Izuku’s side), but he was always with Izuku when there was danger… at least when he could be. The presence of a familiar helped with casting spells, so if Izuku planned to cast something, Popsicle was always there. Except, Izuku pondered, at UA. He hadn’t brought the familiar with him to classes, and he’d been using his abilities without his familiar there. Popsicle had expressed his displeasure at the situation, wanting to be there to protect him, but Izuku hadn’t considered the situation desperate enough to deal with telling the teachers about him. He guessed the jig was up.
“Is this Popsicle the same one that you mentioned pestering you on your way to school? I thought he was a bird.”

Izuku had a brief moment of shit shit crapbaskets as he turned slowly toward his new friend. It was official. Tokoyami was entirely too observant. “Uhh.... please don’t say anything?” Tokoyami was either going to be his new best friend, and fast, or Izuku was going to have to come up with a clever memory spell and possibly slowly die inside at having to make his friend forget this conversation ever happened.

Tokoyami tilted his head in response. “Does this have to do with your bond with him?”

“Uhm, loosely?” answered Izuku, trying to breathe slowly and not tip Tokoyami off about how he was slightly freaking out. He didn’t know whether to try to explain his familiar’s abilities away as a quirk (but I don’t want to lie to him!) or tell him the truth, but there was always the possibility that the truth could end very badly for the both of them. As in, neither of them remembered this conversation after today, or their friendship, or the past year of their life or however much would be taken from them. Yeah, no, Izuku was definitely not telling Tokoyami the truth.

“He can, uh, turn into a bird when he wants to fly.” Izuku didn’t know if that counted as an answer, but he really wasn’t sure what else he could tell Tokoyami. Thankfully, his new friend seemed to accept that information with a “hmmm” before asking Izuku if he was ready to head back to class. Oh god, best new friend ever. Why couldn’t everyone else drop conversations this easily? It would save Izuku so much stress. And if Izuku spent the next ten minutes as they walked back to class mentally recounting all the ways in which Tokoyami was the most beautiful person ever, well, that was his business. He’d always had a thing for birds.

“Hey, can I touch your feathers?”

“Not at this time.”

“Okay, cool! ...so later, then?”

Fifth period Hero Studies was going to be spent doing a capture the flag scenario, apparently, with two teams trying to steal each other’s flag and get it back to their goal before the timer ran out. On their way to the locker rooms, Izuku badgered Kirishima with questions about how the childhood ‘capture the flag’ game worked, since it wasn’t really something five-year-olds or werewolves played. Or bird creatures that were martial arts masters. Or ghosts or young vampire girls or—

“—but if you can make it back to your base with the flag waving in your hand, there’s nothing manlier,” finished Kirishima, stopping just inside the locker room doorway.

“Good to know,” Izuku responded, smiling at the other boy, glad that their friendship (he hoped that was what this was) seemed to be going back to the new normal. Kirishima smiled in response.

“Out of my way, nerds,” Bakugou snarled, pushing past them to get to an emptier area to change.

Their costumes were stored inside briefcases in coded lockers in their homeroom, but the students were supposed to change into the costumes in a large open locker room several doors down from the classroom. There were lockers on the wall, but no one really used them except to store towels, backup water bottles, backup clothes, and gym shoes. Nothing you wouldn’t be willing to lose.
Open shower stalls were situated in the back corner of the room past the lockers, but Izuku tried to use them as little as possible. He was afraid of the other boys seeing his scars and asking too many questions.

Izuku smiled over at Bakugou, who slammed his costume briefcase down on the ground. Kacchan didn’t seem as tense after lunch. His posture was looser, and he wasn’t scowling as much. Izuku liked when Kacchan acted this way, happier, looser, more relaxed; it made him feel like he was succeeding at something even if he hadn’t done anything to affect him. Izuku’s happiness must have translated over to Popsicle, who slithered around his wrist as a reminder. Oh, right. He didn’t have anywhere to hide Popsicle under his costume arms or legs, not to mention that it would definitely be wrong for him to take Popsicle into a combat game without permission. Izuku peered over at Tokoyami, who had already fastened his cape around his shoulders and was looking at Izuku’s wrist where Popsicle had been curled up all day. Tokoyami raised his eyes to Izuku’s face and tilted his head, as if to ask what he was going to do. Izuku shrugged back in response. He had no idea.

From his wrist, Popsicle started whispering that Izuku could always let him outside so he could hang out on the grass beside the exit door. But although Popsicle hadn’t thus far set off any alarms (likely because the sensors could not detect Popsicle as a being separate from Izuku), Izuku had the vague worry that the alarms only couldn’t since him as long as Popsicle was on his body where Izuku kept his student ID. How big did an animal have to be to set off the barrier alarms? And if he just let his snake roam around outside in snake form, would the wards sense him then?

“Alright,” Izuku whispered as he bent over to unlock his costume briefcase, “You can come with me but stay curled around my neck beneath the hoodie. And don’t help me in the game. I don’t want you accidentally setting off any alarms.”

He felt Popsicle’s assent at about the same time he heard him answer in the affirmative. Well, that was one obstacle down. Now, he just had to use a bit of sleight of hand to sneak Popsicle up the shirt he was about to put on. Or down his pants, and then up his shirt? No, that would be awkward.

With Midoriya’s focus being solidly on hiding the snake slithering up the front of his body as he changed into his sleeveless hoodie, his back was turned toward his classmates. Therefore, despite struggling to fit his boots on over his pants, Kirishima was able to catch a solid glimpse of Midoriya’s bare back. No, more than a glimpse, he allowed himself to flat-out stare. There were three slashes in the middle left of Izuku’s back that had scarred over thickly, almost like he had been mauled by some animal and not healed well, and another three large scars that looked similar to what he imagined bullet wounds looked like in his upper right shoulder. Midoriya’s back looked so… manly. He was scarred up, but also fit—his abdominals muscles looking solid and firm even from several feet away. His lats and trapezius muscles were well-defined, and even the triangle at his lower back jutted out in a sharp and mesmerizing way from the rest of his back.

Kirishima shook his head and focused on smoothing his bottom of his pants into the top of his boots. A lot of the guys in their class were well-fit. Bakugou, for one, had stronger arms than you would expect, and Iida and Kamenari obviously kept themselves trim. But there was something about Midoriya’s combination of scars and muscle that had Kirishima suddenly short-breathed, trying not to blush, and thinking entirely too much about hands and mouths and couches.

During capture the flag, the class was split up into two teams. Team A contained Bakugou, Todoroki, Kaminari, Ashido, Aoyami, Uraraka, Koda, Ojiro, and Shoji. Team B had one extra
member and included Midoriya, Tokoyami, Yaoyorozu, Sero, Asui, Sato, Kirishima, Jirou, Iida, and Hagakure. Despite their numbers, Team B were all a bit worried about balancing attack and defense, especially considering that two of Class 1-A’s strongest members were on the opposite team.

“We need to focus on a good defense. Kacchan’s likely to be offense, maybe Kaminari as well. We need something that can insulate against any of Kaminari’s attacks and stop Kacchan from using his explosions.” Izuku wasn’t sure what Todoroki planned to do, probably defense, but none of Team A’s other members would be as worrisome offensively. He hoped so, at least.

“I could create capes for everyone to wear made of an insulated material, but it would take a bit of time,” Yaoyorozu offered.

“Yeah, I would get started on that. Kaminari’s strong,” offered the tape guy. He had said his name was Sero earlier.

“I was thinking I could work as defense,” Izuku offered, chewing at his lip. “If anyone comes near, I can blast the ground near them.” In his mind, he was planning where he could set up a stone circle around their base; he would be much more useful in a static location where he could create a protection circle within which to use his powers. He wanted to avoid using his abilities as much as possible, but he was determined to be prepared either way. Plus, the other team did have Kacchan. Izuku would really rather avoid fighting him, but he doubted there was an option, and there was the chance that their blasts could cancel each other out.

“And I should definitely be offense!” cheered the invisible girl, Hagakure. “I can get their flag before they even know I’m there.”

“I’ve got a theory for dealing with Bakugou’s blasts, so maybe I should join you, Midoriya,” Sero offered. He was fingering the tape portals on his elbows in thought.

A couple minutes later, they had a plan of attack. Izuku, Sero, and Kirishima would focus on defense and stay with the flag at their base. Kirishima pouted at not having the chance to carry back the flag (it would be so manly!), but it was pretty much uniformly agreed that Hagakure would be their best chance at getting the flag while being completely invisible. All the other offensive team members would serve as a distraction: Tokoyami using Dark Shadow to attack from afar, Asui assisting in getting Hagakure out of the enemy’s base once she had the flag, and Iida acting as bait by pretending to be their main offensive strategy. Sato, the guy who could power himself up with sugar, was set to act as both defense and offense, hanging out in the middle of the field with Jirou to knock people off balance. They had already spied a few boulders that Jirou could explode with her ear-jacks. Yaoyorozu was focused on creating the insulated capes, although she had thoughts on scattering some caltrops and other assorted traps if she had enough time before the game started.

It was a quick plan, but there were several back-ups in case everything went south. They could only guess at what roles certain members of Team A would have, so they needed to be versatile while still attacking like a snake, one lunge in and out. And of course, as things typically go when Todoroki is involved, the plan quickly went to shit.

Team B had been correct in their assumption that Todoroki would act as Team A’s defense for the flag, but they didn’t plan on so many of their offensive members not being able to escape his initial blast of ice. Shoji alone had remained with Todoroki to defend the Team A flag, with a plan to use reconnaissance to figure out Team B’s offense and foil them. After having managed to find the invisible Hagakure using the ears on the end of his tentacles, Shoji had tackled her to the ground mere feet from Todoroki. However, Todoroki decided to use him as a worthy sacrifice for finding his invisible enemy, shooting a blast of ice that encapsulated Shoji half on top of her. Hagakure got the lower part of her naked body stuck in the ice, unable to move. Since Todoroki didn’t have time to
waste unfreezing his teammate, Shoji and Hagakure spent the rest of the game on top of each other, one of them naked and screaming abuse while the other blushed and apologized profusely.

Todoroki’s blast of ice had also reached Tokoyami, Asui, and Iida, as well. Tokoyami used Dark Shadow to attack the ice and break himself free while Iida had managed to jump to avoid it, but both of them were too busy trying to pull Asui out of the bottom part of his costume, which was frozen to the ground, to counter-attack immediately. Meanwhile, in the field between the two team’s bases, Yaoyorozu and Sato were distracted fending off the acidic slime courtesy of Ashido and the laser strikes courtesy of Aoyami. The two Team A offensive members were timing their attacks so that neither Yaoyorozu nor Sato could manage to escape from hiding or throw anything as a counterattack. They were pinned down, but Ashido and Aoyami were also stuck in the stalemate unable to continue forward past the caltrops spread in front of them. Meanwhile, Uraraka floated herself and Ojiro over and around boulders so that Jirou couldn’t attack them. Bakugou and Kaminari avoided the middle road of the battlefield in a plan to attack Team B’s defense from the side.

Back at their home base, Kirishima was prepared to use his hardening to defend against Bakugou’s explosions. Sero had proposed that he could use his tape to bind Bakugou in place once the explosive teen got near enough. The chance card was actually Kaminari. Izuku had a plan to use one of Yaoyorozu’s insulated capes in order to wrap Kaminari up like a body bag and detain him with Sero’s tape, but that would require Sero shifting his focus from Bakugou to Kaminari. Izuku had a bad feeling about that part of the plan. He was pretty sure Bakugou would find a way to escape detention if Kirishima didn’t sit on him or knock him out or something.

When push came to shove, the Team B defense actually managed it. Izuku was able to get the jump on Kaminari by exploding boulders around him and creating a dusty smoke screen, sneaking in low, and then sweeping Kaminari to the ground by wrapping the insulated cape around him and throwing him with a hip toss. Meanwhile, Kirishima blocked Bakugou’s approaching blasts while Sero managed to wrap tape around one wrist and then the other, whipping Bakugou around in a circle and taping his arms against his back so that he couldn’t let off any more explosions. Sero then cut off Bakugou’s section of tape and used another round of tape to help Izuku wrap Kaminari tightly so he couldn’t electrocute them with their backs turned. They were both prepared to turn around and focus on detaining Bakugou further when Team A’s middle-fielders attacked.

Uraraka and Ojiro floated over the Team B base before dropping down in a sneak attack. Uraraka seemed a bit sick to her stomach, but Ojiro managed to grab Team B’s flag and throw it toward Uraraka while fending off Sero’s tape with his tail. Uraraka floated herself and the flag above Team B’s base while Izuku exploded the area around Ojiro. While the squirrel-like boy’s defenses were down, Sero managed to capture him with his tape, making sure to tape his tail to his body so he couldn’t move. Now, only Uraraka was left. She was only floating in the air, unable to achieve much velocity after her initial jump and catching the flag from Ojiro. Therefore, the Team B defenders only had to get her down or get the flag away from her. Sero moved his elbow into position to shoot tape up toward Uraraka, planning to grab her foot with the tape and drag her down. But before his tape could get farther than a couple feet, Bakugou came out of nowhere, launching into Sero and knocking him to the ground. Upper arms still taped together behind his back, Bakugou twisted his hands around and used his explosions and a running jump to propel himself off a nearby boulder and up toward Uraraka.

“You better be fucking ready!” Bakugou shouted at Uraraka. By her wide eyes and uncertain face, she likely didn’t want whatever was coming her way. “Now, DIE!” he screamed, using the explosive force behind his hands to rocket himself toward her, hitting her with enough velocity that she began sailing across the battlefield back toward the Team A base. That was definitely going to cause a bruise.
Sero tried to release tape to capture her, but she was too far away by the time he had stumbled to his feet. He turned toward his co-patriots. “Dammit! Sorry, guys!”

“You two go after her! I’ll focus on Bakugou!” Kirishima yelled back. Izuku and Sero nodded in agreement and took off down the field, weaving between boulders. Uraraka was almost halfway across, already.

“Yaoyarozu, incoming!” Izuku shouted, spying his teammate hiding behind a boulder. She had a mirror propped up on top of the boulder to reflect Aoyami’s laser beams, which was also made to withstand the acid Ashido was still throwing in globs. “Uraraka has the flag!”

Sato picked up the mirror (which apparently Aoyami had begun posing into?) and threw it at Uraraka. Uraraka screamed, curling into a ball, and the mirror missed her feet by a few inches. She continued sailing toward the other end of the battlefield, tumbling head over heals with her hands wrapped across her mouth to prevent barfing, still using the velocity imparted to her by Bakugou to propel her floating form forward.

Yaoyarozu tried to form a lasso out of her arm, but it took too long for her to make the rope. Uraraka was too far away. Izuku and Sero continued to run, cursing, past Yaoyorozu and Sato. Ashido and Aoyami (who no longer had a mirror to pose into) began flinging their acid and laser blasts at Izuku and Sero, but both boys managed to dodge the attacks while Sato (who was no longer pinned down by their combined offensive) rushed at his enemies while their backs were turned. Izuku and Sero continued running forward, hoping to stop Uraraka’s flying form.

Meanwhile, Tokoyami and Iida had managed to free Asui from her costume’s boots, which were frozen to the ground. Tokoyami and Asui distracted Todoroki by jumping around and avoiding his ice blasts while Iida used his speed to rush toward the flag and grab it. Iida tossed the flag over to Asui just as Todoroki swung around to ice him in place. Asui caught the flag with her tongue while Tokoyami used Dark Shadow to propel her back toward the middle of the battlefield. Although Iida was stuck in place, Tokoyami managed to keep Todoroki at bay long enough for Asui to land on a boulder halfway back to her base. Uraraka passed over Asui’s head just as the frog-like girl heard a shout from farther away. “Asui! Uraraka has the flag!”

“Gero?” Weighing her options, Asui decided to try to race the other girl to their respective bases. Both girls had the other team’s flag. The game would be decided by a race of long jumping versus flying, Asui vs Uraraka-come-Bakugou.

In the end, Bakugou’s team won, and his bellow of victory could be heard all the way across the battlefield. Tokoyami had failed to stop Uraraka from reaching her base due to Dark Shadow’s preoccupation with Todoroki’s ice blasts. He could be seen approaching his teammates and uttering apologies, which everyone shrugged off. After all, Tokoyami had been up against Todoroki alone at the end of the game, which was no small feat. Panting, Izuku remained kneeling on the ground three-quarters of the way to Team A’s base. The Team B defensive had been a good plan, but as he expected… Kacchan found a way to escape. Izuku found himself laughing into the dirt, the hood of his costume hiding his smile. He couldn’t bring himself to mind losing if it was because Kacchan wouldn’t stop fighting to win.

Izuku hadn’t told his mom about the intruder he saw at UA. He knew if he had seen a demon or other witch break into his school, then he would have told her; but he was trying to keep the two
parts of his life separate. Go to hero school, become a hero who fights villains. Go home, be a witch who fights demons and helps others of the supernatural community. He would use a mix of martial arts and explosions to fight villains, and a mix of spells and pausing time to trap demons. Two lives, separate. This was probably why Izuku was surprised when the principal of his hero school walked up to him as he was heading to leave the “capture the flag” exercise, inviting Izuku to walk back with him toward the school. It was also why he was unprepared for the conversation that followed.

Principal Nezu was a strange being. He looked like a three-foot tall white mouse with a scar over his right eye, or some small bear with a mouse nose. He had read that the principal was smarter than any human and could make connections and calculations faster than a computer. Izuku was suitably terrified. However, the principal’s voice did not match his stature or reputation; it was a soothing medium tone that Izuku imagined befit a scientist more than a hero.

“I have had quite the interesting morning, so far,” Principal Nezu said affably, not looking at Izuku as they walked across the field toward UA. He sounded as though he was discussing business with a colleague, but Izuku was definitely not a colleague and had never talked to his principal before now, so he was a bit weirded out. “A young student entered my school with an unregistered companion. After the attack yesterday, I considered that someone else might be trying to spy on the campus and be using a student to do so. It was quite a surprise when that companion appeared to be the student’s friend; after all, pets are not allowed on the UA campus, and it would be foolish to risk expulsion for simple companionship. But you have had some interesting conversations today, Mr. Midoriya.”

Izuku’s foot paused in the air, a breath stuttered in his throat, and he tried to stop his eyes from widening in surprise. Had he been caught? The first part of the discussion could have been about any student, but the principal knew, didn’t he? He knew he knew he knew. The air whooshed out of his lungs, and Izuku tried to regain a simple gait to match the principal’s. How much did he know? He tried to focus his gaze somewhere else, but the principal was turning toward him.

Principal Nezu turned his stare to where Popsicle was hidden beneath Izuku’s hoodie. He continued on as though Izuku wasn’t freaking out (he must know I’m freaking out) and having his life crash down around him. Izuku really didn’t want to be expelled on his second week of school; he didn’t want his memory wiped; he didn’t want to have to run again; he wanted to stay at the school and learn to become a hero. “Is it a snake? Is it a bird? It was a mystery. The classrooms and lunchrooms are monitored, and you mentioned this Popsicle of yours as having two different forms. I had two hypotheses, whether it was another animal with a quirk like myself or if you were a witch with a shapeshifting familiar. With all other facts being considered, it seems my latter hypothesis is supported. Can it change into any other forms?”

_He definitely knew._ Izuku gulped, let out a shaky breath, and took in another slow one through his nose. He couldn’t find a way out of answering with the truth. If the principal knew that much already… if he already knew about witches… Izuku tried to focus on walking toward the school. Maybe if he just answered normally, like this was a typical conversation. He just had to use as few words as possible, right? If the principal was this smart, he could figure out the rest. “Uh, he was originally a black wolf.”

Principal Nezu smiled at him as they both continued on their way, the school approaching closer. “Oh wolves are nice, loyal. Is that why he is so loyal to you?”

Izuku hesitated at the personal question. _Popsicle was loyal to him for many reasons, but he doubted his wolf-form was one of them. And what did loyalty have to do with—_

“That’s why he is here, is it not?”

_So he was wondering why Popsicle followed him to school, which meant he didn’t hear the entire_
conversation in the classroom this morning. Izuku could work with that. He decided to answer as generally as possible. “We’ve been through a lot together.” That was true enough.

“Yes, I suppose you have,” continued Principal Nezu, chuckling as though the entire situation was humorous to him. “Another witch to come through UA… although you are the first male witch I have met.” He peered over at Izuku, who paled in response. He knew too much; he knew too much; he knew too much. How did he know about the other witch? You weren’t supposed to talk about it. You can’t talk about it! Had she told him herself, or had he been able to sense she was different, too?

“They are rare,” Izuku generalized, trying to find a way to end the conversation. Principal Nezu wasn’t a witch; he was sure of that. He didn’t seem to be a magical species of any sort, which meant discussing this sort of thing was forbidden with a capital ‘F’. Izuku felt like he was going to throw up. He wanted to run away from this conversation and go home and pack his boxes and leave town. He wanted to be a hero. He wanted to stay. He wanted this conversation to not be happening. He wanted Popsicle to have stayed at home like he should have, that stupid, stupid bird...

“I would like to meet with me in the faculty lounge over some tea? I assure you, our conversation would go much more comfortably in there.” The principal was asking him to skip his sixth period class in order to have a conversation. About the supernatural. This was not happening.

Izuku hesitated on his next answer. He thought of his mom. He thought of her hand on his head, telling him how he could never tell anyone, how it had to remain their little secret. He thought of the demons that would show up every time he used his ability, and how he and his mom were always on the run, always leaving for somewhere, because something bad was always after him. He thought about his mom crying next to his bed, telling him that this was what happened when you revealed your magic. He thought back to the white roses covered in blood, and how his mother never spoke of his father. “I… don’t know if I should be talking to you, without my mother here.” Izuku may as well have been in a police station answering to his crimes; it felt like asking for a lawyer.

Principal Nezu began leading them through one of the side doors of the school toward the faculty lounge. He hummed thoughtfully, as though pleased. “Oh, she knows then? Good, that’s good. It’s much easier when you have someone to guide you, is it not?” Izuku didn’t know how to respond to that. “I found I had a very hard time of it, learning how to live with humans. There was no one to guide me. The culture of humans was difficult to understand, at first, as well as their attitude towards quirks and heroism and villainy. It is quite a strange culture we find ourselves in.”

The principal paused, as though waiting for Izuku to have an opinion on the matter, but he didn’t. Izuku had never found the roles of heroes versus villains to be strange. It seemed normal. Heroes versus villains, witches versus demons, good versus evil. Except sometimes evil corrupts. Heroes become villains, witches become corrupted by their magic and turn into warlocks, good intentions paved the way for harmful deeds. Human culture wasn’t difficult for Izuku to understand, not as a theory. The only hard part was figuring out how to form relationships built on lies while not losing the bright light you wanted to be for the world. Figuring out how to become what you wanted to be without endangering what you were.

After a long bout of silence spent traversing two separate hallways, Principal Nezu finally opened the door to what Izuku assumed was the faculty lounge. He fixed two cups of green tea to be placed on a low table before crawling up on a couch, his climbing motions halfway between those of a cat and a child. Or a werewolf cub, Izuku considered, having the strong desire to join his principal on the couch—to crawl up, curl into a ball, and hide his face from the world. That sounded about perfect, right now. Instead, he sat down on the ground on the opposite side of the table, folding his legs
beneath him.

Principal Nezu stared down at where Izuku had chosen to sit. *So the boy was still nervous, then.* He smiled and gestured at one of the cups of tea, which Izuku cradled in his hands bashfully as he tried to place this new situation. He didn’t know how to act. This was essentially the alpha of alphas at this school, but the only thing powerful and intimidating about him was his mind. If push came to shove, Izuku knew he could stop time, come up with a way to make the principal forget their conversation, and run away. But the principal was too clever. He’d guessed Izuku was a witch without Izuku having said a single word to him. He figured it out once; he could figure it out again. Plus, stopping time would probably summon demons here, which was a situation Izuku was trying to avoid.

On the upside, at least Principal Nezu was being circumspect in all his questions. “As teachers, we try to do our best to set all young heroes on the right path with the right resources. Do you feel you have the right resources at your hands, Mr. Midoriya?”

*The right resources for what? Using magic?* Izuku guessed that was what he meant, although it was a strange place for him to begin their conversation. “I… yes?”

“Is that so…” the principal hummed, before his beady stare seemed to pierce Izuku’s soul. “How far back does your magical line go?


The principal nodded to himself. “If you have the right resources, then you probably inherited your ancestor’s journals, correct? How many journals do you own?”

“A lot,” Izuku answered shakily, as vague as possible. Izuku couldn’t say he was a witch without endangering himself, but he could say that he owned journals, right? *And how did Principal Nezu know that witches wrote journals? Wait, had he run across a book of shadows before? Had he read one?*

“I found your behavior yesterday in the faculty lounge quite intriguing,” the principal said, seeming to switch gears. “That does not seem to be a consistent trait among the few witches I have met. Were you raised with a werewolf pack?”

Another answer Izuku couldn’t expound on; other words he wasn’t allowed to say. He struggled to find an answer that wouldn’t get him in trouble. Izuku took a deep breath, bit his lip, and stared down at his mug. “Sometimes,” Izuku hinted, drinking his tea. It was a good tea, earthy, warm. It reminded him of the grass he used to play on, the trees he would hide in with the other wolves. ‘Sometimes’ wasn’t exactly a lie. He and his mom had occasionally stayed with werewolves, but he wouldn’t say he was raised by them. His mom raised him. She was the reason he knew what he knew. She was the only constant in his life other than demons and warlocks and magic. He wondered what that said about him. He missed the pack. He missed them. He missed them, and he couldn’t go back.

Principal Nezu could sense Izuku’s unease. Most of the boy’s answers to his questions had only included one or two words. “You don’t need to be afraid of me,” Principal Nezu soothed. “I am not here to get you into trouble. Think of me as… an ambivalent third-party to this other culture of yours. I know about many things from that side of our world. It is my job to know things. It is the only way to prepare for every eventuality, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes…” It sounded simple when the principal put it like that, as if knowing something wasn’t a
crime. *But it was a crime.* And yet knowing about something was the only way to prepare for it, to prepare to fight against it.

“And do you feel prepared?” the principal asked, as though sensing Izuku's thought process.

“No,” Izuku almost choked on the word as it came out of his mouth.

The resulting stare-down between Izuku and his principal lasted a full thirty seconds. During that time, Nezu considered twenty different questions with a hundred different permutations. Neither of them were speaking directly. Neither of them were saying what they meant. *Why was the boy so afraid to discuss magic, even when faced with someone who knew it existed? Was the boy in trouble? What was he not prepared for? He had some training for his witch abilities, and he was getting new training as a hero. What did he not feel prepared for? Or rather… “What would make you feel better prepared?”*

Izuku hesitated at the question, eyes dropping back down. *In other words, what did he need? What was he missing?* Izuku thought back to the previous day, the claustrophobia, running through the hallways, hiding in the bathroom, the fear that demons had followed him to the school, that the students were in danger because of him. He thought about warlocks with teleportation quirks. He thought about the wards his mom and him had set up around the werewolf camp. “Can... those like me get past the school barrier without an ID?” Izuku finally asked. That was the crux of the matter, wasn’t it? The first step in planning to protect himself and others was prevention. Did he need to set up wards to protect the school? Could he even do that? Would his mom let him? Would the principal?

Principal Nezu nodded. *So the boy was worried about his protection. Others’ protection? “Yes, our wards will sense any intruders, no matter the size.”*

“That’s how you knew about Popsicle,” Izuku muttered, analyzing his former (apparently wrong) assumptions about the school barrier. He had thought his snake would be safe as long as he was on Izuku’s body and would remain undetected as long as Izuku carried his student ID; but the principal had said earlier that the wards sensed him.

“There are many ways I knew of him, but yes, the ward sensors for small animated objects attached to students was one of them. Another was that lunchroom show of yours. Did you find Mr. Tokoyami’s advice helpful?” The question seemed out of left field for Izuku, who stared with widening eyes at the principal. *Could lunchtime conversations be overheard? Was every word they said monitored? How careful was he going to have to be in order to...*

“Don’t worry,” the principal soothed, interrupting his thought process. “I could not hear what was said, but he seemed to be advising you.” Izuku sighed, tense muscles releasing. The principal gave him a beat of relaxation before moving on. “You seemed as though you were set to follow Mr. Aizawa after the end of last class. Were you going to reveal your familiar to him?” Izuku’s body seized up again. *Was this rat-bear a mind reader? That would have been a poor idea. He does have a bit of a trigger for expelling students who break the rules. He even has a file on you. Would you like to know what he’s found?”*

So Mr. Aizawa would have expelled him for sneaking his familiar into the school, even though it was harmless? Izuku flashed back to the moment yesterday when Mr. Aizawa asked him why he hadn’t followed the evacuation safety protocols. His new pack leader seemed to staunchly value rules and abiding by them. It was strange to someone like Izuku who had very little rules growing up. There were the simple ones—don’t reveal your secret, run from any danger that appears, take a shower before bed, etc. But rules for how you should run away, where to go, what to do? That was the sort of thing Izuku was used to making up on the fly. And now he had a teacher who would
possibly kick him out for bringing an animal to school, even though that animal would have followed
him inside UA anyway...

And as for the file that Mr. Aizawa was apparently keeping on him? “Yes,” Izuku answered,
wondering if the principal would show the file to him. Yes, he definitely wanted to know what it
said. He so badly wanted to know what his teacher thought of him. Was he proud? Upset? Did he
trust him? Izuku hadn’t had a pack leader in so long. It was different than a parent. A pack leader
meant… protection. Safety. Someone to put their hand on your neck to console you, to turn toward
demons and roar and thrash and maul to protect you, always to protect you. Izuku couldn’t remember
the last time his mom had protected him. It was always the other way around.

“You should ask him sometime,” Principal Nezu suggested, continuing to talk about Mr. Aizawa. “I
am sure the conversation would prove enlightening. Would it help you to know that he has
encountered other members of your world and is one of the only faculty here who know about
them?”

Izuku’s heart could have stopped in his chest right then and there. “Really?” he asked, trying to
dampen down his excitement. If his pack leader knew about the supernatural… could Izuku talk to
him about it? Could he have ally-friend-leader-pack? Izuku didn’t have a word for the feeling. The
closest he could think of was ‘home’. Principal Nezu waived off Izuku’s enthusiasm, chuckling a bit to himself. Finally, the boy showed
some other emotion than this stoic anxiety. “Oh, I am sure that is his story to tell. Just as you have a
story to tell. Would you like to tell me what it is?”

“My story?” Izuku asked, attempting to clarify. The principal’s nod prompted him to continue, but
Izuku didn’t know what to say. He could answer ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ but beyond that his words were
sealed. There were so many things he couldn’t say, that he wasn’t allowed to say, that it would hurt
him to say. He wondered if the curse was still active. Izuku opened his mouth to speak the words, to
tell the principal ‘I’m a witch who grew up wandering around and helping the supernatural,’ but the
words wouldn’t come out. The taste of blood pooled into his mouth. He wanted to say ‘I’m scared’
and ‘I’m lonely’ and ‘I’ve never had a home.’ He wanted to say so many things, but the words were
like blood flooding past his teeth gushing down his throat. He choked on them before they could
even think to leave his lips. He wanted to say he was in trouble, and he would always be in trouble,
and he brought trouble to those around him. His story contained so many things, dreams and wishes
and loss, but he was never allowed to say them.

“I… can’t say much,” Izuku answered. It was the truth. He couldn’t think of a single thing about his
life that he was allowed to say. It felt like everything about him was forbidden.

The principal picked up on his hesitation. “Hmm… cannot or will not?” And Izuku was suddenly so,
so grateful for Principal Nezu’s intellect, how he was able to pick up on the nuances of Izuku’s
words.

“Physically cannot,” clarified Izuku, his shoulders sagging as he sighed. Blood in his mouth, blood in
his eyes, blood in his ears... why does it always end in blood?

Principal Nezu caught on to the meaning behind his words. “By means of some sort of spell?” he
clarified. “Interesting. Can you tell me what your abilities are, then?”

Izuku smiled sadly, his cheeks trembling. That was definitely forbidden. He shook his head.

The principal hesitated before continuing, his eyes sharp, reading every twitch and sigh. All of a
sudden, Izuku felt like he was under a microscope or a polygraph. Something determined to figure
him out. “You have shown us your primary ability before, the one witches are born with. It comes naturally much like a quirk, yes?”

Izuku hesitated. The principal already guessed, so confirming or denying was allowed, wasn’t it? That wouldn’t hurt him, would it? “Yes,” Izuku answered, braced for pain. The pain didn’t come.

The principal nodded to himself, hypothesis verified. Yes or no questions could work, then. “Your ability seems to involve an explosive force that affects both solid and non-solid objects. I have a theory, if you would like to hear it.”

Izuku nodded rather than speaking. He felt like he was walking a tight rope over a huge chasm, one wrong step and he would fall.

“You have only shown your class part of your ability, the part that can be used to speed up the molecules of an object and cause them to explode,” Principal Nezu suggested.

Izuku didn’t know how he could have guessed that, but he nodded. Everything the principal had said was true.

“It would reason, then, that the other part of your ability, which I intuit was briefly used during the entrance exam,” the principal paused, squinting his beady eyes and leaning forward on the couch, “was the ability to slow down the molecules of an object.”

Izuku nodded again. From what he had experimented, that was technically correct.

“Meaning you could effectively pause time for that object,” suggested the principal.

Izuku wasn’t sure that was the way to word it. He could pause time for a single object, theoretically, but he had a hard time specifically choosing a certain area to pause, even when he flung out his hands in the same motion he did when exploding something. Instead, he typically ended up pausing a whole room or a whole house or the whole damn block of a street, depending on his emotional state at the time. It had gotten him into trouble many times. Slowing down specific molecules or objects was just too hard to control. He hesitantly shook his head.

Sensing that part of his former statement was correct, Principal Nezu re-worded it. “You could pause time for an area greater than the object.”

Izuku nodded a bit more enthusiastically at this statement.

Putting two and two together, the principal summarized, “You could slow down or speed up time for all objects in a certain radius.”

Izuku smiled slightly and nodded, uncertain how to clarify his ability any further without being able to speak about it. He had trouble exploding an object of a radius greater than one meter, due to the amount of focus it required. Smaller objects were easier. Smaller ones were also harder to aim at, though, since Izuku had to fling out one of his hands in the direction of the specific object in addition to focusing his intent in order to explode it. If the direction he was aiming at wasn’t spot on... well, he had lost of couple of lamps, back when he was a kid. That was before he and his mom had switched to only owning whatever they could carry.

“That is quite the useful ability,” Principal Nezu considered, leaning back on the couch and sipping at the cup of tea he had nearly forgotten. The ability to control the speed of objects in a certain area... It was almost like time manipulation, which was very rare. Only two recorded instances existed, neither of which worked both to speed and slow time.
“Thank you, sir,” Izuku said, hesitating. He didn’t know how to say that he couldn’t use all of his abilities in front of normal people. He didn’t know how to say ‘this part is forbidden, this is allowed’ when he couldn’t fully articulate why that was. The fear clenched in his gut as he considered his words. The principal waited, but after several minutes passed, he seemed to accept that Izuku was not going to voice his thoughts and decided to move on.

“Now, we seem to have reached an understanding regarding your abilities. Would you like me to call in Mr. Aizawa to continue our conversation?”

Izuku tried to swallow and ended up coughing, putting his cup down to beat at his chest with his fist. His voice squeaked coming out. “Sir?”

Principal Nezu smiled at him. “Your earlier answer, in addition to your behavior during the faculty meeting yesterday, suggests you were raised primarily in a werewolf culture, correct? This would indicate a certain level of familiarity and adherence to their rules. Your behavior with Mr. Aizawa suggests you consider him to be the pack leader for your class.” Izuku stared at him, wide-eyed.

Yeah, he was definitely a mind-reader of some sort. Holy shit. And maybe a magical creature guru.

“I wish to discuss with you how you can keep your abilities a secret. That is important for your society, yes?”

Wait, he knew about that all along and still asked me all these questions? Izuku tried not to be upset that the principal hadn’t clarified that aspect sooner. “Yes, sir.”

Principal Nezu nodded and hummed in thought. “Mr. Aizawa could be very helpful in this task. In addition, he already knows of certain parts of your society, so revealing your nature to him will not get you into any trouble. Since he is also your de facto pack leader, it would make sense for him to be present for the rest of this meeting. Now, would you like me to call in Mr. Aizawa?”

Izuku tried to swallow again, his throat was suddenly dry. It felt more real now that someone else had said the words aloud. It had been so long. (pack pack pack) (ally-friend-leader-pack) Izuku suddenly found that his eyes were burning and liquid was dripping down his cheeks. Was he crying? (pack pack pack) He had been in a strange room with a strange teacher for what felt like an hour. He wanted (pack pack pack) his homeroom teacher to be there. Izuku wiped at his cheek and nodded toward the principal. Why was he crying? This was just a conversation. “Yes, sir.” Even his voice sounded strained, his throat clenching.

Within five minutes, Mr. Aizawa was opening the door of the faculty lounge. Izuku had finished his tea and already started on a second cup when he entered. He had a sudden feeling—gratefulness? pride? wonder? worry? So many emotions buzzed through his veins that Izuku found himself nervously scratching his cheek. He forcefully pulled his hand down and started massaging it in his lap. He massaged one finger, then the next. Just calm down. He approves of students controlling themselves.

“Hello, Eraserhead,” Principal Nezu greeted. “I called you in here to discuss Mr. Midoriya’s abilities and the necessity that they remain as secret as possible within this school and the greater community. Would you like some tea?”

To his credit, Aizawa didn’t hesitate for a second at either the revelation or the offer. He continued into the room before sitting down on the couch a seat away from the principal and pulling a juice box out of his pocket. Izuku wondered how he fit it in there.

Once Aizawa was settled, the principal continued. “As you expected, Eraserhead, Mr. Midoriya does not have a quirk. He is not allowed to reveal the specifics of his abilities, but he is a witch.”
Although neither of these statements seemed to phase Aizawa, Izuku found himself paling at the direct wording, a cold sweat breaking out all over his body. Every time the word ‘witch’ was actually mentioned, it felt like the word itself summoned disaster. Izuku tensed in preparation for someone to bust the door down and tear everyone’s memories from their minds. No one came.

“Do not worry, Mr. Midoriya. He has some knowledge of these things,” Principal Nezu soothed once again before turning toward his fellow teacher to clarify. “Mr. Midoriya would like to keep his abilities secret, but I thought you should be aware of them, in the hope that you might train him to use his powers with secrecy. I am sure you know of what I speak.”

Aizawa continued to slurp at his juice box, eyes in a heavy-lidded stare that remained on Izuku even as his words were directed toward the principal. “You want me to train him?” he clarified.

The principal nodded. “He has the very useful ability to effectively manipulate time.”

Aizawa’s eyes sharpened on Izuku, as though re-analyzing his previous interactions with the boy.

The principal continued. “Specifically, he does this by speeding up or slowing down time in a specific area. In a smaller area, this seems to cause explosions. In a larger area, he can stop time completely. Although I do not understand his specific paranoia with using his abilities—” Izuku choked on a gulp of tea and began coughing his brains out. “—or whatever prevents him from speaking of them, he seems to want to primarily use his gifts as a last case resort. In the case of his ability to pause time, I do worry about villains discovering this ability before he is fully trained to defend himself. It is quite powerful, and like all witch’s abilities, could be turned to evil purpose if something happened.”

Aizawa turned to glare at the principal. “Lots of students have powerful abilities. This kid’s not special in that.”

“You are correct. However, time manipulation is very rare and has a tendency to be feared. Imagine him walking into the Sports Festival and freezing all his competitors in place, unable to move, unable to fight. Villains would be foolish not to try and obtain that ability. And what will they do when they realize it is not a quirk? What will others do?”

“That’s why I don’t use it. I never use it,” interrupted Izuku, before hesitating, “unless there is no other way.”

“And how often is there no other way?” Aizawa drawled. He didn’t need to ask. He could feel the answer on his tongue.

Izuku looked down at his hands and didn’t respond.

As suspected. Aizawa refused to look away even though the boy wasn’t looking at him. “In which case, don’t tell anyone about that part of your power and don’t use it. Ever. Especially not during publicized events or where anyone could record you. Still, that doesn’t explain why you won’t just register the other part of your ability as a quirk.” Izuku remained silent. “By being registered as quirkless while displaying an ability, you are calling into question our system of quirk registration. Heroes need to be held accountable, and to be held accountable, we agree to tell the world what our quirks are and to only use them for specific purposes. If you can’t even say that you have a quirk and you won’t register your abilities, then how can we as teachers trust that you can be held accountable? That you would make a good hero?”

Izuku couldn’t help the guilty feeling crawling up his stomach. Izuku didn’t want to lie; he wanted to tell the truth, always, or at least say nothing. He was being made to bend the truth when talking about
so many things that he couldn’t bear the thought of completely lying about this. Izuku didn’t have the words to say ‘it would be a lie, and I don’t want to live a lie,’ when he was bound to have to lie about something at some point as a hero. Mr. Aizawa was right. He would have to say he had some ability and that ability was a quirk. He had to be held accountable for his abilities. But at the same time… he thought about his mom, placing her hand on his head, telling him it had to be a secret… he didn’t know what to do.

Principal Nezu interrupted Izuku’s thought process. “I may not understand your hesitation for discussing your ability, but it is very similar to having a quirk. There would be no shame in registering it as such.”

But that wasn’t the problem. “It’s… not about shame,” Izuku whispered. “My mom, she said I couldn’t—that I couldn’t tell anyone. That it wasn’t allowed.” He tried to say the words as quietly as possible, as though having them uttered aloud would bring the ceiling down on him.

Principal Nezu tilted his head in contemplation. Was that the root of his fear?

“I know many things about the society you are trying not to reveal. I know of many different creatures and the secrets they hold… and I know for a fact that it is not forbidden for others to know you have an ability, not with the rise of quirks in the past century. You would not get in trouble just for registering your ability as a quirk. If it makes you feel better, there is currently an active hero who is a demon who registered his abilities as a quirk. There have been several vampires who have done this, as well, and a banshee.”

“There’s a what?!” Izuku yelped, mouth gaping. But demons were evil!

The principal continued without pause. “And if your mother said otherwise, then she was either mistaken, over-zealous, or lying.”

Izuku shivered and refused to consider that possibility. She wasn’t lying to him. She wouldn’t do that. They’d always agreed to never lie. He could definitely understand her being overzealous, though. Izuku tended to bring danger with him wherever he walked, and that danger was always worse when he was looser with using abilities. He’d lost count of the number of times they’d had to run and the homes they’d had to burn because he’d gotten himself discovered by using his ability to try to help someone.

While Izuku had a mini-breakdown on the floor, Principal Nezu turned toward Aizawa. “It seems like Mr. Midoriya has a… block of sorts preventing him from speaking about his abilities directly. Yes and no questions seems to do nicely, for now.”

Aizawa nodded, parsing together the principal’s advice with what he had observed and recorded, before filing the information away for later. “Understood. So if he decides to register his work, it would help if I filled out and submitted the paperwork for him, under the guise of being his homeroom teacher. Is there anything else?”

“Ah yes,” Principal Nezu said, getting out of his seat to shuffle toward a section of the faculty lounge with a ton of folders. “We need to get some school paperwork sorted out so that Mr. Midoriya can bring a familiar to campus with him.”

Aizawa startled slightly at this information, turning away from Izuku’s muttering form to stare at the principal. “But he… doesn’t have a familiar quirk,” Aizawa wondered. Did witches have familiars?

“No, he does not. However, he does have an animal that is a familiar, which typically boost a witch’s magical endeavors, and if we are considering what is best for the safety and training of Mr. Midoriya, having his familiar with him will be a boost toward both efforts. He has expressed his familiar’s displeasure at being separated from him.”
Izuku whipped around to stare at Principal Nezu, yanked out of his mutterings by the thought of his principal lying for him. Izuku had never said anything like that. He hadn’t said it to Tokoyami, he hadn’t said it to the principal… *Was the principal just guessing that Popsicle was upset? Or did he somehow know? And also, how did he even learn about familiars?!

Aizawa nodded as though all of this was perfectly logical. His eyes flicked back toward Izuku. “Does the familiar have any special abilities?”

Principle Nezu had returned with two forms and a pen, which Aizawa took from him to fill out. He knew most of Izuku’s information by heart already. He may be keeping too much of an eye on the boy, but he had thought it warranted at the time. Now, he definitely knew it was warranted. *A goddamn witch…*

Izuku wondered how much he could say about his familiar. Typically, they only boosted one’s magical casting, which wasn’t a special ability that could be mentioned on a form. But Popsicle was capable of much more than that. Izuku wondered how much the faculty could be allowed to know. Sighing, he considered his options. *There weren’t any, really. He needed to tell them. The truth would come out at some point. His familiar was too reckless to keep something like this hidden, even if Izuku asked him to. “His name is Popsicle, and, um, he can shapeshift into three forms. And he has the, uh, general abilities of that form.”*

“What forms?” Aizawa asked, writing down the information. He acted as though familiars having abilities were normal. Izuku considered Dark Shadow, able to change in size and move independently of Tokoyami. Maybe they weren’t that abnormal after all…


“And the abilities?” Aizawa asked.

Izuku scratched at his neck; he didn’t think the curse mattered if he discussed his familiar’s abilities, even if they were magically linked. *Keep it simple and don’t reference anything magical*, he thought. “In raven form he’s smarter and helps me think through things, in the snake form he can heal me, and, uh, as a wolf he gives me better instincts and night-vision and stuff.”

This actually made Aizawa pause and switch his gaze from the form to Izuku’s hesitant eyes. “What kind of healing?”

Izuku chewed on his lips in response. He had no idea how to answer that. *It wasn’t like Recovery Girl or anything, but he guessed strong healing abilities were pretty rare in society. And useful.*

Aizawa continued looking at him, somewhere between incredulous and incensed. “Where did you come from?”

“Uh… nowhere?” Izuku answered. That was a strange question. *What did that have to do with Popsicle?*

Aizawa didn’t seem pleased with his answer, but Principal Nezu was laughing his rat-bear head off. Still chortling, the principal butted in, “Well, I think that is all that we needed to discuss at this meeting. Most of the fields on the familiar application form should be finished. All Mr. Midoriya needs to do is sign it. If you could also sign the quirk registration form, then I could help Mr. Aizawa fill it out once you leave. That way, you do not have to be involved with speaking or writing about your ability, which seems to cause you trouble.”

Izuku hesitated. Mr. Aizawa had already written down the familiar’s name and abilities on the form,
but it seemed like such a dangerous thing to have recorded. Familiars were a witch thing, not a normal quirk that could be labeled and filed. Izuku worried what trouble would find him if he let a recording about his familiar’s existence and abilities enter the school’s database. “Is… is it safe for me to have information about Popsicle written down?”

“It is safer for us to know, so that we can aid you in becoming the best hero you can be. Recovery Girl would know to bring your snake if you were in dire need of healing, for example.” The principal had a point, but Izuku still found himself worrying. Registering his own ability as a quirk was dangerous enough, but registering a secondary quirk for a familiar? It seemed like too much to register all at once, and he feared flags being raised about why he wasn’t registered beforehand.

“I suppose that makes sense,” allowed Izuku. He would just have to trust his teachers to look out for him. His pack leader was writing the form himself. That was the best protection he was going to get.

The principal seemed to note his hesitation. “It remains up to your teacher’s discretion how often you can use your familiar in hero classes. Since your familiar is not attached to your body, there is the chance of becoming separated from it during hero work. Therefore, you will likely need experience fighting both with and without your him.”

That information startled Izuku out of his worries about registering his abilities. “Wait, he would be able to join me in battle exercises? Like the heroes versus villains fight?”

“It would depend on the teacher and exercise,” Aizawa responded. “The exercise earlier today wouldn’t have been very useful to have him, but an outright fight against someone else would. I would also be interested in how it affects your quirk apprehension test results. I assume your familiar wasn’t there with you that day?”

“No, I think he was at home.”

“Hm. Would be interesting to catalog the differences.”

Izuku flushed, thinking of the test. He had been so worried, then, about using his powers, how to hide them, which ones to use, how to use them. And now here he was, in a faculty lounge, revealing his powers to two members of the UA faculty, signing a form saying that he could speed up time and explode things, and registering an animal as a quirk familiar. His mom was going to kill him.

Principal Nezu cut in before Aizawa found a way to run tests on him in the faculty lounge. “In addition to your familiar, it seems that you need something else for your abilities to work at maximum capacity. Most of the recordings we have involve you putting something on the ground. Is this a requirement of your ability?”

“Not exactly,” Izuku answered, hesitating on how he could explain this in a roundabout way. He could feel the blood pooling in his mouth as he considered saying that it brought demons to his location if he didn’t use the stone circle. He had to find a way to speak around it. “The stones have to be in a circle to hide the signal? Yeah, signal, from certain people who are listening in?” Izuku hoped that the principal could parse that one out.

Aizawa’s gaze became more focused on this, likely due to his protective instincts for his pack. At least, that’s what Izuku hoped the look was for. “Do they contain the effects of the ability?”

No, that wasn’t it at all. But how did Izuku say ‘demons will come’ if he can’t mention demons? Maybe he could just hint that they’re demons? Ugh, this complicated word dance was exactly why he never liked discussing anything related to his powers. “The stones have to be in a circle to hide the, uh, signal? Yeah, signal, from certain people who are, uh, listening in?” Izuku hoped that the principal could parse that one out.
Principal Nezu nodded. “So they act like a containment field for the signal that your powers emit, to prevent others from sensing your magical energy? I suppose if they can sense your energy, they can locate you using it.”

Close enough, Izuku figured, before smiling and nodding at the principal in assent.

“In that case, it might be useful for you to have a device that allows you to create that field instantly. Does it have to be a circle?” Aizawa clarified.

Izuku nodded. This was going much easier than he could have ever imagined.

“Then I would suggest filling out a form for the support course to build a belt that releases stones omnidirectionally in a circle. Specify what size the stones will be and how many there are. The support course don’t generally ask questions, so don’t worry about having to give them any reason. There are forms online, if you want to turn it into me tomorrow morning. Would you be able to fill that form out?”

Izuku nodded his head and smiled in lieu of agreement, afraid to say anything further about his abilities aloud. He looked above the couch to check the time. School had ended about fifteen minutes ago, but he hadn’t even heard the alarm over his worry about registering his abilities and his familiar. He wondered if Aizawa came before or after class had finished. “Um, if that’s all, I, uh, I need to get home. My mom is probably going to start getting worried. She doesn’t like it when I’m home too late.”

Aizawa snorted and leaned back against the couch, eyelids drooping even as he stared at Izuku. “Why—does she think it’s dangerous for you, or would she think you’ve gone and done something stupid?”

Izuku looked to the left, trying to think of an appropriate answer other than “both” and “from experience.”

Aizawa sighed. Yeah, the kid definitely looked left when he lied or tried to think of excuses. Bad habit. “Never mind. That’s answer enough. Go on home, I’ll turn that paperwork in for you. Bring your support course request form tomorrow, as well as your familiar.”

That information brought a surge of joy to Izuku’s heart, and he found himself smiling brighter than he had the entire meeting. “Yessir!” He was only slightly (probably) affected by Popsicle’s mood, who was slithering around his neck in pure snake-y glee, still hidden beneath the facial mask of Izuku’s hero suit. Sitting up on his haunches (his legs were starting to go numb from sitting on them so long), Izuku crawled over to where Aizawa sat on the couch. He nuzzled his head against his teacher’s leg and smiled, feeling happy. He had a pack leader who knew about his world and his abilities, he was allowed to carry around his familiar, and throughout all that he was still allowed the chance to become a hero. Today couldn’t get any better. His body hummed in response, and Izuku crawled backwards before standing and leaving the room.

Aizawa refused to move for the next ten minutes. Nezu pounded his fists on the floor in laughter. Aizawa concluded that everything was shit and the principal could go hang himself and die, before turning to fill out the rest of the quirk registration form for his student. The things he did in his capacity as teacher...

A couple minutes later, Izuku found the locker room, changed out of his costume in solitude, and thanked every deity that existed that he had managed to get through a whole day without Aizawa expelling him for bringing his familiar to school. Popsicle tightened his coil around Izuku’s neck, self-satisfied and triumphant.
Well, that went about better than I could have expected, Izuku considered, heading toward his homeroom classroom to pick up his stuff and head home. It seemed like he might potentially have two more people in his corner to come up with excuses in case something went south. Izuku supposed he should have been able to guess that Principal Nezu would know about magical stuff and demons. He was said to be a brilliant analyst who had a firm grasp on all the factors affecting society. The existence of magical beings and demons would have come up at some point. As for Mr. Aizawa… maybe he met someone with an ability that he couldn’t erase, and it made him curious. If so, Izuku wondered who he could have met. Either way, that was one potential weight off his shoulder. He had felt a bit on edge about the possibility of his teachers learning about his abilities, not being able to talk to them about it, and not wanting to be kicked out of school because he wouldn’t talk about it. Principal Nezu had made the conversation go so easily, and Izuku felt like he was in his principal’s debt. And he seemed to know about werewolves! That was both exciting and worrisome. Werewolves didn’t exactly take kindly to being known.

And on another note, he could now bring Popsicle to school! No more droning bird lectures every time he got home for getting himself into dangerous situations without his familiar. That was another weight off his shoulder, Izuku considered, gathering his backpack and heading out of the empty classroom. He had just made it out of the front doors of the school when he heard a sound toward his right.

“Oh, Deku. You’re late.” Bakugou was standing against a pillar outside the school. His spiky blonde hair seemed to explode in every direction in comedic mimicry of his quirk. He had no tie, his unbuttoned shirt hanging lazily off his collarbones, and his blazer seemed to be lying on top of his backpack on the floor. His red eyes were hooded, simultaneously lazy and angry, and Izuku wondered if he had been waiting for him.

“Oh! K-Kacchan. Um, hi?” Enough had happened in the past hour or so that Izuku’s body felt both buzzed and numb, like something was humming beneath his skin even though he could barely feel his legs. He wasn’t quite sure how to talk to Kacchan while he felt like this. He wanted to go up and hug him and nuzzle beneath his ear, but Kacchan kept getting mad when he did that without permission. Kacchan also didn’t seem like he would give permission right now. Izuku’s hands twitched by his sides, eager to grasp. He bit his lip as a distraction. The anxiety from earlier was still flowing through him next to the excitement. He really wished Kacchan would allow him to hug him.

Bakugou snorted at Izuku, picked up his backpack from the ground, and swung it over his shoulder. He gestured with his neck as though to head out of UA with Izuku, which was… nice, but unexpected. Izuku wasn’t sure what Kacchan was still doing here. All the other students had already left. “What did that mouse dude want?”

Or maybe he just wanted to question him? Izuku shrugged and hoisted his bag over his shoulder to follow him. “Um, just to talk about, uh, Popsicle,” Izuku stammered. “And me.” Mostly just me.

“What about you?” Bakugou sneered.

“My… abilities,” Izuku hesitated to say anything more. He’d already used up all his luck on not getting found out for the day. He wasn’t quite up for using the words ‘witch’ or ‘demon’ or ‘magic’ for the next twenty-four hours. He wondered if he could actually avoid saying them. Kacchan didn’t generally push about this sort of thing, or he hadn’t in the past after that one incident.

Bakugou shrugged back at him, as though uninterested in Izuku’s issues, starting their trek toward the UA front gates. “Thought you couldn’t tell people about that shit.” But he was interested. Izuku could still remember Kacchan’s face when he first showed him his powers. He remembered what happened afterward. Izuku wished that he could regret it, but they were only still friends now.
because of that day.

“I can’t talk about them,” Izuku agreed. “But he, uh, knew somehow?” Izuku hadn’t figured out how yet, other than Principal Nezu being a certifiable genius who should never be underestimated and always be bowed down to. At least, those were his current feelings.

Bakugou didn’t seem pleased with his answer, a scowl crawling up his face as he pulled one of his hands out of his pocket to let off a few small blasts in frustration. He glared over at Izuku. “Come on, we’re going to my place.”

“Wait, what?” Izuku turned toward Bakugou, who had stuffed his hand back in his pocket and hunched his shoulders. He looked defensive-angry-upset, and Izuku wondered how long he had been waiting beside the front door. Why had he been waiting for him? And why did the principal knowing his secret upset him? It wasn’t like Izuku had told his teachers everything. Not like Kacchan. And why would Izuku be following Kacchan back to his place?

Bakugou scowled over at Izuku and spoke in small clenched words, “My place. English assignment. Go. That enough words for you, or do you need me to dumb it down more?”

Izuku gulped. “N-no, that’s fine! I just, uh, need to text my mom?” His hands fumbled the cell phone from his back pocket as he tried to type out a message to his mom while walking. He’d only recently gotten back into the groove of using a cell phone. They didn’t tend to work in a lot of the rural areas Izuku traveled to with his mom, so he hadn’t had experience using them for almost the past year. Halfway through the message, he paused and turned to Bakugou, his heart hammering in his chest as he realized, “Wait, I really get to go to your house?”

Bakugou sneered, “Shut up. It’s not a big deal,” before huffing and stalking forward away from Izuku.

Except it kind of was a big deal, Izuku smiled. Izuku hadn’t been to Kacchan’s house since they were kids. After a long day of hiding his familiar, discussing forbidden things with the principal and his homeroom teacher, officially registering abilities and familiars that he was supposed to keep secret, and in general doing everything his mom said that he shouldn’t… Izuku felt like he was being given a gift. A gift for bad behavior. Maybe it was a gift for all the stress he’d been through in the past eight hours? Either way, a smile bloomed on his face as found himself skipping forward to walk with his friend. Friend friend friend. Kacchan glared at him when he got close, but it was okay, it was very much okay, because he proceeded to brush his shoulder against Izuku’s in the biggest display of companionship Izuku had from him in years. Suddenly, the worry, anxiety, and guilt of the past eight hours faded away. Izuku was on fire, and no one could bring him down.

And that was how Izuku Midoriya found himself standing in Katsuki Bakugou’s house, staring into his bedroom and trying not to have a heart attack. His former feelings of excitement and anticipation had all made a one-eighty turn toward nervousness and fear. He wanted Kacchan to like him. He wanted to be friends. He wanted all of this to work out so badly, and this was the first time they had hung out alone in years. Izuku wasn’t sure how often he would get paired up with Kacchan for group assignments like this, so it might be his only chance to reconnect, to solidify, to hold out his hand and have Kacchan grasp it. And then Izuku would never let go.

But first, Izuku considered, he would probably have to remember to breathe. Breathing also might be a bad thing, because everything smelled like Kacchan in here—that weird mix of gasoline and electrical burning, mixed with something sweet. It was addictive. Izuku sniffed his own shirt, wondering if just by being here he could imbue his clothing with the smell. Was that weird? He hoped it wasn’t weird. Liking smells couldn’t be weird, right? Popsicle curled down his arm toward his backpack, slithering inside to where Izuku had just stuffed his blazer, which was warm from
walking home in the sun. Izuku guessed his familiar wanted to curl up with something warm, too.

“Deku, are you going to come into the fucking room or not?” Bakugou didn’t seem angry anymore, just irritated, as he threw his blazer on a basket behind his bed and settled down on his mattress.

“I, uh, yes. Of course, yeah.” Izuku shuffled his feet a few steps forward into the room, before looking up at where Bakugou had splayed himself diagonally on his bed, one leg up on the mattress while the other dangled off the side. “Kacchan, can I—” Izuku gestured toward Bakugou’s neck, but the other boy didn’t acknowledge the movement. Izuku moved a step closer, trying to broadcast his intentions. Kacchan had said not to invade his personal space without permission, but Izuku was too afraid at the moment to ask. He needed… the day had been a weird seesaw of emotions, fear and worry and anxiety and elation. Izuku took another step forward, still trying to gesture with his eyes toward Kacchan’s neck.

Bakugou didn’t move, laying slightly against a pillow and watching Izuku with narrowed eyes. But he didn’t shout, and he didn’t move away, so Izuku took that as a sign of permission.

Within seconds, Izuku had dropped his backpack and crawled onto the bed next to Bakugou, nuzzling his face into the other’s neck. He slipped an arm around him and moved to bury himself in Bakugou’s chest. “Kacchan—Kacchan, Kacchan, Kacchan…” Izuku didn’t know what he was doing, but he couldn’t seem to stop. He needed to be closer to him. He needed the warmth and the smell. He needed pack pack pack.

“Oy, Deku. You’re supposed to do homework, not try to grope me.” Bakugou took a firm grip of Izuku’s shirt and tried to drag the smaller boy off him and away from his neck.

“Kacchan—” Izuku grasped his hands back toward the warmth.

Bakugou growled underneath his breath. “Fuck. What the fuck—” After a few more seconds of struggling and grasping arms, he managed to pin Izuku down on the mattress. Izuku’s hair was a wild mess of short green curls, his longer bangs having fallen back to splay over his head. He looked wild-eyed and sad and he had no right… “Why are you always—” Bakugou stopped. Gritting his teeth, he looked down at the other boy beneath him. He could blast his face into the next century if he wanted, make an explosion right between his eyes, wipe away that stupid pout he had on his lips. He growled again. He didn’t know what was up with Deku all the time, why he kept nuzzling him and touching him. He’d set his rules, he’d told him to… Bakugou ground his teeth together. His right hand made a small explosion next to Izuku’s hip, near enough to scare him but not hurt him. Deku wasn’t even phased. He laid still on the bed beneath Bakugou, relaxed, waiting. No, Bakugou realized, trusting. Deku trusted him.

“What did they do to you?” Bakugou’s voice wasn’t loud in the silence of the bedroom, and that in itself was a feat. He was usually screaming or raging or yelling at something. Izuku didn’t respond, staring up at him in confusion. “You weren’t like this when we were kids. You didn’t… you weren’t so touchy, and you weren’t so fucking nervous all the time.” The look on his face could be considered an accusing sneer, but Izuku could feel the confusion behind it. Maybe he was just imagining it.

Eventually, Izuku answered him, small and breathless beneath the other’s looming form. “They didn’t do anything to me… sometimes people just change.”

He sounded sad. He had no right to be sad. Bakugou shook his head in denial, his red eyes piercing flames as he stared at the smaller form beneath him. Izuku felt pinned in place by the gaze. “Not like this.”
Unable to stand the attention, Izuku cast his eyes away toward Bakugou’s pillow. Kacchan didn’t get it. He didn’t feel it, like Izuku did. “Sometimes, someone can be alone for so long that all they want is a connection. I just want to be… near you. Closer. And it never seems close enough,” Izuku admitted. How did his conversations with Kacchan always get so serious?

Bakugou’s face remained impassive. Despite his explosive quirk, he seemed made of stone. “I don’t need anything. Or anyone.” His low voice sounded like a growl.

“Okay,” Izuku allowed. Kacchan didn’t have to want the same things as him or need the same things. He had other friends in his life, didn’t he? Other people he talked to and connected with. Things he was fighting for and working toward. But even if Kacchan didn’t feel the need as physically as he did, Izuku could still touch him, right? He hoped so. “So can I not do that again?”

Bakugou actually managed a brief second of a barking laugh before he smirked down at Izuku, smile sharp and dangerous and, Izuku hoped, somehow fond. “You never give up, do you?”

Izuku smiled up at him, eyes filled with fire and blood. “Never.”

Bakugou shoved Izuku further into the bed to make a point. He sat up, moving back toward his initial corner of the bed, reaching down into his backpack and pulling out his notes. “Alright, go ahead and do whatever,” he conceded, throwing a leering snarl over his shoulder at Izuku. “Just don’t distract me. We’re getting our work done tonight, okay? And that’s final.”

“Of course!” Izuku agreed. He used his arms to prop himself up on the bed, legs dangling off the edge.

“And I’m not looking for a boyfriend or anything, so don’t get any weird thoughts in your head,” Bakugou muttered, flipping toward the correct section of their English textbook.

Izuku legitimately whined. “But I thought I was your friend. Right, Kacchan?”

Bakugou rolled his eyes and threw his pen at Izuku’s forehead. The other boy managed to both dodge the hit and catch the pen before it went sailing over the bed. Bakugou scowled and looked for another pen. “Friends and boyfriends are different, shit nerd.”

“Oh…” Izuku trailed off for a second, silent. “Uh… how?”

Bakugou sat back up and glared at him. A growl-snarl came out of his mouth, teeth gleaming, and Izuku smiled at Kacchan’s subtle werewolf behavior. He loved how Kacchan never spoke in a normal voice, danger always lurking somewhere in his words. It made Izuku feel homesick for something long gone. “Seriously? Didn’t I just say we were going to work? Do you want to lose your touching privileges?”

Izuku suddenly panicked, not knowing what he had done wrong, and waved his hands in protest. “N-no! I’ll stop asking questions. I promise.”

“Good,” snarled Bakugou, pulling out a notebook to write down ideas. Izuku stayed silent and folded his legs beneath him, biting at his lip, before Bakugou rolled his eyes and gestured with his head toward his side of the bed. “Well? Are you going to get your ass over here and listen to my project ideas or not?”

Izuku beamed brightly in his direction before practically bouncing over to the other side of the bed, directly beside Bakugou. He leaned against Kacchan’s left side, away from his dominant writing hand, and burrowed his face into the side of his friend’s neck, sighing. Kacchan could take notes for both of them; Izuku knew English conversation stuff off the top of his head. They spent the next two
hours planning their English project with Izuku half-draped over Bakugou, occasionally nuzzling his neck and trailing grasping fingers down his button-up shirt. And Bakugou would deny it to his deathbed, but there may have been a point where he began holding Izuku close to him and gripping tight at his hip, scowl set firmly on his face, strangely hesitant to let go.

“Don’t you dare fucking tell anyone about this or I will blast one off in your face,” Bakugou sneered.

“Whatever you want, Kacchan,” he whispered. Izuku felt like he was on fire. No, he was the goddamn sun.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone! I know I said I would post on Fridays/Saturdays, but I can't stop editing this. Please, take it out of my hands.

Once again, let me know what you did/didn't like about the chapter. I was too embarrassed to send this to my beta so I just ended up editing it myself 2x through. Bakugou without someone to bully as a kid is really hard to write; I just can't imagine him being as angry without quirkless!Izuku at the same school, so he just seems rough around the edges with a side of deadly explosions and 'my way is the highway'.

Next chapter is the attack on USJ, so get ready to hold on to your butts.
Chapter Summary

Izuku spends the night with Kacchan, freaks his mom out (more than once), has a really weird day, and then villains attack. Also, Mommy Inko schools Eraserhead, because that happens, and Present Mic stays hidden in a corner.

Some TodoDeku and TokoDeku tries to sneak in, as well.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Inko answered the call from her son, she wasn’t expecting the voice on the other end. “Hello? Inko?”

It took her a second to place why the voice sounded so familiar, but once she did, it felt like getting hit by a brick wall or an ursa demon. Same thing, really. “Mit-Mitsuki?”

The sarcastic drawl on the other line had Inko biting her lip to catch her breath. It had been so long… “Yeah, yeah, you still remember me. I hope you don’t mind, I borrowed your son’s phone to call you. He and Katsuki are passed out on the bed, so I was calling to tell you he’d be spending the night.”

Inko felt a wave of relief sweep through her. She had worried when three hours had passed after Izuku’s text message that he was heading over to Kacchan’s house. She was nearly petrified by the time seven hours had gone by with no further communication. Inko breathed through the gratitude and leaned her back against the living room wall. “Oh, really? That’s so good to hear! I was getting worried…”

There were the sounds of movement and running water on the phone. “Yeah, they finished eating dinner a while ago and were going to play some video games. I don’t remember the last time Katsuki actually had someone over, so I figured…”

Inko smiled and leapt to assure her. “Oh, of course! As long as you’re all right with Izuku being there, I completely support their friendship. He can stay over anytime! He hasn’t…” She paused, unsure whether to voice the thought. Her voice switched to something softer, more mild. “He hasn’t had many friends over the years to do that with. I… think it would be nice for him. As long as you are okay with it!”

Mitsuki snorted. “No sweat off my back. Anyhow, I’ll make sure Izuku eats before he goes to school tomorrow. Oh, and congratulations on him getting into U.A…”

“Thank you. He wanted to go there very much, and see Kacchan again.” Inko figured Izuku’s desire to go to U.A. had been half wanting to become a hero and half wanting to reunite with his old friend.

Mitsuki laughed, a sharp thing. “It’s been forever since I heard that nickname. It makes my day. My stupid shit son is always acting high and mighty, and both you and Izuku still call him that.” More laughter. “Anyway, it was nice talking to you. I’m going to head off to bed. Goodbye, Inko.”
“Goodbye… Mitsuki.” Inko barely got the name out before the call ended.

Inko was thankful her son was safe with a friend and not wandering around waiting for danger at night. She was thankful that her son was strengthening friendships. She was thankful for many things, the chance to talk with Mitsuki, to hear her voice again. But she was especially thankful that her sweet, precious boy wasn’t at home to see her brace herself against the wall, hand held to her mouth to stifle hiccups that wanted to become sobs, as she mourned what could have been. The life half-lived, for both her and Izuku; the chance they both had, many years ago, for something normal. Friendships, a warm home, stability, going over to the Bakugou house for the kids to play while Inko caught up with Mitsuki about her work. It seemed so long ago that they had that.

And it was her fault, wasn’t it? Inko had been lonely and wanted someone to know about her secret, someone to share the wonder of magic with. And this was how it all turned out. A friendship reduced to nothing, all memories of affection and camaraderie erased, all because Inko had opened her stupid mouth and felt alone.

“Be careful, Izuku,” Inko whispered to the air between her fingers. She hunched against the wall and looked out amidst the shambled remains of a life on the run—a box acting as a table, a carpet she had found near a dumpster, old faded bloodstains on the wooden floor serving as sufficient proof of her inability to provide a better home to her son. She pushed away from the wall a couple minutes later, her guilt churning in her gut; she made herself some tea and refused to let herself cry. In the next room over, her journal lay beneath her pillow, waiting to be read, wanting to be remembered. Truthfully, Inko wished she could just forget.

Like all her ancestors before her, Inko had spent her life writing in her journal about spells she had used and why, important moments of her life, creatures she had faced. She wasn’t a fighter, not like some of those before her, not like Izuku was. But there were things she had done, and spells she had created, that Izuku might need to know one day if she were to somehow disappear. And as for Mitsuki… well, she would find a way to tell Izuku, soon. He didn’t have to know everything, and she didn’t think she could bear it if he did, but Izuku seemed to have forgotten the danger—and the promise he made so long ago—in his efforts to become the hero he wanted to be for the world. Maybe those memories could serve as a warning, for both of them, of the price he might have to pay for letting down his guard.

Izuku was having the strangest dream. He was aware that it was a dream because Kacchan wouldn’t hold his hand in the real world, wouldn’t walk slowly by his side along a beach covered in trash, the sand getting stuck between their toes. The ocean was red and full of blood. Despite the serenity of the moment, Kacchan would occasionally use his free hand to explode nearby piles of trash. They made a game of it, seeing who could explode the largest objects, Kacchan using his fiery explosions while Izuku combusted the materials themselves. Kacchan laughed, and it was something soft that Izuku had never heard before. He wondered if real-life Kacchan would make that noise. He didn’t want the moment to end.

For every bit of trash they exploded, another piece appeared; but they were enjoying themselves. This beach was a moment in time just for them. Izuku didn’t know when it changed, but it seemed as though he turned his head only to realize both he and Kacchan were drowning in trash, getting buried by everything from refrigerators to old car parts to concrete cylinders. He saw Kacchan raising a hand up to explode whatever was on top of him, but the objects kept coming and he was becoming engulfed. Izuku could barely see the sky from where they were getting buried alive. There
was no other way; he knew what he had to do.

In a swift motion, Izuku used both of his hands to freeze time. The trash stopped falling, the ocean waves stalled on the shore. He dug himself out of the pile and dragged Kacchan with him. They tumbled down a mountain of abandoned things, rolling to a stop on the warm sand. Kacchan opened his eyes and stared at Izuku, who had fallen with Kacchan on top of him. Slowly, Kacchan leaned down, red eyes gleaming, and pressed his lips to Izuku’s, his eyes wide and careful. The touch was soft, almost a whisper, and Izuku closed his eyes, warm and full and confused. When he opened his eyes again, Kacchan was gone, and Kirishima lay on top of him instead, sharp teeth dragging across Izuku’s lips. A breath shuddered from his chest. Kirishima dragged his nose up Izuku’s jaw before whispering into his ear, “Why didn’t you tell me?” Izuku pulled back to see Kirishima’s face was crying; he looked confused and betrayed, and Izuku didn’t want his friend to feel like that, he wanted him to smile—

Izuku woke up with a gasp, Bakugou’s hand imbedded in his stomach. Looking over, he saw Kacchan still asleep. His hand must have flung itself out and hit Izuku, ripping him from his dream. Taking a deep breath over a racing heart—that hand had hurt—Izuku settled back down into his spot curled next to Kacchan. It was still dark outside. There was time until morning to rest once more. Maybe he could go back to that beach, where it was warm…

Izuku’s next dreams were confusing, and he would barely remember them come morning. There was a dark purple mist spreading like a plague, infecting the ground beneath it with creatures that crawled out of their graves. They all had strange abilities, electricity, water, fire; some had strange mutations, almost monstrous. Izuku felt hands all over his body, but they weren’t attached to anything—just severed hands caressing his skin. He shivered and sobbed and screamed, but no heroes came to save him. He opened his eyes to Mr. Aizawa’s lifeless stare, yellow goggles broken and covered in blood beside him. Izuku couldn’t stop crying, hands trailing destruction across his skin. A broken tengu with an exposed brain screeched at him in agony. “Kill me,” it asked, but heroes didn’t kill. Izuku shook his head back and forth, refusing, shaking on the ground. The dark purple mist creeped around him, and he felt himself falling falling falling … and there was that bar, again, and the tinkling of bottles, someone rambling in a crazed voice, and Izuku didn’t understand.

Izuku didn’t feel well the next morning. It wasn’t anything obvious, just an itch beneath his skin. His knees kept bouncing, and his fingers would twitch to scratch his neck before he realized he’d stopped holding his cup of tea. Auntie Mitsuki gave him a strange glance but let him follow Kacchan out the door without any fanfare. Izuku bounced next to Kacchan on their way to the bus stop. When Izuku kept twitching next to him on the bus, Kacchan shoved his hand on Izuku’s legs and growled at him to ‘fucking stop it, Deku.’ Izuku smiled at him and tried.

The itch got worse the longer they were on the bus, and Izuku rushed from the school gates to the locker room near homeroom to take a quick shower, hoping to get whatever it was off his skin. Bakugou shouted after him but didn’t follow. Maybe Kacchan’s sweat had gotten on him, and he was allergic? His chest felt thin and shaky, but Izuku shoved the sensations away in his focus to get showered, dressed, and back to class in time for the morning bell. Popsicle peered at him, perched atop the lockers in his raven form, red eyes piercing and worried. Drying himself off after the shower, Izuku shrugged at Popsicle in a hopeless gesture. The itch was still there.

By third period with Cementoss, Izuku had the definite feeling that something was wrong. Kacchan kept stealing glances back at him, and Tokoyami had leaned forward from his seat to the back right
of Izuku to ask if Midoriya was alright since he seemed pale. Izuku smiled back shakily and said he was fine, but Cementoss stopped the lesson halfway through class to ask him if he needed to go to the nurse’s office. Izuku kept trying to insist that he was fine, but Cementoss left the room a few minutes later to go grab Mr. Aizawa. Popsicle sat perched on Izuku’s shoulder, grooming his hair in worry.

And that was how Izuku found himself with Mr. Aizawa kneeling at his feet, his teacher’s hand on his leg, asking when he started feeling strange. He didn’t know how to answer. 

“Almost all morning. I feel like it’s gotten worse since I got to school.”

“Cementoss said you weren’t sick, but you’re obviously pale…” Aizawa trailed off as Midoriya’s bird began cawing at him, fluffing its wings and jabbing its head as though to say something. Midoriya turned to his bird and started scolding his familiar.

“I told you, I’m fine!” A pause, the bird tilting its head and jabbing its head forward. “I’m not freaking out!” A flap of the wings, and the bird seemed more agitated. “I felt better when I was showering in the locker room. I’ll be fine.” The bird switched its gaze to Aizawa as though to say, ‘See what I’ve been dealing with?’

Aizawa sighed, squinting his eyes at first the bird and then Izuku. His instincts were telling him that something was wrong, and it had to do with the boy’s familiar. “Mr. Midoriya, where was your familiar while you were showering?”

“Huh?” Izuku looked taken aback. “He was on the top of the lockers, I guess.”

Which was on the other side of the locker room from the showers. That could mean… the boy had said the raven form only made him smarter, right? Aizawa switched his gaze to Midoriya. “How long has your familiar been in raven form?”

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Izuku turned to look at Popsicle. “Since I woke up?”

Aizawa had a bad feeling about this, gaze switching between the boy and his bird. “Have you ever felt like this before? Where you feel sick but aren’t, and your familiar is in this form?”

The class was silent around the pair as they talked, ears straining to listen. Bakugou pretended not to care, but his head was tilted slightly backward and his eyes were narrowed in thought.

Izuku scratched his head, thinking. A minute passed. Izuku stopped scratching his head, his face paling further. He looked up at Aizawa and nodded his head.

“And what happened the last time you felt this way, with your familiar in that form?”

Izuku breathed in shakily, bit his lip, chewed on the flesh further. The next part was a whisper that even Uraraka on the other end of room leaned in to hear. “Something very bad.” Almost to a person, the class shivered in unison.

Aizawa stared back at his student, suddenly serious. He couldn’t shake the bad feeling he had about this situation. “And how soon did whatever it was happen?”

Izuku was silent for a beat. He opened his mouth, hesitating, almost unsure. “Almost right away, once I started feeling worse,” Izuku whispered.
Aizawa’s ‘fuck this isn’t good’ meter went up another notch. “And how bad are you feeling right now?”

“Not that bad…?” Izuku didn’t sound as sure about that statement, either.

Which meant the boy had some time, at least. Maybe whatever it was would happen on school grounds. “Whatever happened before, did it happen near you?”

Izuku seemed to catch on, and he nodded hesitantly. “Whatever will happen, it should probably be at the school,” he paused before adding, “and probably near me.”

Aizawa nodded in understanding before pinning Izuku with his gaze. “You will come and get me in the faculty lounge when you begin feeling worse. Non-negotiable. You have permission to leave class.”

Izuku nodded quickly, leaning toward his teacher but not quite butting heads. “Yes, sir.”

Aizawa patted the boy’s leg and rose to his feet. He walked over to Cementoss and, under his breath, asked the other teacher to keep an eye on the boy for any changes. Cementoss nodded. Aizawa headed out of the class to go notify Principal Nezu that he had good reason to believe shit was about go down at U.A. today, although he didn’t know when or why. The principal had dealt with witches before, and if Aizawa remembered correctly, the principal told him that the only other witch to come through U.A. was precognitive. Principal Nezu would know how worried they should be and how they should act. Aizawa sighed underneath his breath. Well, that was what he hoped, at least.

By lunchtime, every U.A. faculty member was on alert. Although the entire situation was not clarified, the teachers knew that a student who didn’t have control over their ability to foresee the future had a bad feeling that something was going to happen on the U.A. campus before the end of the school day. Midoriya hadn’t come to the faculty lounge, though, so Aizawa wondered if whatever was going to occur would happen at the end of the day or perhaps after school ended. Either way, he wanted to keep the boy here for his protection. Deciding to be proactive, Aizawa hunted Midoriya down before he could leave the classroom for lunch and invited him to have eat with him in the faculty lounge. Midoriya looked nervous but accepted, and the two of them walked in silence down several hallways.

Aizawa wasn’t much of one for eating lunch or most meals in general. He tended to drink a couple juice boxes with protein supplements and call it a day. Hizashi constantly gave him shit about it. He was well-practiced in ignoring his friend when the issue arose. As if to mock him, Midoriya didn’t seem to have a lunch either and claimed he wasn’t that hungry. The boy’s stomach growled, but Aizawa didn’t push the issue. He just handed Midoriya a juice box and told him to drink it. The boy did.

Good, Aizawa thought, rubbing a hand over his face. Midoriya had decided to sit on the ground on the other side of the table, once again, in similar stature to their meeting the day before. Aizawa hunched his shoulders and stared at the boy. His face was still pale, underneath his long curly bangs and short side hair. His green eyes stood out from dark eyelashes, and he looked so young like this, younger than Aizawa was used to seeing him. Maybe it was a trick of the light.

Aizawa sighed. He stared at Izuku, who curled his body beneath his shoulders. “Are you feeling any worse?”

Izuku nodded his head, hesitant.

“How much worse?”
Izuku swallowed a few more gulps of juice. “We have a little bit longer.” He sighed, shifting on the ground. “I just... I hate this. It feels like a waiting game where I’m not even sure you need to be worried about what’s going to happen.”

“You think I’m worrying for nothing?”

After a couple seconds of consideration, Izuku shook his head. “No. Something’s going to happen. I just wish I could tell you what it was.” He looked up at Aizawa through his bangs. “Whatever it is, I have a feeling it’s not going to be good.”

“I didn’t figure it would be,” Aizawa responded. They both fell silent, the sound of the fridge suddenly loud in the room. Aizawa slurped at his juice box, ran a hand through his hair, and laid back against the couch. He looked down at Midoriya, contemplating the discussion he had yesterday with the principal after Midoriya left. “Principal Nezu said you were raised by werewolves and you think I’m your alpha. Is that right?”

Izuku smiled up at him with a sudden flush on his cheeks, glad for the switch in topic but a bit embarrassed at discussing it so openly. “It’s, uh, called pack leader. Generally.”

Aizawa didn’t nod or show any sign of acceptance outwardly. “And what does a pack leader do?”

“They protect the pack, look out for them, and, uh, tell them when they’ve done something right or something wrong.” Izuku paused and looked down at the juice in his hands. “They make sure the pack are eating, healthy, happy. They make sure everyone’s safe.”

Aizawa hummed. “Do you consider your classmates your pack?”

Izuku hesitated at this. “Some of them,” he responded, but he didn’t specify who.

*One guess it includes Bakugou,* Aizawa considered, snorting. “I’m not saying that I’m willing to act in the capacity as your pack leader, but if I were to do so… what would you expect me to do differently?”

“Differently?” Izuku asked, eyes squinting as he stared up at Aizawa. Then his eyes went wide and he started waving his hands and endangering the contents of his juice box. “N-no, you don’t have to change anything! You’re a perfect pack leader! You look out for us, and you made sure I had lunch, and you touched my head when I did something right, and you let me be near you… you’re perfect!” Izuku wondered if that was what Kacchan meant about Izuku gushing at people sometimes. He’d done it this morning over Auntie Mitsuki’s breakfast, too. To be fair, money had gotten a bit short at the Midoriya household, so he’d had less for breakfast these past few days, and any breakfast would have tasted delicious. Auntie Mitsuki’s breakfast just had the added benefit of a ton of hot sauce.

Aizawa looked a bit taken aback at Izuku’s answer. *Touched his head? Did Midoriya mean when he shoved his head against his hand? And what about being near him?*

And then Midoriya started speaking softly under his breath, so Aizawa had to strain to hear. “If you don’t want to be… the pack leader is something you choose, it’s not something I can ask you to be. I just thought you were? That’s what homeroom teachers are, right? That’s… you’re the ones who care about us, right?”

Aizawa didn’t know where to even begin answering that. “All of the teachers at U.A. care about their students,” he began in a stilted tone. “Although as your homeroom teacher, I do have more of an… interest and say in my students’ lives than other teachers.” Aizawa sighed, leaning back again as he debated why Midoriya considered him this pack leader thing. “You haven’t been in school
since you were about five years old, right?"

Izuku nodded his head, blushing.

“And you lived with a werewolf pack after that, which is where you picked up these customs.” Aizawa shifted sideways on the couch, staring back at the boy on the floor. Midoriya wasn’t expecting anything that different from what Aizawa typically did with his homeroom students. In all fairness, he would be doing most of those things, anyway, except perhaps the touching stuff, and Principal Nezu wasn’t going to fire him for a few pats on the head. *Seriously, the things Aizawa was willing to do for his students… and yet he still had trouble imagining himself as a teacher. “If you need this, I can be it for you…”* Midoriya perked up, excited, “on one condition. I’m not a werewolf. I don’t understand what you expect of me out of this role. You have to tell me and use your words if you need something. Alright?”

Izuku nodded again, smiling. The bell rang overhead, signaling the end of lunch. Izuku looked over at Aizawa, as if seeking permission to leave.

Aizawa groaned softly; he wasn’t sure if Midoriya’s obedience was going to turn out to be a good or bad thing. The boy needed to be able to act independently as a hero, but perhaps temporarily this new relationship between them could be used to curtail Midoriya’s more reckless tendencies. Aizawa stood up, rolling his shoulders in circles to crack them. “I’ll be going with your class for hero studies, today, just to be safe. Originally, there were going to be two teachers, but… All Might elected to stay back at the school in case something happens here during the class period. Cementoss and Thirteen will be in charge of training today. It will be an interesting mix for your class. I’m interested to see how you all do.”

Izuku followed Mr. Aizawa into the hallway, feeling light and free. His pack leader had agreed to be his pack leader! The itch beneath his skin seemed to be getting worse, but he shoved the sensations away as he focused on Mr. Aizawa’s back as they walked. He felt pack-pack-pack thrumming through him, just like the night before. A wide smile overtook his face, almost dopey.

When he got back to the classroom, Kacchan sneered at him and asked him ‘what put that stupid fucking look on your face.’ Izuku told Kacchan he loved him, Bakugou tried to explode his desk, Kirishima put his hardened hands in the way to protect it, and Izuku once again felt like he could fly.

Izuku didn’t really understand that he had switched from feeling slightly bad to ‘shit, something’s about to go down’ until it was too late. The bus had already pulled up to the USJ, and every step toward the building felt like molasses or quicksand, something dragging him down and seeming to slow time along with it. He turned to warn Mr. Aizawa that something felt very wrong, but his pack leader was already scoping out potential threats ahead of the class. Kirishima had thrown an arm around Izuku’s shoulder and was laughing near his ear, excited to do rescue training, but the feeling of wrong-wrong-WRONG thrummed through him, making every breath short and deep. Popsicle pecked at Kirishima’s arm, upset at being roused from his perch, and why wasn’t anyone noticing? Last time, Izuku’s mom had felt it, too. She had known to prepare.

*Kacchan had come up to him while they were lining up for the bus and asked why Aizawa had taken him to lunch. Izuku tried to tell him about not feeling well.*

“That shit you were talking about earlier?” A side glances, pensive angry stare, hunched
shoulders like a cat ready to fight.

“Yeah, the feeling keeps getting worse.”

“You said something bad happened last time. What the fuck was it?” Kacchan wasn’t even looking at him now.

“Oh, you know… an ambush.” And Kacchan really shouldn’t be grinning at that; demons weren’t meant to be fun.

“Whatever it is, we’ll fucking deal with it, so stop worrying, stupid Deku.”

The words still rang in Izuku’s ear. We’ll fucking deal with it, as if he wasn’t alone. Maybe he wouldn’t have to deal with it on his own. Maybe whatever was going to happen was a danger to everyone else, too, his classmates, his teachers. He wasn’t sure if that made him feel better. Izuku knew he could escape nearly anything unscathed. He couldn’t promise the same for others, or for himself if others were around. And how would he forgive himself if other students got hurt because of him?

It wasn’t until everyone was inside the USJ, Thirteen and Cementoss explaining the exercise while Izuku was shouldering his way forward to warn Aizawa, that his classmates seemed to cotton on that something was wrong. His familiar flew in wide circles above the group, cawing a fucking prophecy of doom, and even the teachers quieted as his black form grew into a larger, menacing mass, his wings beating down near-gales of wind that had his classmates holding their arms to their eyes. Aizawa said something then, directed at Izuku, but he was paralyzed, stuck in place, hand raised behind Uraraka. He couldn’t respond. This feeling…

It was like he was the only one who could see it, the portal on the other end of the room opening, dark purple mist swirling outward, and the forms of people coming forth. The world had nearly slowed to a stop. Then, all of a sudden, time resumed. Izuku could breathe. He knew that whoever those people were on the other side of the room, they weren’t here for the rescue exercise. Popsicle finished his last circle over his classmates’ heads before swooping down and transforming into a wolf next to Izuku. His natural wolf form was much larger than typical wolves, almost the size of a dire wolf, and his haunches were level with Izuku’s hipbone. Izuku found his hand curling automatically in Popsicle’s fur as he shouted at Mr. Aizawa, “They’re here!” His classmates seemed torn between staring at the huge fucking wolf that had just appeared and at the portal that their teacher turned toward.

Izuku wished he could say that what happened next was too fast for him to see, but Popsicle’s wolf form increased Izuku’s eyesight and instincts as long as they were near each other. He saw every second of Mr. Aizawa—no, Eraserhead now—and Cementoss turning toward the people coming out of the portal, prepared to enter the offensive, warning the class that the figures stepping out of the mist were villains. Thirteen pointed his classmates toward the door, trying to usher them to safety. All the other students were confused, still worried from Popsicle’s flying and cawing, and shifting in place as though not sure whether to engage in fight or flight. The dark purple mist concentrated around a single figure, whose voice could be heard reverberating throughout the USJ. He said something about a schedule, hinting that All Might was supposed to be here, and Izuku remembered. He remembered seeing that mist in Thirteen’s office. He remembered telling that teachers that he thought someone infiltrated the school. He hated being right. But between Izuku seeing the villain, warning the staff, and then having whatever weird body premonition thing was happening today, Izuku had a strong hope that the U.A. faculty could be here in record time. Until then, Eraserhead and Cementoss would protect them.

The tall grey-haired figure seemed to be the leader. He was complaining about something, All Might
not being there?, and whining about bringing his friends over to play. As though everyone was a kid, here, and this was just a game. How old was he? His voice was the only thing about him that sounded older, rasping, like he’d smoked one too many cigarettes. Izuku stared in horror at the creature next to him, beak-like, brain-exposed. Was that— “Maybe if I kill a few kids, All Might will come out to play.”

Izuku shivered. All Might was supposed to be here. He would have been here, if Izuku hadn’t been acting weird all morning and worried Mr. Aizawa. He was back at U.A. because the principal was worried about an attack on the campus proper. If only someone in their class could get a signal out, All Might could be here in a second, and then all his classmates would be safe. Until then, they would have to put their trust in Cementoss and Eraserhead, neither of whom were directly combative fighters for large groups, but each could do in a pinch. Class 1-A was definitely in a pinch.

Thirteen tried to contact U.A. while pushing the students toward the exit doors, to no avail. Kamenari was instructed to try next, but someone had jammed the communications and even his hero gear couldn’t get through. Yaoyorozu was questioning the U.A. barrier system, and Todoroki was asking if the whole campus was under attack, and Izuku didn’t know. He didn’t know anything. He had felt that danger was coming, but he expected it to be localized. He was afraid to tell them that in case he was wrong. But if the villains really were after All Might, and they were working off of previous scheduling, then the villains should only show up at this facility. Todoroki was right, though. One of the villains was definitely masking the group’s presence. The faculty were all on high alert for an attack, so the only way that the alarms weren’t already going off would be if one of those villains could jam the signals somehow. No wonder Kameninina’s gear isn’t working. Todoroki finished monologuing about the villains likely having a concrete objective in attacking this facility while students were there—Yeah, weren’t you listening? They’re after All Might!—before Thirteen caught the students attention once again.

“Everyone, toward the doors, now! Cementoss and Eraserhead will take care of this. Focus on escaping and alerting the faculty to the breach in our wards!” Thirteen pointed toward the exit, and the students took a near-collective step back from the center of USJ before turning to escape.

As they began rushing forward toward the doors, Uraraka turned to Izuku with wide eyes mouthing ‘Deku?’ She seemed scared and helpless, and it hurt Izuku to see her that way again, his memory jumping toward that moment when she was caught beneath rubble as the zero-pointer robot neared. His heart had been frozen in fear, his feet flinging themselves forward before he had a second to think, throwing stones on the ground, willing them to form a circle, willing a protective bubble around the duo large enough for him to save her… Uraraka shouldn’t look so helpless because she was so strong. She and Bakugou kept teaming up to defeat the class, and everyone looked up to her ability to escape obstacles no matter the cost.

Izuku felt Todoroki’s ice waft cold air from where he matched Izuku’s pace. He was gazing at Izuku in contemplation, about to say something else, when the dark purple mist came for them. It appeared out of nowhere, not-there then there in the same second.

Closer up, Izuku could see the purple mist had yellow eyes that glowed like watercolors toward the sky. Izuku felt dizzy, his mind flashing back, memory catching up with him. Those eyes were from his dreams. And then the villain started speaking, introducing the intruders as the League of Villains, speaking cordially as though all they wanted to do was greet All Might, sit down, have some tea, a side of murder, and leave his ashes in the haven of justice that U.A. represented. Izuku stared, wide-eyed, comprehending, his mind stuck like a record on the same image, over and over, of that purple mist in his dreams, the figures coming out, the hands, the screaming—

“I still have a role play…” The villain trailed off as a barrier of cement blocks appeared between the
students and his dark purple form. Bakugou and Kirishima stood in front of the wall, having rushed forward to attack, hampered by the ten foot tall cement wall in front of them.

Laughing could be heard from the other side of the barrier. “I was going to warn you children to be careful, that someone might get hurt. But now there’s a wall preventing your escape. How helpful for our purpose.”

Bakugou started raging at the wall, trying to explode it with his fists. Kirishima turned toward where Cementoss had run off, their teacher currently facing toward them, hands on the ground. Thirteen stepped forward in front of the students, no longer covering their rear since Cementoss was there to cover the students' backs. “Students, move out of the way! Cementoss, lower the wall. I have him!”

That plan went over about as well as Izuku expected it to. Maybe he had too much experience with demons and warlocks with teleporting abilities, but he knew the wall didn’t matter one lick. Cementoss focused his quirk on lowering the wall as Bakugou and Kirishima jumped back toward the group. Thirteen stood in front, ready and aimed to dissolve the villain with their Black Hole technique, but the villain was nowhere to be seen. A shout could be heard from behind the group, and the students turned only to watch in horror as Cementoss had half of his body already falling through a portal that had opened beneath him. Another portal opened at the top of the USJ dome, and Cementoss could be seen falling out of it, unable to stop his dissent without any contact to the ground. His body was made of a concrete-like material, and the increased mass caused a quick dissent and a loud crashing and breaking sound to be heard in the middle of the USJ.

Izuku’s classmates winced, some putting their hands to their mouths in horror, others stepping back in fear. One of the girls called out to their fallen teacher, but there was no response. Izuku could hear Eraserhead cursing while Thirteen gasped, running toward the back of the group in order to get a better aim at the mist villain behind them, his classmates parting down the middle to make way. Before they could get there, the villain was already laughing. “I hope you enjoy meeting my comrades. They should treat you to a nice course of pain and death!”

His announcement was followed by darkness. Izuku felt something fast move past him—_Iida?_—just as Popsicle’s fur became separated from his death grip, and Uraraka’s hold on his arm faded, and he was falling. _Falling-falling-falling just like in his nightmare. Had he dreamed this was going to happen?_ He tried to reach out his hand, grasp onto his familiar, do something—

He landed with a grunt on top of Todoroki.

“Mydoriya?” The voice was a groan beneath him.

Izuku felt disoriented by the dual sensations thrumming from his classmate’s body to his. He’d expected but never verified that Todoroki’s left half was warm, much warmer than Izuku’s body heat, and Todoroki’s right half was cold, like bedsheets just as you crawled in at night. The dual effect was a strange blend of perplexing and addictive. Half of Izuku relaxed on top of the heat while his other half developed tingling goosebumps at the cold.

Izuku found it hard to focus, breath forced out of him, grasping onto Todoroki’s shoulders like a lifeline. Therefore, he was as surprised as Todoroki when he was on top of his classmate’s form in one second and then several feet away, hands raised to defend, in the next. Todoroki quickly threw a cone of ice in the direction of the villain attacking Izuku while Izuku spun and kicked the frozen villain into the wall behind him.

Izuku caught Todoroki’s eye as his classmate stood to join him. They were surrounded by half-sunken concrete buildings, tree roots, and piles upon piles of dirt.
“The Landslide Zone,” Todoroki announced next to him, cataloguing their location. He must have read about the different zones in USJ. Izuku only knew it was a facility for rescue training.

Several more villains were headed their way from behind one of the half-sunken buildings. Izuku raised his fists, prepared to fight, only to hear Todoroki scoff beside him.

“Don’t bother. They’re amateurs. I can take care of them.”

Izuku would have accused him of self-aggrandizing, but shit, he knew how to fight. Within a single minute, all the nearby villains were frozen and incapacitated. Todoroki walked over to the one who looked the most scared and started threatening him with frostbite and loss of limbs. Izuku wanted to interrupt that he wasn’t acting very heroic, but he and Todoroki were two kids against a dozen villains. Perhaps now was not the time to draw strict lines around the proper way to survive a fight.

Todoroki pierced Izuku with the turquoise eye set in the middle of the scarred portion of his face. “Midoriya, would you be interested in putting our friends here to sleep?” The question was equal parts taunting, harsh, and so fucking capable, and Izuku wasn’t sure whether he felt a little bit afraid or a little bit in love. Either way, he got the gist of Todoroki’s plan. His classmate would unfreeze them, likely one by one, and Izuku would put them in a sleeper hold. Just like their first fight together.

Explosions could be heard far off in the distance, likely from Kacchan, and Izuku could feel heat on his left side where there was none. Was Popsicle with Kacchan? Vague impressions of paws smacking into hard objects, pressure against his teeth, a copper taste in his mouth. He hoped Popsicle would keep his pack safe. Pack-pack-pack. The feeling flowed through him as he followed Todoroki away from a dozen unconscious forms, abandoned heaps of trash. Izuku shook his head and tried to focus.

Todoroki hadn’t gleaned much more information than they already knew from the, er, talkative villain. Apparently, the villains had a creature with them that had the supposed ability to defeat All Might. Todoroki suggested he and Midoriya head to the central plaza where Cementoss fell earlier in order to offer support and pass on the intel.

No kidding, he actually used the word intel. Izuku snickered at him, but Todoroki didn’t seem to get what was so funny. Izuku told him he was trying to act too much like an adult. Todoroki reminded him their classmates’ lives were in danger. Izuku huffed and rolled his eyes. It was a bonding moment.

Of course, as inevitably happens when Todoroki is involved, things quickly went to shit. Seriously, what was with this guy? Cementoss was up and fighting by the time they arrived at the central plaza, several villains trapped in concrete constructs as the hero split his attention between offering assistance to Eraserhead and to the students who were having trouble with villains. Tsuyu was hovering behind Cementoss as though to offer him support, or perhaps gain his protection, when she saw Todoroki and Midoriya. She waived her hand to invite them over, only for a couple villains to catch sight of the duo. Todoroki quickly froze them, which brought more villains to the area, whom he move to froze, until suddenly the central plaza was like winter wonderland in a graveyard, concrete structures surrounding the villains’ frozen unmoving forms. Izuku attacked whatever villains tried to sneak up behind the cover of ice, kicking them into range for Cementoss to entrap with cement blocks or Todoroki to freeze.

Cementoss was really turning the tide of the battle in the heroes’ favor, entrapping whole groups of villains in large cement structures… until he wasn’t. That creature with an exposed brain from before, the one that looked like—
It stood over Cementoss, who lay prone on the ground beneath it. One of its hands ground Cementoss’ head into the pavement, and if Izuku could have gotten past his horror, he probably would have found it an ironic way for the cement hero to go down. Instead, Izuku kept waiting for Cementoss to get up, entrap the creature’s feet in cement, twist around and barrier the creature behind cement walls, something badass and heroic like earlier, but nothing happened. He didn’t move. Tsuyu remained frozen, staring up at the creature beside her, poised and ready to jump but not doing so, too afraid to move, eyes quivering.

Eraserhead appeared out of nowhere, using his capture weapon to pull Tsuyu out of the way and throwing her toward Izuku and Todoroki. He activated his quirk before the creature could attack him, but the creature was strong. It didn’t seem like strength was part of his quirk; it was just how the creature was made. Izuku opened his mouth to shout, to warn him to get out of there; but he didn’t know how to help Eraserhead fight something that strong when he didn’t have time to set up his stones. Todoroki raised a hand to freeze the creature to the ground—

And then the leader of the villains, the one with the silver hair and the disembodied hands, materialized from across the plaza and grabbed Todoroki’s right arm, the side with ice. Izuku watched, eyes wide in horror, as the skin started crumbling away. Todoroki quickly froze his arm and the hand to it, but that only made it worse, sealing in the horror so the villain couldn’t have stopped dissolving Todoroki’s arm if he wanted to. Todoroki was nearly paralyzed as he stared at his arm, willing the ice to disappear, to disengage himself from the villain with the severed hands covering his body.

Izuku shouted at Todoroki to melt it, to just use his fire to melt the ice already, and Todoroki looked so stricken and so torn in that moment that Izuku wanted nothing more than to freeze time and take care of the problem himself. He wanted to rip the villain off Todoroki, kick him away, seal him into a vial where he could never do this to a kid, a teenager, one of Izuku’s classmates…

The left side of Todoroki’s body erupted into flames, melting the ice on his arm. The fire was so large and so hot that, once freed, the villain leapt back, jacket and severed hands burning as he screamed. A portal opened behind him, and he disappeared. By the large splash heard nearby, the purple mist villain likely dropped him either in the lake or the central plaza fountain. Either way, Izuku had no time to look because Todoroki was falling to his knees, the outer part of his lower right arm nearly disintegrated to pure muscle, a bit of bone peaking through. Izuku choked back a wave of vomit—it had been so long since he saw someone’s bones inside of them, screaming, so much screaming—and went to go support Todoroki. But they were in the middle of a battlefield, and he didn’t have the time.

Eraserhead—Mr. Aizawa—hadn’t been able to detain the bird-like creature with the exposed brain. Bakugou and Kirishima had gotten to the central plaza from wherever the purple mist villain had teleported them to and were attacking the creature as well, Mr. Aizawa screaming at them to run and get the other students out of the plaza. Neither hardened fists nor explosive blasts seemed to do anything to the creature, who healed as soon as any damage got past it absorptive exterior. There was no way they could beat it; there was no way… and Popsicle had appeared by Izuku’s side in raven form once again, trilling a loud cry, vicious, mourning.

Mr. Aizawa’s goggles were on the ground, covered in blood, and Izuku saw it coming—he saw the creature move to attack Mr. Aizawa, saw his pack leader go down, head caved in around the creature’s fist. He saw Shigaraki nearly fly in from Todoroki’s left, intent on disintegrating the remainder of his body. He saw Kacchan’s arm being broken, being forced to his knees; he saw Kirishima being thrown into one of Cementoss’s walls, his spine cracking. He saw the beginning of the world start to end, his new pack scattered and bleeding, and he couldn’t take it. It was only their second week of school. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. Heroes were supposed to represent hope.
They weren’t supposed to have their base broken into and their members beaten down and their children slaughtered. Izuku could still hear the screaming, sometimes, when he slept. And it was his fault his fault his fault because he didn’t do it sooner, because he wouldn’t take the risk, and he could never be forgiven, never—

And then the world was frozen. Izuku stopped breathing for the two, maybe three, seconds it took him to realize what had happened, still disoriented from his sudden flashback. Nothing in the central plaza was moving. The creature was still looming above Mr. Aizawa, but he hadn’t been knocked down. Kirishima stood with hardened skin, braced for an impact that didn't come. Bakugou supported one arm with his hand, ready to let out a big explosion, never giving up, he would never give up. Izuku took a deep breath, tears coming to his eyes, so grateful and so glad.

He had stopped time.

But Izuku only had a few seconds to feel relieved. His teacher and classmates—pack pack pack—were paused in place, but that meant he still had some time. Time to make sure Todoroki could escape the grey-haired villain’s grasp. Time enough to… to warn them about what was to come. But it was all a lie, of course. There wasn’t any time. The demons never waited, once they sensed his magic. Izuku could only hope they were too far away to sense him and try to move as quickly as possible.

That hope was dashed before Izuku even made it a few feet from Todoroki's side. Thankfully, there weren’t many demons, only two, maybe three... okay, four. Four was such an unlucky number. Shit.

Izuku didn’t have time to get a handle on the emotion that swung through him—fear-fear-fear—didn’t have time to think, before two things happened. Time resumed, the bird-creature’s fist headed toward Mr. Aizawa, and then the lower half of the creature’s body suddenly toppled to the ground, severed in half with its intestines spilling out. A demon stood behind it, large enough to dwarf All Might himself, with twelve eyes and four tongues and numerous giant tentacles swaying back and forth, crunching on the upper half of the creature’s body before gulping it down and letting out an ear-splitting screech. Two tentacles began reaching toward Izuku while two more whipped around to hit Bakugou and Kirishima across the plaza, too fast to dodge. Mr. Aizawa had managed to jump backward in time to avoid a third tentacle headed his way, but Todoroki was still on the ground with a disintegrated arm, Tsuyu hovering over him. Izuku had to protect them. The demons were here, and if anyone else got hurt or killed, it wouldn’t be the villains’ fault anymore but Izuku’s.

At this point, Izuku could only improvise two options. He could focus on protecting his friends as quickly as possible, or he could focus on stopping the demon in the most humane way possible. The first would require him to explode the demon’s tentacles, and maybe have to explode the other demons that had teleported in, but that wasn’t humane; it would hurt them. That could kill them, and heroes didn’t kill. Or he could try to bind the demons into whatever he could find nearby, maybe a rock or chunk of cement, just like he normally did with his action figures. But binding rituals take time, and there were four of them. Izuku was afraid to pause time again—what if more demons came—and he could hear sounds behind him. Were the other demons attacking his classmates or attacking villains? He wasn’t sure, and he didn’t have the time to look around.

The tentacle demon was almost upon Izuku as he stood protectively in front of Todoroki and Tsuyu, who was poised to jump away with their injured classmate. The demons were after Izuku and his magic. They couldn’t always sense him after that initial burst of magic; but somehow, the tentacle demon seemed to know. He knew. The demon drew closer. Izuku raised his hands to explode the demon’s tentacles, suddenly out of time, and then the tentacles weren’t in front of him anymore. Swooping in to save the day, Mr. Aizawa had tied six of the tentacles together with his capture weapon, the white strips gleaming against dark purple scales. The demon screeched and flashed its
fangs, its tentacles using their combined momentum to throw Mr. Aizawa into the air and slam him to the ground. The hero managed to dodge most of the hit, but his arm was broken from where it buckled under him to brace for impact against the cement.

Izuku stared down at his winded teacher, immediately furious. *It wasn’t right, Izuku wasn’t supposed to get upset, magic was triggered by emotions and large emotions like this were bad, but he was so livid; he could pop the demon’s eyes right out of their damn sockets.* Izuku wanted to let it all out, he wanted to scream. *Pack-pack-pack.* It wasn’t supposed to be taken away from him. Izuku moved to explode the demon’s tentacles, to use his magic one more time outside of a circle, even though he wasn’t sure how large the blast would be or if his friends would be knocked backward by the explosion or if more demons would come—

Across the USJ dome, the entrance doors slammed open. “It’s fine now, students… because *I* am here.” Izuku pivoted toward the entrance, but the cement walls and ice-encased villains were in his way, so he couldn’t see All Might’s face. It didn’t matter. He knew the voice by heart. He’d memorized it back when he was a kid, playing the same video on a loop, listening to his commercial jingles on repeat, running around wearing his All Might onesie screaming ‘Never fear! I am here!’ *Thinking of it, that was back before the demons, wasn’t it? Back before magic, when all Izuku wanted to do was become a hero, when he didn’t have to worry about balancing a hero’s life with a witch’s curse.*

In the moments between All Might appearing at the doorway and him punching the tentacle demon to kingdom come, Izuku had the thought that maybe, if he tried hard enough and prepared well enough, he could still be like All Might someday. He could still be the hero running in to save people with a smile. But then he turned his hopeful gaze toward the trembling form of his homeroom teacher, his pack leader, peering up at him from beneath blood-soaked hair, reaching a hand out to make sure Izuku was safe… and Izuku could be fine with this, too. Becoming someone like Eraserhead, who wasn’t going to get the glory, but who’d *saved his life…*

A row of U.A. faculty appeared at the USJ doors after All Might, a force to be reckoned with. Snipe took aim at the silver-haired villain who was scratching his neck and ranting about his pet being eaten before it even had the chance to take down All Might. He ranted about a ‘Game Over’ and it not being over yet, but his eyes weren’t even on All Might anymore. They kept sliding over toward Izuku, who stood still with his hands raised in front of Todoroki and Tsuyu. The grey-haired villain smiled, said, “I’ll see you again, soon,” and it sounded like a promise.

The purple mist villain opened a portal and took the leader away from the battlefield, leaving the rest of the League of Villains and their comrades behind. Snipe managed to get four shots past the severed hands, hitting vital areas, before the two disappeared, but he didn’t manage to prevent their escape. Izuku wasn’t sure whether to breathe a sigh of relief or prepare for the worst.

Izuku turned his gaze from the central plaza, where Kirishima was trying to console a screaming Kacchan who kept yelling profanities and ranting about being swatted out of the fight ‘by fucking tentacles of all things, what the fuck.’ Mr. Aizawa was harmed, but safe, no life-threatening wounds obvious on his frame. All Might seemed to be smoking or something, but he turned toward Izuku and raised his hand in a thumbs-up motion, which Izuku assumed was meant to reassure him or something. Up on the dais near the other U.A. teachers, Izuku spotted Iida hunched over and panting —*had he brought the faculty here?*—and Uraraka punching the air in a ‘you did it!’ fashion toward Iida, who smiled.

Next to him, Todoroki reached his good hand out to grasp Izuku’s leg. “Midoriya…” Izuku crouched down to Todoroki’s level to hear him better. His classmate’s voice was barely a whisper even then, but Izuku didn’t feel like his hushed tones were from pain alone. “You did something,
didn’t you? To save me…”

Izuku smiled back at him, eyes sad, voice holding a hidden warning. “Don’t mention it.”

And Todoroki stared at him, one grey eye, one turquoise. Izuku didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know if he should say anything. Todoroki’s breath froze on contact with the air, and Izuku looked down to see that Todoroki had frozen his right arm completely. His confused gaze must have tipped Todoroki off because the other student responded to his unspoken question. “To prevent contamination,” he answered, as though freezing your arm was perfectly normal.

Izuku wondered how many wounds Todoroki had suffered before, that he was so used to icing his skin to prevent ‘contamination.’ He wasn’t sure how to ask, the other boy’s gaze not seeming to welcome it. Maybe Izuku really was starting to get a handle on this whole ‘talking to people’ thing. Or maybe he just understood the need to keep secrets.

It wasn’t until Izuku was almost outside of the USJ entrance doors, Todoroki walking next to him and refusing the assistance of his classmates, that the cast of monumental errors he’d made that day caught up with him. Mr. Aizawa had been ordered by Principal Nezu to escort the students back to school and receive medical attention, so he was currently leading Izuku and his classmates toward the bus that had arrived. Izuku managed to share a glance with his pack leader; he had a horrible guilty feeling that something was wrong.

Mr. Aizawa’s eyes may have met Izuku’s, but they weren’t kind; they didn’t seem to share a secret that only the two of them knew; they didn’t seem appeased or happy, despite the day having been saved and the heroes having shown up to capture almost all the villains. Instead, his eyes were piercing piercing piercing, and Izuku couldn’t breathe. He thought back to the villains, the creature about to attack his pack, the way he brought the demons here and endangered everyone further. He felt the tide of ‘what have I done?’ roar through him as his eyes teared up. This wasn’t supposed to happen; his hero life and his witch life were meant to stay separate. He was supposed to fight villains during the day and demons at night, but not both at the same time, and one of them wasn’t supposed to eat the other, and Izuku was pretty sure the other demons might have killed a few of the villains, and someone was going to find out, and Izuku was going to have his memory wiped or be erased from existence he knew he knew ...

Izuku looked down, afraid to continue looking at the judgement in his pack leader’s eyes. Izuku had endangered everyone. In his mind, he still heard the whispers, that voice calling to him. ‘Do you know your part in this, Izuku-kun?’ The white roses covered in blood, the way the snow fell. He knew his part; he knew he knew he knew. But there had to be another way, he had to be more, he had to be more than this.

There was a reason that Izuku was trying to build a pack at U.A., and it was very simple: he needed one. He couldn’t place why; he wasn’t a werewolf, had no inherent traits in his blood that demanded a pack in order to stay sane. But at the same time, bonding with his pack was how he knew he would be okay—Kirishima collapsing next to him on the bus, groaning, complaining, smile bright on his face at surviving the fight. His sharp teeth gleamed in the sunlight, red hair like fire on his head, and Izuku was crying. He couldn’t stop crying, now that all the horror was past. He hoped they wouldn’t have rescue training for a while. He would probably have nightmares about the USJ attack for months.

Kirishima was saying something about ‘Hey man, are you okay?’ which should have garnered an obvious answer. But Kirishima was running his hand through Izuku’s hair and bringing his head to Kirishima’s bare chest, which was warm and kind and pack. Izuku shuddered at the word, just as much as he was buoyed by it. Pack-pack-pack. He leaned up, shoving his nose in Kirishima’s neck,
and gulped in deep breaths of his scent. He smelled a bit like Kacchan’s explosions, probably from fighting next to him, along with his own unique blend of forest and wood and trees, earthy things that sung of home. Izuku remembered playing video games on Kirishima’s couch; touching his hands, his cheek, his teeth. Kirishima’s smell took him back to those moments in the apartment, and Izuku curled his body in the seat toward his classmate, the other’s warmth surrounding him.

If Izuku had any shame in the first place (which, let’s be honest, he didn’t), he would have felt embarrassed that his classmates could have seen him like this. But the duo were hidden at the back of the bus, Kacchan sitting in front of them making explosions in his hands anytime someone looked over. Kacchan would occasionally glance back at the two of them, him and Kirishima, a fond glare on his face, a scowl turning serious, before angling back toward their class.

Izuku didn’t see many things that happened on the bus ride back to school that day, his face obscured by Kirishima’s bare chest, his nose scenting sweat tracks from Kirishima’s jaw to collarbone. Tokoyami sat two seats forward on the left, and although he pretended to be staring resolutely at his lap, Dark Shadow kept an eye out on their friend for the both of them. Midoriya had looked pale all morning, followed by Mr. Aizawa barging into the room and demanding strange questions about Midoriya’s familiar and pale visage and Shakiness. Then Midoriya had made it seem as though his physical ailment had something to do with events yet to come, like the sickness of his body acted as a premonition for some unforetold disaster. To Tokoyami’s knowledge, Midoriya had nothing to do with foresight or precognition. How, then, was his body’s illness a sign of the attack that ended up happening at the USJ?

Tokoyami considered himself a rather open person. He had a familiar that could literally take over his mind and body if he was emotional enough to let it, so he’d grown long-used to being in control of his mind and his emotions. Part of this involved research into more esoteric areas. It started as the need to study meditation, but the best articles online were all for casting magic or doing spells. Ridiculous notion, of course, but spells were just fancy ways of calling forth one’s own intent to bring about changes in one’s self or others. There was nothing absurd about that. Tokoyami himself had tried a couple spells to help him gain control over himself and settle Dark Shadow. His familiar mocked him relentlessly, but the spells did help. He had never managed to gain any level of precognition, though, despite his nightly meditation sessions, the bay leaves he kept beneath his pillow, and his dedication to the craft. He burned sage incense to rid the area of dark spirits, used certain crystals in designated portions of his bedroom to increase the vibrations of his solar and crown chakras, and even collected bits of his own feathers and baby teeth in case he ever found use for them in focusing spells. But never anything like precognition.

There were a couple of quirks out there that could predict the future in some capacity or another, and their users often worked with the police. But how did a student whose quirk had something to do with explosions and owning a ‘familiar’ that could shapeshift (Tokoyami wasn’t picky about the term ‘familiar’ since he just assumed Izuku used it to mean ‘animal whom he shared a strong bond with’) somehow end up with the ability to predict that an attack on the school was going to happen? It was true, his new friend could not seem to pinpoint the where or how of the attack, so the ability was not necessarily very useful; however, it was perplexing.

Many things about Izuku Midoriya did not add up, but when Tokoyami considered the fond smiles the other boy sent his way, the warmth of him on his lap during that fateful lunch period, Dark Shadow’s amused chuckles later that night as he recounted the event to Tokoyami’s parents… he
could bide his time until Midoriya was ready to divulge his secrets. Tokoyami had pushed that one time during the lunch period, asking how his familiar could be both a snake and a bird, and Midoriya had clammed up, so Tokoyami would bide his time. Midoriya seemed like the sort of person to wait until he decided to trust you fully before he huddled with you beneath a blanket and whispered all his secrets in your ear. Tokoyami shivered at the thought, Dark Shadow chuckling beside him. He glared at his familiar for good measure.

... 

Iida, meanwhile, sat in the midst of the class on the bus feeling guilty over having to abandon his classmates in order to warn the faculty of the breach in the wards. He kept glancing around at the other students, checking on their health, any injuries they obtained, trying to soothe and lead and help in any way he could. Midoriya was the only one crying. Iida wondered where the other boy had fought in order to remain so shaken by it. *Wasn’t he near Cementoss in the end? Their teacher had suffered the most damage during the attack.* Iida hadn’t seen much of the battle after Thirteen ordered him to rush past the warp villain, run the three kilometers back to school, and warn the faculty that villains were attacking the USJ. Iida hadn’t been pleased at that order, either. He had wanted to stay and fight and protect his classmates, to be the hero that Tensei would have been in that situation. Instead, he had felt delegated to the role of courier, passing along messages, as though fast legs were only good for running away. He had felt so much shame...

He formed a fist on his thigh and shook the thoughts away. *No, he was still a hero. He did what needed to be done to save his classmates, even though that meant leaving them.* He peered across the row at Uraraka, who seemed to be smiling even though her legs were shaking. She had cheered him on when he arrived with the pro heroes, all the while kneeling next to an injured Thirteen whose suit had been half-disintegrated. Iida remembered saving Uraraka and Shouji from the warp villain’s purple mist, back when Cementoss had been portaled to the top of the USJ and dropped from a frightening height. Iida could still remember the sound of his teacher’s body impacting the ground, almost like a building smashing. He shuddered and forced the memory out of his head.

Bakugou and Kirishima had fought together somewhere, then made it to the central plaza. From what Tsuyu recounted, Todoroki and Midoriya arrived together as well. But only Uraraka, Shouji, Sero, Ashido, and Sato were up on the dais near the USJ entrance. That meant that nine other students were busy fighting either alone or together. The students had grown more silent as the bus ride went on. Iida decided to ask the others where they had been and what they had done.

*Talking things out was a bonding experience, right? As deputy class rep, he was in charge of the other students’ well-being. Since Kirishima was busy, ahem, consoling Midoriya, Iida would have to take charge of making sure the other students were okay.*

... 

Meanwhile, at the front of the bus, Todoroki sat next to Mr. Aizawa, ready to be escorted to Recovery Girl’s office when they arrived back at school. He allowed himself to slump against the bus seat, staring up at the bus driver’s mirror, where Todoroki had the perfect view of Midoriya in the back row. He seemed to be molesting Kirishima, or at least rubbing his mouth all over his neck and bare chest, if Kirishima’s red face had anything to say about it. Against his will, Todoroki found his lips twitching, a vague sense of schadenfreude sweeping through him as he took enjoyment from the other student’s embarrassment. A bump in the road jostled his arm, sobering him up and making him contemplate the events that had occurred not ten minutes ago.

Todoroki thought back to Izuku’s face, those panicked eyes, yelling at him to use his fire. The action hadn’t been his first choice. He’d sworn never to use that man’s ability in a fight. He was going to
become a hero on his ice alone—but the ice wasn’t enough to get rid of that villain that could disintegrate things with his hands. And even with his fire, even after setting the villain aflame and claiming his birthright or whatever it was his old man always shouted at him, the damage to Todoroki’s arm was severe. He refused to think about that. Todoroki was confidant that Recovery Girl could heal him. Through the layer of ice, he could see a bit of bone beneath the muscle fibers, but the villain had thankfully mainly dissolved the skin and not gotten much of the muscle. If he’d lost the muscle in his arm, his ice arm, Todoroki didn’t know what he would have done. Muscle couldn’t regrow that quickly, even with a quirk to help it along. His right arm was the one he needed, not the left one, not his fire arm; although that was probably why the villain attacked his right side instead of his left. He was so stupid, letting that villain get the drop on him. His old man wouldn’t be pleased.

Todoroki raised his eyes to the mirror once more. Midoriya had stopped shaking and seemed content with draping his arms around Kirishima’s shoulders and… had he crawled into Kirishima’s lap? Todoroki bit his lip, amused once again. The pain in his lip distracted him from the numbness of his arm. He grit his teeth, not thinking about the last memory of the pain hurting like this. He refused to go back to those memories of the burn searing across his face from the boiling water, of his mother’s crazed face and wide eyes and streaming tears, of the way she shouted and raved and crumpled on the floor. It wasn’t her fault; it was his. For so many hours, Todoroki had laid there with burning skin, positive that he would be permanently blind in that eye, that his father’s perfect son was forever ruined and he might get to play and laugh and smile like his siblings. But his father was a famous pro-hero, and many people owed him their lives. Some of them were doctors. And he couldn’t allow his precious creation to be permanently damaged by his wife, could he?

Todoroki raised his left fingertips to his left eye, not touching, just hovering over it. A bump in the road made him clench his left hand and lower it down to his lap. He gazed down at his ice-covered arm. This was probably the worst wound he’d ever suffered from a fight before, but it wasn’t the only wound, and all the others had healed. Shouto Todoroki, patched up, handsome, and new. Shouto Todoroki, scarred forever to remind him that his mother could never love something that resembled his father. He breathed deeply, making sure to keep the mask on his face smooth and clear. He’d learned long ago that showing emotions was weakness. That’s when his father knew to attack. That’s when everyone knew to attack. That villain had seen ‘Todoroki’s face, sensed his distraction, and jumped him while he was weak. His father had raised him to never be weak. Stupid, so stupid. Recovery Girl might heal him, and he might go home without bruises, but the clear unblemished skin wouldn’t last long. He knew what was coming for him. Todoroki grit his teeth, anticipated the pain, and rolled his shoulders back as he accepted it. To know what was coming was the first step in controlling your reactions to it. His father had taught him that, too.

Todoroki glanced once more at the mirror. Izuku Midoriya was staring back at him, green eyes bright even from the end of the bus. Todoroki’s breath halted in his throat. His first real memories of the boy were from that hero vs villain exercise, his dark form coming out of nowhere, appearing in Todoroki’s blind spot, and choking him with two arms braced around his neck. Todoroki lifted his left hand to his throat. It was the first time he’d ever been choked. His father tended to prefer burning him during their ‘fights’ together, punching him, throwing him across the room, sometimes a kneecap or foot to the face. Todoroki had never been choked, though. That was probably why he was so surprised, why it took him so long to react and try to freeze Midoriya in return. And then today, Todoroki had used that power for his own good, asking Midoriya to choke the villains into unconsciousness so he didn’t have to feel guilty over causing hypothermia and limb loss due to prolonged ice exposure. Todoroki would be hesitant to admit to a certain pleasure at seeing the villains lose consciousness, Izuku cradling their head in his arms like he was whispering them to sleep. Maybe he’d let Midoriya use that move on him again, sometime, so that he could get used to fighting against it. You know, for practice.
Todoroki used the mirror to smirk back at Izuku and nod his head. He was fine. Midoriya didn’t need to worry.

In response, Midoriya smiled and puckered his lips in vague mimicry of a kiss. Todoroki felt himself flushing.

Most of the class had joined Deku, for one reason or another, in sitting in a circle on the floor of their classroom. The desks had been moved against the walls as Deku dragged first one person then another, all-smiles, to sit on the floor. Some had no problem—Uraraka had followed him while giggling, and Tokoyami never wanted to sit at his desk in the first place—while others were slightly more hesitant. Iida had raised a bit of a fuss at first, lecturing everyone about respecting their desks and the organization of the classroom, but he’d soon been swayed to think of it as a class bonding exercise after the trauma of the USJ, courtesy of Kirishima. Kamenari probably only joined the circle on the ground in order to get close to Uraraka, who was smiling at him kindly and nodding her head in sympathy to something he said.

But none of that mattered, because Katsuki Bakugou wasn’t about to budge from his seat. He liked his seat. He liked putting his feet up and leaning back. He liked where it was situated in the classroom, and fucking Deku hadn’t even dared to try to move the chair with him still in it. Katsuki sneered down at the gaggle of dumbfucks sitting in a circle beneath him. Well, they knew their place.

“Come on, Kacchan, please? You’re so far away…”

Fucking Deku had been complaining like this for the past minute, and it was driving him up the wall. The other boy had the gall to act sick all day, get to the main villain fight before him, summon demons, and then create a circle of friendship or whatever the fuck this was; and he wanted Katsuki to join him? Fuck. That.

“What Katsuki wanted to do was to shove Deku against the wall, blast one off near his whiny little face, and storm off into the sunset. However, the police had yet to release the class from questioning, still taking students one by one every few minutes to clarify last details for their case. For at least the foreseeable future, Katsuki was stuck in the classroom with shitnerds who needed backup to deal with low-level villains. Deku was strong; Katsuki knew he was strong. He remembered that demon when they were younger, the one with the green scales and a single eye, how Deku pushed Katsuki back, how everything seemed to slow down, and then suddenly the demon was in some stone and Katsuki’s exploding fists hadn’t meant anything next to its scaly skin. Apparently, most demons had extremely durable skin. Even at his age now, Katsuki would probably have to use a full-arm blast and strain his muscles to do any damage. And then there was that tentacle demon earlier today. Why hadn’t Deku stopped it like last time?

Ugh, whatever. Point was: Deku wasn’t weak. But then he’d do shit like this, form a circle of tra-la-la ding-dongs or whatever the fuck they were trying to do, and he’d want Katsuki near him to… what? Touch? Hang on to? Crawl on top of? Fuck. That. Katsuki wasn’t about to let Deku do his weird touchy shit with all their classmates watching.
Kirishima joined in to cajole Katsuki to at least roll his chair over toward the circle, and Deku’s eyes were shining little stars of hope, and none of it fucking mattered. None of these extras mattered. Katsuki had seen that villain up close, the one with the strange beak and exposed brain, and his fists had done nothing. He could still feel the rage boiling beneath his skin, his impotence, how he wasn’t strong enough. Heroes never give up, but his explosions hadn’t even hurt the thing, and he would have lost.

“Just leave him alone and let him brood or whatever. That guy’s personality is a bag of shit, anyway.”

Katsuki glared at the blonde-haired idiot that dared insult him. He was about to get up and show him who, exactly, was full of shit, when the classroom door opened. Todoroki walked through, head down, arm in a bandage. He seemed to be fingering the wrapping around his lower right arm, and Katsuki scowled. He hated that half-and-half motherfucker, and he wasn’t about to pity him for getting hurt. If anything, he wanted to push scar-face’s head into the ground and throw off some explosions next to his stupid fucking smirk. When Katsuki and Kirishima had gotten to the central plaza, everything had been entrapped in either ice or cement. Apparently, half-and-half and Cementoss had corralled most of the villains in the area that hadn’t fought Eraserhead. Fucking half-and-half, getting all the glory, taking out all the villains before Katsuki could get there to bash their brains in. He hated his stupid fucking face and those weird fucking eyes.

Katsuki turned back toward his chair and plopped down into it. That blonde haired idiot wasn’t worth it. Deku crawled over, put his hand back on Katsuki’s leg, looked at him all sad and adoring and shit. Todoroki glared at Katsuki from his position at the entrance of the room. Katsuki smirked at him, tilting his head back. Motherfucker. See something you want? He looked down at Deku, his eyes hardening, before he glared back at Todoroki. Well, you can’t have it, you half-and-half bastard.

The loss of Bakugou’s acerbic personality to an interview with the police had several students relaxing back into the camaraderie of the group circle. Izuku lay with his head in a blushing Kirishima’s lap and his feet on top of Todoroki’s crossed legs. He kept nudging the latter with his foot, hoping to distract Todoroki from having his eyes keep falling to a million meters somewhere else.

“But I do think it’s funny how you’re always in the middle of the boss fight!” Uraraka was trying to put a positive spin on everyone’s stories, and Izuku had just recounted how he and Todoroki had ended up near Cementoss and Eraserhead.

Izuku flushed, raising out of Kirishima’s lap to deny it. “No, I don’t!” That was really not his intention. He wanted to be a sideline fighter, not a big boss fighter.

“Well,” she started, putting her finger to her chin. “There was the first time with the zero-pointer robot—”

“You were in trouble!”

“And then when you exploded that missile…” she continued with a smile.

“That wasn’t a boss fight!”
“And now you ended up right in the middle of the USJ boss fight…”

“That was Todoroki’s fault!” Izuku felt his feet forcibly lifted and shoved off of said student’s lap. “Aww… Todoroki, I was comfortable there.”

“Stop complaining,” Todoroki ordered, and Izuku stopped talking only to put on a pout that he directed at Todoroki. He could swear that Todoroki almost snickered at him. “What are you, a child?”

Izuku glared at him for a second before he rolled to his knees and pounced on Todoroki, knocking him backward. Todoroki managed to brace himself enough with his right arm so that his left arm wasn’t jostled any further, only to have Midoriya’s teeth bared in a growl in front of his face. “I’m not a pup.”

Midoriya was also pinning Todoroki’s legs with his own, one hand shoving Todoroki’s hip to the ground, and this reaction was really over the top, Midoriya. “Pups can’t fight. They can’t defend. I’m not a pup.” Todoroki had a brief few seconds to be completely and utterly confused—why were they suddenly talking about dogs—before Midoriya’s arms and legs were flailing toward him, the collar of his shirt caught in some upward grip, a voice growling behind him.

“Dekuuu… stop touching the half-and-half bastard, got it?”

Oh. Bakugou was back from his interview. Wasn’t that fun.

Midoriya was suddenly half on the floor and half on top of Kirishima, because that made sense, as Bakugou stood above a blushing Todoroki’s sprawled form. “And you and your broken arms don’t touch him either.”

Todoroki wouldn’t have normally been insulted by anything Bakugou was capable of, but the comment about his arms hit a little too close to home. He didn’t even instigate the tussle, hadn’t even meant to touch the other boy, and yet he couldn’t stop his mouth from going off, not willing to let the other try to put him in a corner. In a fight, you never let someone put you in a corner; it made it hard to escape. “I’m pretty sure you don’t control him… or me.”

The circle of their peers had gone quiet around them. Some of them had laughed at first when Midoriya jumped Todoroki because it had all seemed playful, but then Bakugou came back and got involved. And then Kamenari tried to get involved.

“Come on, man, calm down. No one here controls anyone, right?”

Bakugou turned on him, ready to exact justice both for earlier and for his current stupid fuck ass comment, when the classroom door opened again. Bakugou whirled around, thwarted again, to shout ‘WHAT?’ only for Principal Nezu to give his student the most threatening, beady-eyed stare a bear-rat creature could give. Surprisingly, Bakugou hunched his shoulders in a sulk and walked back toward his seat, silent.

“Well, it seems the police are all done with you for today. If you would, please keep the day’s events to yourselves and each other. This is an open investigation as we try to figure out the identities, location, and purpose behind the villain attack today.” The students nodded their heads and shuffled around on the floor. “You are all free to leave now. Be safe on your way home. I would suggest walking together. Safety in numbers!”

Class 1-A moved to put their desks back in place, grab their things, and head out of their classroom.

“Oh, and Mr. Midoriya, could you come with me to the faculty lounge? There are a few things we
need to discuss.”

Izuku nodded his head, having expected that he would need to discuss what happened with either Mr. Aizawa or the principal. He waved Uraraka and Iida off; he would walk home on his own. They nodded their heads, Uraraka giving him an encouraging smile and a thumbs-up, as Izuku left his backpack with his desk. Popsicle was currently curled around his neck in snake-form, trying to heal non-existent wounds. The pressure of his head against Izuku’s collarbone was comforting, although he much preferred the warmth of being on Kirishima’s lap earlier. He doubted his teachers would allow him to drag Kirishima around to act as a couch, though. They seemed to have weird issues about him touching other students. Present Mic kept getting onto Izuku for nuzzling Kacchan during class. He wondered what their problem was. Kacchan was fine with it. Well, sort of. He didn’t stop Izuku.

There was a new person in the faculty lounge, compared to Izuku’s previous conversation with the principal and his homeroom teacher.

“Young Midoriya, I heard from a friend of mine on the police force that you blamed yourself for not being able to predict the attack today, and for causing me to not be at the scene of the attack. I wanted you to know that the fault was all my own, not yours. My decision to stay back at the campus had little to do with your premonition and more to do with one of my own secrets.” All Might was even larger in a room like this, where his figure stood at three or four times the height of the coffee table. His smile was blinding, his blonde hair streaking upwards in defiance of gravity or any other law of physics.

“I tell you this now, so you can understand my ability to keep secrets from society. I… am weakening.” Izuku stood in front of the coffee table, not breathing, not moving an inch. What was his teacher talking about? And why was he telling him? "A fatal wound has destroyed my lungs to the point where I can only use my power for roughly four hours a day, and I spent too many hours helping the public this morning to teach. I stayed back at the campus to reserve the last of my strength, and for that I must apologize.” All Might seemed to bow his head, and Izuku's eyes went wide as the pro-hero continued in a softer voice. "If I had been more careful, more cautious, and saved my power, then I would have been there to protect you and your classmates this afternoon. The fault… is all my own.”

That was all a lot to take in. All Might having been severely wounded, being weakened, unable to act as a hero 24/7... that was a lot to take in. And then All Might deflated, smoke surrounding his body similar to earlier, as he hacked out blood into his fist. In his place, a gaunt emaciated man stood. This figure was almost as tall as All Might, but his eyes were sunken in and he looked ready to blow over any second. Izuku felt shivers running down his arms as he fought the urge to scream, the transformation sudden and jarring.

“This is my true form. It is a secret I hide from the public, but from my conversation with Nezu just now, I think you know the importance of hiding some truths from the world. Isn’t that so?”

The shivers on his arms returned in full force, and Izuku found himself stammering and nervous. What exactly had he been discussing with the principal before Izuku came in? Izuku bit his lips and took a step toward his teacher. “Wh-why are you telling me this? Showing… me.”

All Might walked over toward Izuku and put one of his large hands on Izuku’s shoulders. He was even taller from this angle, almost twice as tall as Izuku. He hadn't felt so small in years.

“All I am sharing this secret with you because your principal shared yours with me. It is only fair that we understand each other, if we are to prevent any more harm from coming to your classmates… or to you.” All Might's voice was kind and strong, even in this form.
Izuku tried not to tear up. One of his childhood heroes want to protect him? On the other hand, Izuku gulped, All Might knew one of his secrets. “To... me?”

All Might nodded and lowered himself to one knee, hand still on Izuku's shoulder. “Young Midoriya, I need you to answer me truthfully.”

Izuku nodded in acquiescence, hesitant but unwilling to deny the pro-hero much of anything in this moment.

“Are you in trouble...” Izuku looked at All Might strangely. Trouble? “...from demons?” Shit fucking crapbaskets.

What followed was a conversation that Izuku was very sure he wanted to forget. Screw what he had admitted to or not admitted to Principal Nezu the day before. This was insane. All Might kept talking about how dangerous the demons that appeared earlier were, how if those demons were after him than certain pro-heroes could be counted on to help him. There was something that existed, apparently—a crisis line for those in danger from magical and mystical entities. It worked much like calling the police, but it was headed up by a hero agency that was run by a vampire. Most of the heroes and sidekicks who worked there were either creatures themselves or were humans with more esoteric quirks. ‘That is where the other witch from U.A. interned,’ Principal Nezu had added. On top of that, certain pro-heroes—including All Might—had interacted with this agency, although they only had surface knowledge of demons and had been encouraged not to ask any more questions or look into any of that society’s creatures further.

By the end of the conversation, Izuku felt caught in a strange mix of anger, betrayal, fear, and... comfort? Izuku had been appeased the other day, when Principal Nezu and Mr. Aizawa discussed his abilities and his magic, because he had assumed neither teacher would discuss his magic, his familiar, or his fear of demons with anyone else. And sure, All Might had shown up after the villains had left and defeated the four demons that had shown up, making it so Izuku didn’t have to use his abilities to get rid of them. But... Izuku was torn. All Might still didn’t have the right to discuss magic and demons with him so casually. It had been nice of him to share a secret for a secret and show Izuku his frail form, but Izuku still didn’t trust him. He didn’t trust him, and he couldn’t talk about these things, and he’d already endangered too many of his classmates earlier when the demons came to USJ.

And, what, now there was suddenly a phone number he could call if demons appeared? Where was that phone line when he was a kid, and he and his mom were on the run? Where was that phone line when the demon attacked him and Kacchan? Where was it when the werewolves were being attacked, or the tengu were in danger from humans on their lands, or any of the number of things that Izuku and his mom had to solve because there was no one else?

But at the same time, if it was true... then Izuku would have a place where he could belong. He could work at a hero agency that both allowed him to be a hero and solve magical problems. Izuku would be able to combine the separate parts of his life that his mom had made him promise to always keep separated. Were they trustworthy? Who was the vampire in charge of the agency? How old was he? Was he a neophyte or an elder? Was it even a he? How were people like Izuku’s mom supposed to know about the agency in order to call it for help? Why had he never heard of it before now? Everything about it sounded suspicious, somewhere between ‘too good to be true’ and ‘they’re the ones that erase your memories.’ Izuku shivered, hoping it wasn’t the latter.

By the end of the conversation, Izuku was curled up on the floor next to Aizawa’s feet as his teacher sat on the couch, hand on Izuku's head. The physical contact with his pack leader was probably the only stabilizing force stopping him from freaking out, as he drew comfort from the warmth of the
hand. Recovery Girl had been able to heal Mr. Aizawa’s arm and other minor injuries easily, so he wasn’t currently covered in any bandages, like Todoroki. Izuku tightened his arms around his knees, which were pressed to his chest. He hadn’t been able to look at Principal Nezu or All Might for the second half of the conversation, ever since they started mentioning the strange pro-hero agency for the supernatural. Izuku felt like throwing up.

There was a tug at his hair. He looked up to see Mr. Aizawa’s piercing gaze directed at Izuku.

“All of that aside, there is something we need to ask you.” Izuku nodded, hesitant. “Your ability today… you were able to predict the attack, even if you didn’t know where it would be or when. You mentioned doing this once before.” The door opened on the other side of the room. “How far does your precognitive ability go?”

A soft gasp was heard from the doorway, and Izuku slowly turned, afraid of what he would see. His mother was standing there next to Present Mic, hands over her mouth as she stared at Izuku. She didn’t have to say anything for Izuku to know what she was thinking—’what have you done?’—nor was he sure how to answer the unspoken question. He hadn’t done anything; he hadn’t said anything about his powers, except maybe mentioning a couple of physical enhancements that his familiar could give him; he hadn’t actually revealed their secrets. Principal Nezu was just a genius, and Mr. Aizawa was his pack leader who already knew about the supernatural, and All Might had, uh, fought demons or something, once?

“Izuku, come on, sweetie, it’s time to head home.” His mom stood at the doorway next to Present Mic, hand outstretched toward Izuku, and Izuku knew what was coming (he knew he knew), but he still hoped she wouldn’t continue. “You need to pack.”

The final ball fell, Izuku’s new world ending with the one word that served as the Midoriya household code for: We’re going to leave and burn the house down and never look back. It typically also meant: Izuku, you’ve exposed too much, and they’re going to come for us if we don’t disappear. Same thing, really.

But Izuku didn’t want to leave. He had a new life here, acquaintances that were becoming friends, friends that were becoming pack, a pack leader to protect him… and sure, there was danger. There was always danger. His mom didn’t even know about the villain attack or the demons or the way All Might and Mr. Aizawa saved him. And now there was a hero agency that dealt with supernatural problems that he might be able to join someday, and she just—wanted them to leave? Again?

“Mom… we don’t have to run away anymore.” Mr. Aizawa’s leg stiffened behind him, the grip on his hair tightening. Izuku smiled shakily at his mother, trying to seem certain. “It’s going to be fine.”

His mother knelt to the floor of the doorway, still not entering the room. The hum of the refrigerator once again loud in the silence. Izuku was really starting to hate that refrigerator. “Izuku… you don’t want to endanger your friends, do you?” She reached out her hand again. “It’s time to head home. You need to pack.”

The hand on Izuku’s head shifted to his shoulder, squeezing in consolation. All Might’s emaciated figure stood on the other side of the table, unsure whether to say anything. Principal Nezu turned from his position on the couch to glance between Izuku and his mother, eyes assessing.

“Mom… they already knew. About… them.” The curse was still active, so he couldn’t say ‘demons’; but Izuku knew his mom would be able to interpret his words. Of course, so could Principal Nezu.

The principal crawled forward on the couch toward the table to put down his empty mug, before
sitting on the couch edge and staring calmly at the doorway. “Mrs. Midoriya, I assure you that this
campus is one of the safest places for your son.” Ironic, considering the events that happened earlier,
but Izuku still agreed.

His mother dropped her hand, settling both palms on her thighs, and stared calmly at the principal.
Much more calmly that Izuku was capable of. “I won’t argue with you. I know Izuku trusts your
school’s barriers. But my son being on this campus is not what worries me.”

“Mom…” Izuku wasn’t crying. He wasn’t.

“My son worries me. He does not always know where to stop,” she shifted her gaze back toward
Izuku, “or when to let things be.”

Izuku couldn’t take it anymore, turning toward Mr. Aizawa and placing a hand on his leg. “She
thinks if anyone knows... that they’ll come for me. Find us. Kill us.”

Mr. Aizawa remained silent, eyes calmly taking in the way wet tears began tracking their way down
Izuku’s cheeks, before Principal Nezu spoke up again. “Why would you think your son is in more
danger from these people than other witches who have come through U.A.? He is not the first to
enter our school, and he would not be the first to graduate.”

His mother shook her head, mouth a firm line, and stared the principal down. “You are not my
superior, and I have no cause to answer you.” It was the most Izuku had ever heard his mother stand
up for herself, in his life. Of course, he would have preferred it to happen about some other subject.

Mr. Aizawa spoke up from behind Izuku, his hand still offering Izuku his support as his teacher
leaned forward on the couch. “Mrs. Midoriya, you have my promise that we will do whatever we
have to do in order to protect your son.”

His mother’s eyes narrowed, her chin tilting up. She was across the room and on the floor, but she
still seemed equal to his teacher, matching strength for strength. Izuku’s respect for his mother raised
another notch. “And what use would you be? You’re Eraserhead, aren’t you? Izuku’s looked up to
you since he was a child. He’s told me of your quirk, the ability to render other people quirkless for a
short time. It’s a very useful ability for a pro-hero. However, it does nothing against demons, does it?
The threats my son faces are the only ones, I think, that you couldn’t protect him against.” His
mother took a deep breath, mouth firming again, before summing up her observations into a cruel
tagline. “You’re a useless pack leader for him.”

Izuku was incredulous. “Mom, you have no right to say that! I chose him! He agreed!”

His mother rounded her firm gaze on her son. “His quirk would not work against demons!”

Izuku shook his head, adamant, refusing to budge. “That doesn’t mean he wouldn’t protect me! Just
today, mom, there were this tentacle one that showed up during an exercise. Mr. Aizawa captured its
tentacles before it could hurt me… he saved me! He’s not useless. He’s a hero!”

If Izuku had been looking behind him, he would have seen Aizawa’s cheeks flush for the first time in
half a decade. His teacher’s voice remained bland and soft, but there was an undercurrent of steel.
“Mrs. Midoriya… I may not be part of your world, and I may not understand some of the customs
that Izuku was raised with, but I am a pro-hero who has had dealings with demons before. If
anything, my quirk makes me more likely to be able to tell if his enemies are quirk-users or
supernatural. And besides that, I have already given your son my promise that I will protect him. He
is…” Aizawa paused, debating what word to use. What was Mr. Midoriya? Was he just a student, a
member of his homeroom class, a boy with talent that Aizawa wanted to see strengthened? That
wasn’t what Aizawa was to the Midoriya, though. The boy considered him more, and he’d agreed to try. “He is part of my pack.”

Izuku relaxed against his teacher’s knee, tears in his eyes, grateful and happy but still scared. He didn’t want this to be taken away. *He was part of a pack again, after all this time. Mom, please let him stay. He’d do whatever he had to do. He would be good. He would keep their secrets safe. He just wanted to be allowed to stay.*

Aizawa continued. “I don’t know what particular perils the both of you face or why you are so paranoid for his wellbeing, but I promise you that I will help you in any way I can. However, in order to do that, I need to know what the situation is.”

His mother switched her gaze from Aizawa to her son, slightly mollified, still afraid, needing to understand. “Izuku, what do they know?”

Izuku wiped at his eyes and took a deep breath, thinking where to begin, hoping there was still a way to salvage his highschool career at U.A. *Hadn’t his first conversation with his teachers about this sort of thing been yesterday?* “The principal guessed about my ability, both parts, so I told them about Popsicle and what he can do. Then today… my class was attacked by villains, and I-I lost control, and four of *them* appeared.”

His mother braced herself, looking down. “Was anyone hurt?”

Izuku shook his head. “Only villains.” He paused, trying to think of a way to sway her. “But mom… Mr. Aizawa promised to help me keep the secret safe, to find a way to hide my abilities and still become a hero. That’s all I want to be, mom. I just…”

“You just want to save people. You always have.” His mother sighed, tearing her gaze away from Izuku to stare at her lap once more, shoulders hunching as though in defeat. “Izuku… if you promise to, uh, to not spread this to anyone else, then you can stay.”

Izuku’s cheeks flushed as he nodded his agreement. His mother then raised her head to stare at Aizawa. “And you… you will protect my son and be the pack leader he deserves. But you should know…” she trailed off, considering whether to mention it. *He needed to know, if he was going to be Izuku’s new pack leader.* “His last pack leader died saving him, so you have to promise me…” she paused to take in a shaky breath, her voice weakening, tears entering her eyes as she bowed to the floor—*like a normal Japanese person, thought Aizawa, why the hell didn’t her son learn those manners—*“...that you won’t die, trying to save him. He looks up to you; he always has. So please… don’t make him live with that guilt again.”

And that was the story of how Izuku Midoriya, age 15, became a member of his second pack. Of course, more happened afterward. Everyone realized Present Mic heard the whole thing, but he was apparently Mr. Aizawa’s roommate, so that was somehow considered fine. All Might didn’t mention his name but let Inko Midoriya know that he had encountered demons before and would keep their secret safe. Principal Nezu explained how he knew about much of the supernatural world while Izuku sat curled into a grateful ball, hands clasped against Mr. Aizawa’s pants, smiling. The day had started out strange before turning terrible, then horrific, then happy, then frightening; but it had ended up like this. Izuku Midoriya, age 15, finally allowed to have a home with a pack leader who both supported him, was willing to hide his secrets, and help make him into the hero he dreamed of being. And Izuku also had a mouse-bear, a not-banshee, and a wounded Symbol of Peace to help protect him while he tried to find his way in this new world he had created for himself.

Speaking of… he should probably try to do something about that lung wound All Might mentioned. If the wound was the only thing preventing him from being there to save the day and keep the school
safe, then Izuku might have just the thing. *Mr. Aizawa would probably be willing to slip it into his tea, right?*

Chapter End Notes

Once again, this is self-beta'd. I had more than a bit of trouble figuring out where to end it. I didn't want to leave you on a sad note post-USJ, so I put in some POV switches and class bonding. Then Principal Nezu walked in, all shit went to hell, and everything came back hunky dory. Hope that's okay.

Let me know what you did/didn't like! I tried to keep everyone in character, but All Might kept surprising me near the end. He just doesn't know when to shut up, sometimes.
Everyone Has Their Own Processing Mechanisms

Chapter Summary

Following the USJ attack, Izuku freaks out at home while Shigaraki and Aizawa have internal debates. Oh yeah, and Izuku's magical life starts affecting his normal life, and his classmates really need to stop freaking out about it.

I'm not even sure the Dekubowl is subtle in this chapter, but Hitoshi and Bakugou fans should be happy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Halfway home, it occurred to Izuku that this was the first time since he was a child that he had walked home from school with his mother. That shouldn't surprise him since Izuku hadn’t been to school since he was five years old, but it was still a melancholy thought. The silence between the two of them only enhanced this. Izuku tried several times to strike up a conversation, only for it to fall flat, two words tumbling out of his mouth before trailing into silence. His mother wasn’t much better, filling the silence with sad smiles and shakes of her head, a worried look in her eyes, long bouts of distant stares that had her tripping over her feet when she remembered where she was and when.

The apartment seemed somehow much smaller after the events at the USJ, fragile and old and worn. His mother set about making some green tea, cooking white rice, pulling out leftover salmon and pickled veggies. Izuku tried to take a warm shower so that he could feel his limbs, but his skin turned red and began stinging long before he felt like he had any more control over his fingers. He felt numb. Today had seemed to last both an eternity and no time at all.

He heard his mother’s voice calling him into the kitchen.

Izuku Midoriya had always had a close relationship with his mother. For every moment that they were creating a protection ward, hunting down lost possessions, or enchanting objects, Izuku and his mother had another moment spent staring at the stars in silence or laughing over meals or chasing each other through the woods. They would travel through forests and forage wild plants, build blessed mudpies for nature spirits, and skip stones across a lake. If Izuku had stayed in Mustafu, he probably would have done most of these things with Kacchan; but since they were always moving somewhere new, Izuku spent most of his time either alone or with his mother.

She had taught him almost everything he knew about magic. The rest had been gleamed from ancestors’ journals and what little oral knowledge was passed along through magical creature clans. Most of the rituals that Izuku practiced in connection with the moon were from his time with the wolves, for obvious reasons, and even those he rarely used. It was difficult to commune with nature under the full moon when you lived in an apartment complex, surrounded by concrete and glass. Izuku missed it sometimes, the wind carrying leaves right outside your door, the river only a short run away, stone circles that could be called upon for energy, and the feel of the earth beneath his fingertips. Being a witch was much easier when you lived in solitude, surrounded only by nature and the land.

Of course, being that far from everything else carried its own dangers. Izuku supposed that was why
there were so few witches around anymore. Most lived in exile, only traveling to cities or to visit magical creatures on rare occasions; and eventually, they caught something’s attention while they were out there alone, and they disappeared.

Izuku was glad his mom lived with him. He wouldn’t trust her to be safe on her own. She didn’t have an offensive quirk or power. Her quirk allowed her to move small objects toward her, and her witch power allowed her to levitate and, to a certain extent, fly very slowly—neither of which were good for fighting or for running away. He had been thankful when Popsicle agreed to be left at home while Izuku went to U.A. because it meant that Popsicle, at least, could protect her if something were to happen. Maybe he was just being paranoid, but he felt distinctly less sure of her safety now that Popsicle was going to be joining him at school.

His mother called for him again, and Izuku sighed, toweling off his wet curls. He put the towel back in the bathroom to dry and headed for the kitchen, despite a lack of appetite and an exhaustion that felt settled deep in his bones. He flexed his fingers, hoping to be able to feel them. He still felt numb. He couldn’t shake it, this need to grasp and feel. He wished Kacchan were here, or Kirishima. If Mr. Aizawa were here, would he let Izuku sit by his legs and gain strength from him? Izuku could still feel his teacher’s powerful calves next to his back from their discussion in the faculty lounge earlier. He had felt safer there. Izuku wished he felt safe, now, in his own home. They had protection wards set up around the place, but today something about the stains on the walls and the creaks of the floorboards made it seem like everything here was just waiting to fall apart. He hoped that wasn’t a premonition.

Izuku shook his head and tried to focus.

He walked into the kitchen, still flexing his hand, and looked to see his mom pouring green tea over the rice. She looked contemplative, but he didn’t really feel like talking. He wondered how long she had been waiting. “I’m sorry, mom. I don’t really, uh, feel good.”

His mother smiled over at him as they both carried a bowl to the living area, the cardboard box that served as their table now sporting a tablecloth she had found on sale. It was white with yellow flowers, and Inko had thought it looked cheerful. “I know I shouldn’t push. From what you said earlier, a lot happened for you today, didn’t it?”

Izuku sighed as he settled into a cross-legged position on the rug. He was silent for a second as he fiddled with his chopsticks. “You could say that, yeah.”

Inko let her son stew in silence for a while as they both broke apart the salmon in their bowls and mixed it with the rice. Izuku hadn’t been this quiet in months. He was generally a very positive and agreeable boy, with a penchant for going on tangents about new things he had learned or seen or wanted to do. He only became silent like this after more severe attacks—typically by demons, although there had been that one up-and-coming villain at the market.

Inko sighed, still stirring around the contents of her bowl. “I’m ready to hear about it, whenever you want to talk. I won’t push you. I just…” She raised her eyes to look at her son again, his mouth pinched at the corners. He looked so tired and alone. It broke her heart. “I just need to know one thing, sweetheart.”

“Hmmm?”

“You said there were both demons and villains there, earlier.”

“Yeah.”
Inko hummed, pressing her lips and debating. “I know why the demons probably appeared. I just want to know… did you use that power again?”

Izuku nibbled at his lips between bites of rice. “Yes.”

Inko had figured that, but being certain didn’t make her worry less. “Did anyone see?”

Izuku hesitated and thought back. He’d only paused time after he had that horrible vision, but he didn’t think it had been paused for long. Nothing had moved severely during those few seconds, except for demons appearing, so he doubted anyone besides himself had understood what he had done. Mr. Aizawa hadn’t even mentioned it. “I… I’m not sure. I mean, it was only for a few seconds, and then I got scared and it started back. I think… if anyone saw anything, it would just have been the demons appearing? There wasn’t anyone there who could sense magic, that I know of.”

Inko smiled and sighed in relief, her shoulders slumping as she took a sip of tea. “Well, small mercies then.”

There was silence. Izuku could hear someone in the hallway jangling their keys, opening a door, and entering their apartment. A car drove by, the wind blew, and everything seemed still.

His mother was the first to break the silence. “Izuku, I… I’m so glad you’re alright. Earlier, I felt… it felt like you were in danger. I didn’t know if it was just one of your exercises at school, but I had this feeling like… like I needed to get to your school and get you out of there.” She paused, biting her lip. “I’ve never felt like that before.”

His mother sounded shaken, and Izuku felt guilty. It wasn’t exactly his fault that he had been put in danger, but he had chosen a career and high school where such things were likely to happen more often, especially in the future. Still, Izuku found himself smiling in a small bit of irony. “To be fair, you’re usually nearby when I’m in danger.”

That was true enough. Inko nodded and straightened her back, willing her heart to be made of rock or steel, something tougher that wouldn’t shake or bleed when she worried for her son. “I suppose it’s something I will need to get used to, then.”

The next bout of silence didn’t last as long, Izuku’s guilty conscience crumbling under the weight of the day. His mom shouldn’t have to get used to things like this. Students should be safer at U.A., and everything else had been Izuku’s fault. The villains came for All Might, but the demons came for him. Before Izuku knew it, the dam on his emotions was breaking again; but this time, Kirishima wasn’t there to hold him. He wanted his pack again. His fingers clenched onto his pants; his bowl lay abandoned on the box, the submerged rice reminding him of shattered ice and that creature’s intestines on the floor.

Izuku’s numb fingers were shaking, and he couldn’t seem to make them stop. “Mom, I… I’m sorry. For losing control. I didn’t… I saw something, and I freaked out, an-and it was my fault that the demons appeared. I mean, I guess one of the demons kind of saved us by eating a villain, but that was… Mom, it killed him. It killed him, and it’s my fault, but I still can’t help but feel glad because it saved us. Mr. Aizawa couldn’t defeat that villain, and neither Kacchan’s or Kirishima’s quirks were doing anything… but then the demons also put my pack in danger. One of them flung Kacchan through the air, and I was… I was so afraid…”

Izuku ground his teeth together to prevent himself from talking more. He was over this. It had happened hours ago, and he’d calmed down on the bus when he’d been surrounded by Kacchan and Kirishima; he should be fine. He needed to get over this and move on, and do better next time. He
needed to make sure he wouldn’t freak out and pause time the next moment he had a bad premonition, at least not before attempting to put up a protection circle.

His mother abandoned her meal and slid over to console him, hushing him as she petted his hair and ran her nose against his temple. He slumped as she pressed her forehead against the side of his hair. “Everything is fine now, Izuku. Everything is fine.”

Izuku bit his lip and tried to focus on his breathing. “I’m sorry, Mom.”

The hand on his hair paused before resuming, her other arm moving to embrace his shoulder. “You don’t need to be. I know you, Izuku. You did the best you could, didn’t you?”

Izuku shook his head. He had, but—

“It wasn’t enough. I thought… I thought I could just fight villains with my physical abilities and only use my power to blast the ground or a wall or something. But it’s not enough, and I… I need to be able to use my power any time and not only after I’ve spent several seconds prepping the area.”

Inko hummed against her son’s hair, debating for a few seconds before scooting back to look him in the eyes. “Izuku… since your, uh, principal already knows about what we are, I was thinking of proposing to him that we set up protective wards around the school. That way, you could use your abilities anytime you are on campus. If villains or demons or whatever else that would endanger you comes to your school, you would be able to defend yourself without hesitation. Does that… does that sound like something you would like me to do?”

Izuku’s sudden nodding dislodged her hand, his voice growing more excited as he considered the possibilities. “Yes, yes definitely. I… I could help you set the wards up, do two or three layers just in case?”

Inko laughed and moved her bowl closer to her, relaxing back on her knees. “That sounds like a plan to me, then… so don’t worry, Izuku. We’ll make sure nothing like this ever happens again.”

Izuku’s posture relaxed as he nibbled at his lips in thought, his index finger rubbing at the edge of his lower lip. “There was this one villain who could teleport. He created these… portals? They looked like a dark purple mist that swirled in the air.”

Inko nodded. That would be a bit more complicated than a normal circle ward or stone sigils. “Hm… creating wards against teleporting is difficult, but… I suppose if you would be willing to cast some of the older wards? The sigils are complex, and they would need a good deal of blood, so it would be difficult to do on my own…”

Izuku shook his head. Whatever it took for the school to be safe from that one villain, he would find a way. “If it keeps the school safe and helps me cast magic, I’ll do it.”

Inko smiled at her son’s enthusiasm. She knew what she would be helping him research over the weekend. “Then I’ll call your principal tomorrow. For now, just focus on finishing your rice and getting ready for bed. You don’t have to save the world for another night.”

Considering his enthusiasm a few moments earlier, Izuku’s nod was more hesitant than Inko would have preferred. “Our wards are safe, right?”

Ah, so that was it. “I will double check them after I put away the dishes,” Inko said, hoping to ease his fears. He deserved to rest as peacefully as he could tonight, and she would set up more wards if she had to. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. The day was long, but the night is here.”

Izuku smiled and finished the saying for her. “And the night is where we are free.”
Izuku finished his rice and cleaned his bowl before brushing his teeth and heading to bed. As he waited for his mom to join him, Izuku filled out his journal on the day’s events. He hadn’t met anything like that tentacle demon before; it had been terrifying. He couldn’t remember how many tentacles it had, but it was definitely a weird purple color with scales and three tongues and… how many eyes? Eugh, that thing was gross looking.

He made sure to note that it was able to bite that villain with an exposed brain in half and eat it within seconds. Neither Mr. Aizawa, Kacchan, or Kirishima had been able to hurt the creature, but a single bite from the demon had done him in. That was definitely not good, especially considering All Might had punched the demon away to somewhere unknown. Next time Izuku met it, he would have a binding spell prepared.

Though he might need to find a larger action figure...

Once the journal entry was completed, Izuku laid down in his pallet and waited for his mom. A few minutes later, she had turned off the lights and crawled onto her pallet on the other side of the room. Izuku debated with himself for a couple seconds before crawling over with his blanket to join her. He tugged his covers over both of them and curled up next to her arm. It didn’t feel as comforting as Kacchan’s bed, but it would do for now. He didn’t know when he’d get to have a pack pile again.

Figuring his mother was still awake, Izuku nuzzled her arm with his nose. “I got to sleep like this with Kacchan last night.”

“Hmmm, Mitsuki mentioned you fell asleep,” Inko murmured. “Did you share a bed?”

Izuku smiled and pulled the blanket up closer to his nose. “Yeah, it was nice. Fel’ like pack.” He yawned halfway through the sentence.

Inko freed one of her arms and started drowsily playing with her son’s hair; it was always so unruly. “Does anyone else feel like pack?”

Izuku nodded, yawning again. “Mmm-hmm, Kirishima. He’s got red hair an’ poin’y teeth. He’s warm an’ smells good.”

His mother’s answering grin was fond, if a bit droopy. “Well, feel free to spend the night whenever they’re comfortable. It helps you, doesn’t it?”

“Mmmm, pack, warmth…” Izuku sighed, missing his friends once again. “Wish they were here.”

Inko patted her son’s head before moving her arm back under the covers. “I hope you find more pack soon, sweetheart.” She yawned. “You deserve that happiness.”

Izuku nuzzled his face into the blanket, contemplating his classmates and potential friendships with a sleepy mind. “Can birds be pack?”

“Birds?”

Izuku nodded beneath the blanket, which tickled his nose. He scrunched his face to relieve the itch. “Have a friend, he’s part bird. He’s got a cool familiar, and they’re both warm.”

Inko laughed to herself as her son summed up what were apparently the most important parts of this new friend of his. He had always loved warm things. It was likely his main reasoning for loving pack piles as much as he did. “As long as he’s open to the idea of a pack, I don’t see why not. Now shhhhh, Izuku, try to go to sleep. The day was long, but the night is here.”
Izuku nodded back as he drifted off. “Mmmmh, an’ we’re free.”

That same night, at an undisclosed location, in what Izuku would have recognized as the bar from his nightmares, Shigaraki lay slumped against a bartop, ranting about the unfairness of the day. Sensei had told him that All Might would be present and weakened at the USJ; he had offered the Nomu to Shigaraki in order to kill him. Instead, All Might hadn’t been there, only Eraserhead and Cementoss and that Thirteen hero, as well as a group of lambs lead to the slaughter.

Or it was meant to be a slaughter, at least. Something Shigaraki hoped would take All Might down a peg, something to make him realize that he had always and would always fail to protect the innocent. Instead, the students had been absurdly talented with their quirks, and Cementoss had lived up to his name as a hero and put up barricades and bridges to save more than one of the student groups, resulting in zero casualties among the students. Zero.

Shigaraki scratched at his neck compulsively, feeling the need to touch, to grab, to steal. To disintegrate.

When he’d first arrived back at his hideout, Shigaraki had laid on the floor bleeding through bullet wounds. Villainy didn’t tend to attract healer-type quirks, so Shigaraki had to make do with Kurogiri’s unexplained field medic skills. He remembered telling Sensei that the Nomu had been defeated by some other creature that had appeared at the USJ, bitten in half and eaten. Shigaraki had seen it with his own eyes. It should have been impossible to bisect the Nomu, never mind completely consuming it before his pet could regenerate.

And All Might hadn’t even appeared until the end! He just showed up and punched that creature away like it was nothing, the thing that had eaten his Nomu suddenly gone. Would his pet have won? Was All Might weakened? They hadn’t even the chance to find out before the rest of the pro-heroes showed up. Those annoying pro-heroes, trying to live up to their names. Shigaraki hated them.

“Tell me again about the boy.” Sensei’s voice had been quiet for longer than Shigaraki wanted. The crackle of his voice over the screen sent pleasant shivers down Shigaraki’s spine. Sensei, his Sensei… no, he hadn’t been wrong. Right, Father?

Shigaraki began muttering as he stared at the bottles on the walls. “He had his hood up and a mask, but I could still see freckles. Yes… dark green curls, green eyes. He brought the demons.”

His Sensei hummed before trailing off into silence. “I trust you to know what demons feel like, but it is peculiar. Do you think the child has the ability to summon demons?”

Shigaraki was silent for a minute, scratching at his neck, peeling his fingers away only for them to continue twitching in mid-air. He hated getting shot. The bullet wounds felt like burning holes on his body, and he couldn’t use his left hand to scratch yet. That Snipe hero just had to aim for his hand…

Not a quirk. A witch.

The knowledge was clear as day, a bludgeoning force that forced a smile and a crazed laugh onto Shigaraki’s face. “Sensei…” Shigaraki turned around to face the screen, hand still raised and
twitching beside him. “I think I found a witch.”

“A witch… are you sure? You said it was a boy.”

“He tried to use his abilities, and then the demons came. That’s it. That has to be it!” Shigaraki’s grin grew wider as her turned his stare toward Kurogiri. “I want him, Kurogiri. I want him here!”

The voice on the screen crackled before smoothing out. “Be cautious. You don’t know what his active power is yet.”

Shigaraki lowered his right hand so that his fingernails could scratch at the surface of the bar, scratching down, again, again. He flexed his fingers and watched them move, his eyes glazing over as he imagined it. If the boy was brought here, they could make him hunt down other supernaturals. Hunt them, steal from them, make them work for him. “I want him…” Shigaraki murmured before pausing and remembering with a wide grin. “I told him I would see him soon.”

Kurogiri interrupted, attempting to be the voice of reason. “Shigaraki, if we do manage to bring him here and he summons more of these demons, we would need a way to stop them from hurting us. Why would you want someone that dangerous here? Surely we are better off without him.”

The screen crackled to life again. “Witches are not something to be trifled with. Even young, he likely has significant training, especially if he is at U.A. He would not be there if he couldn’t control his powers.”

Shigaraki shook his head back and forth in denial. He raised his right hand to scratch at his neck, head tilted backward as he ranted aloud. “If he could control them, he wouldn’t have summoned demons, would he? They didn’t just hurt the Nomu. They hurt his classmates. What kind of little hero-to-be summons demons that hurt his friends, hmmm? And his active power can’t be anything too strong, or he would have used it after exposing himself already. But he didn't do a thing. He just stood there.”

An electronic sigh seemed to come from the screen. “If you are this interested, then I will search for information about him. Perhaps he has abilities registered as a quirk. Otherwise, he wouldn’t be able to use them for hero work.”

Shigaraki leaned his head closer to the bar, staring at the severed hand on his arm in thought. “Father, what do you think? Can we use his power? Can we use him? I want to play with him.” A witch a witch a witch. A witch could help them do so many things. Young ones could be convinced to turn, couldn’t they? Make him use his powers for selfish reasons, and his powers would corrupt him. “Right, Father? We can make him ours…”

The voice on the screen interrupted his mutterings. “Until you have the witch here, you should begin gathering a new group together. Your previous alliance relied on numbers, not strength; but those numbers failed you in a fight against mere children. You need to search for companions who are efficient killers, ones who can stand by your side and not fail against pro-heroes. Then next time, you will show the world the true horror of your existence, and they will know fear.”

Shigaraki nodded, his cheek brushing against the wood of the countertop, two of his fingernails moving to scratch at the surface again. “Yes, Sensei. Father… I will not let either of you down.”
Due to the attack on the USJ, the school had canceled classes for the next day, giving the students a three-day weekend. Ostensibly, the reasoning behind the canceled classes were increased police foot traffic on campus, the busy schedules of the pro-hero teachers that were chasing down leads, and the school administration trying to reinforce the school’s barriers. Izuku’s morning was spent explaining the whole sordid tale of Thursday’s events to his mother. In return, Inko promptly decided to take her son on a long weekend visit to the tengu tribe in the mountains.

All across Japan, Izuku and his mother had stayed with various tribes and people who had need of a witch’s services. Most often, this came in the form of protective wards (three guesses how Izuku became so adept at casting his own wards quickly), although there were other odd requests—like helping a young vampire girl who lived in a cave to walk around during the daytime, or helping a ghost find the grave of her now deceased son.

In return, he and his mom were granted sanctuary, a place to stay, a temporary home where wards had already been set in place. At a younger age, Izuku didn’t have as much control over his powers, accidentally pausing time when he was scared or blowing things up when he was angry. The pre-warded areas were particularly useful, as were the fact that the people they were helping already knew Izuku was a witch. Still, it was rare enough for a male witch to be born that they often received too many questions and too many stares.

There were two kinds of witches in the world: those who were born with active powers, and those who learned spells and prayed to gods or spirits to obtain powers. Witch bloodlines, however, were few and far between due to the amount of demons, creatures, and warlocks that sought to own or control a witch’s powers. Other magical species—vampires, werewolves, etc—had singular abilities with attributable downsides. But witches were granted special abilities in addition to their predilection for casting spells, scrying, and creating potions. As a magical package deal, a witch was a valuable addition to any tribe.

Inko Midoriya had never taught her son anything about potions largely because potions required ingredients, which were tricky to obtain and even more troublesome to cart around from location to location. Izuku had enough trouble when he was younger just controlling his powers. She had taught him how to scry, in part because two witches scrying were more powerful than one alone; and that was how they would find their next place to stay. That was also how she had found their current apartment—well, after Izuku helped get rid of the gremlins. Pesky creatures.

Of all the places they had stayed, however, Inko knew that only two held a special place in her son’s heart. They couldn’t return to the werewolf pack or the forests they called home; but the tengu would still be happy to welcome them for a time. And if her son was having trouble controlling his powers again, then they would be best suited to help him. The tengu were a species of bird-like humanoids who specialized in protecting sacred natural resources, in this case a specific mountain region, and were well-versed in various martial arts and illusions. Izuku had trained with them in judo, on and off, every time they would come to update the tengu’s wards. He also learned his best meditation practices here, which Inko was hoping would help with his current dilemma.

It had been a long, long time since Izuku last had a premonition like that. Sometimes, he would mumble in his sleep about dark things, worrisome images, signs that Inko could only hope were fantastical nightmares instead of future events. The last time he actually had a full-body premonition like this one, Inko was of the opinion that his reactions prior to the demons ambushing actually put them in more danger than if he had not anticipated them at all. Izuku had agreed, at the time, that Inko should place a binding spell on that part of his bond with his familiar, so that he wouldn’t have full-body premonitions like that again.
The spell must have worn off over time. Inko didn’t know how she felt about that; the power wasn’t necessarily a good thing. In fact, Inko had the worrisome sense that being able to predict danger would just make Izuku rush even faster into it. He didn’t always think before he acted, especially when he thought innocent people were in trouble.

All of these thoughts and worries coalesced into a single plan that Inko hoped would help her son with the fallout from the previous day. She would take Izuku for a three-day trip to visit the tengu, update the wards around the village, and have the tengu help Izuku meditate and control his power to pause time and manage the precognetic bond with his raven familiar. Of course, Inko wasn’t really able to call ahead to warn the tengu that they were coming, so she didn’t know the clusterfuck she was about to bring her son into… but all was well that ended well, she supposed. Izuku always seemed to enjoy getting to practice his powers in real-life situations, even if it made Inko hyperventilate and her heart seize up in her chest.

And how was she supposed to anticipate that the demons would have escaped police custody or had a scent-hounder among them that followed Izuku all the way to the mountains? And then the tengu felt threatened, as though Inko had meant to bring demons along for the journey, so Izuku had to fight in a tournament to restore the Midoriya honor in the tengu’s eyes… and all of that was on top of the tengu having other tribes over for some sort of meeting about strange disappearances.

Apparently, every tengu tribe across Japan had at least one of their members missing, some tribes having two or three. Inko had offered her and Izuku’s services to reinforce protection wards for each of the tribes, in case it was an outside danger. The leaders of all the tribes had agreed, and the resulting travel and subsequent ward creation and restoration had ended up taking the entire weekend.

Long story short, Inko was able to get her son away from the city and his worries about the USJ, but she didn’t think Izuku working through his problems by physically fighting in tournaments was exactly healthy. Not that her son was normal, of course—the tengu’s attempts to teach him proper etiquette notwithstanding—but Inko still hoped that someday her son would face traumatic events through the normal cycle of finding a safe place to recover, processing the trauma, and then moving to empower themselves. Fighting demons and judo masters did not count as healthy processing techniques in her mind. Nevertheless, Izuku had a smile on his face and some new training under his belt, so Inko supposed she shouldn’t complain.

Izuku was excited to spend another week with Kacchan, of course, although Inko had managed to tease out information about the rest of his classmates during the train ride to the mountains. He currently only seemed to view Kacchan and this Kirishima character as pack, in addition to his homeroom teacher, but she was sure that would change soon. Her Izuku could be such a bright light, sometimes; she just hoped the other teenagers could accept how much touch he needed in order to stay sane and happy.

“Shouta, what’s bothering you?” Hizashi had been staring at Aizawa Shouta’s unmoving form for the past ten minutes, and it was frankly becoming ridiculous. The man didn’t sleep enough as it was, and now he was wasting time better spent sleeping on staring at the wall instead. “Come on, you know I won’t leave you alone when you’re like this. Is it about the attack, your students, or both?”
Shouta lay slumped against their couch, staring at the television on the mantle, its black screen mocking him. His mind kept working in circles, starting at how he would begin class tomorrow morning and looping back to the attack on the USJ. One thought would lead to the next, and he couldn’t help but think about what it all meant. What it meant for the teachers. What it meant for the students. What it meant for the pro-hero industry in general. Aizawa sighed. “It isn’t supposed to be like this.”

“Like what?” Hizashi was being the annoying bane of Aizawa’s existence as usual, poking him in the arm and resting his chin on Shouta’s shoulder.

What a pest. What an annoying idiotic uncompromising wonderful pest.

Shouta shifted so that his back was to the armrest and his cheek was resting on the back of the couch. He looked at his friend, that goddamned stupid moustache, green eyes that refused to give up once he’d decided something was wrong. There was really no avoiding the conversation when he was like this. Hizashi was just going to have to put up with Shouta philosophizing, then.

Shouta closed his eyes, unsure where to begin. “Students are supposed to come in, bright-eyed and foolish. They’re supposed to get training and be thrown into the Sports Festival, where we show them what the real hero world is like. We make them compete against each other, work together only to fight to get to the top. We reward them for recklessness and self-disregard. We make it a game, and then they go on internships and gain field experience of what it actually means to be a hero. That’s how the system works. Hizashi, that’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“Shouta—”

“It’s not supposed to be like this. They aren’t supposed to be in danger because of us. We’re supposed to be pro-heroes, give them something to look up to, show them what they can be. We don’t throw them in a sea of villains and tell them to swim or die. Not at that age. Do you remember what we were like back then?” Shouta scoffed, opening his eyes to look at Hizashi. “We wouldn’t have been ready for that. We wouldn't have learned, yet, how to be ready.”

“None of them were seriously hurt, Shouta. Even Todoroki got healed up by Recovery Girl. You and Cementoss protected them. They’re kids. They’ll bounce back.” His friend’s eyes were full of compassion, his voice a surprising whisper. Hizashi didn’t do soft things, soft voices, soft sounds. He was loud and bright and glaring. Shouta didn’t know what to make of him when he was like this.

Aizawa shut his eyes again, a frustrated burning sensation pricking behind his eyelids as he ground his teeth together. “On Monday, I’m supposed to announce the Festival. But how am I supposed to tell them to go fight in a Sports Festival like their life depends on it, when they’ve faced something like this? How do I make them believe fighting each other is better than fighting together? Damn it, how do I explain it to Midoriya?”

Hizashi had been nodding along in understanding until that last part. “Wait, Midoriya? Why him?” Hizashi waited for Shouta to expound further, to no avail. Hizashi furrowed his brows, his moustache drooping downward in thought. “Is this a witch thing, a demon thing, or a pack thing?” Shouta sighed in response, which was an answer in and of itself. “Or a you-being-his-pack-leader thing, which by the way is still really confusing and kind of exciting and I’m surprised you agreed?”

“Kind of an all-the-above, I suppose,” Aizawa grimaced.

It was now Hizashi’s turn to flop backward to rest on the arm of the couch. He put a dramatic palm to his head, pretending to be overwhelmed by the drama. “Alright, so why is explaining the Sports Festival to Midoriya going to be a thing?”
Aizawa sighed, closing his eyes and massaging his temples. “How many of our students would you say grew up watching the U.A. Sports Festival on television?”

“Probably all of them.”

“Except him,” Aizawa pointed out.

“Ahhh… right, the traveling around, no schooling, no records thing.” Hizashi had heard Shouta rant about it once or ten times. “So you don’t think he’ll understand the competition aspect of it? Or won’t be prepared for the crowds?”

Shouta shook his head. “I don’t think he’ll be prepared for any of it. The first round is generally an obstacle course, but the only ones who pass that round are those that have a drive to come in first place. Tell Midoriya that winning will affect his grades, and he’ll strive to achieve. Tell him that it won’t hurt him academically, and I have a feeling he’ll try to help everyone else win.”

Hizashi used a thumb to smooth out his moustache while he stretched his legs out to bump Shouta’s. “But wouldn’t he want to get noticed by pro-heroes and their agencies? That’s the whole point of the games, for the students to show off what they can do and get recruited into internships that can become their first job postings.”

Shouta snorted and raised a finger to flick at Hizashi’s legs. “I’m not convinced Midoriya understands that pro-heroism is a job category. He probably thinks of it more as a calling that happens to need a license.”

Hizashi kicked back at Shouta’s hand. “And you’re not sure whether to persuade him otherwise. Because that’s precisely how you were.”

Shouta didn’t respond to his friend’s jab. “I don’t know whether it’s a good idea for him to try to win. He doesn’t want to be in the spotlight. Needing a job after school is one thing, but there is an agency that would take him in if they knew what he was. He doesn’t need to prove anything. At the same time, it would be a disservice to his ambition and talent if I told him to lay low.”

The furrow in Aizawa’s brow spoke volumes. Shouta didn’t do emotion, not typically. He kept his face expressionless, his eyes a hooded stare. It was part of his image. Sure, at the apartment, Shouta let himself go more; he smiled sometimes, and occasionally his eyes would alight in excitement. However, it was always something hard-fought-for by Hizashi. There was something about Midoriya, though, that made Shouta care, made him worry. Hizashi found himself vaguely proud of both his friend and the boy responsible.

“Shouta, I think you’re overthinking this. First years almost never get picked by the drafts. Sure, some scouts come, but the main recruiters are at the second and third year games.”

And there was Shouta’s heavy-lidded stare again. “Really? You think no one’s going to want to see ‘Class 1-A, who faced a villain attack’? They’re going to be prime meat for the hordes.”

Hizashi laughed at his friend’s melodrama. “I still think you’re overreacting. Just explain to Midoriya that he needs to try his hardest because there are people there that determine whether he’ll be able to get a job after school. I’m sure he’ll understand that. I mean, I get that he has some sort of special power, but he’s still just a student. If his ambition isn’t large enough, he won’t get too far in the games, and you’ll just be worrying for nothing. Seriously, what’s the worst that could happen?”

Shouta Aizawa tried not to consider that Hizashi had just doomed them all. It was only a few weeks into the first semester, but Shouta already knew that question was one that should never be asked in
connection with Izuku Midoriya. Of course, he also had that feeling about Katsuki Bakugou and Shouto Todoroki.

It was going to be an interesting festival.

Izuku spent his Monday morning walk to school in deep debate with Popsicle. He hadn’t had much chance to discuss his theories on the tengu disappearances with his familiar since he and his mom had spent the entire weekend traveling and putting up protection wards around the tribes. Izuku was frustrated with the whole situation. He probably wouldn’t have worried as hard, but his former mentor, Avis, was counted among the missing. No one had heard from him in months.

Part of Izuku’s frustration stemmed from wishing that the tengu village had contacted him and his mother earlier. They might have had a chance of finding Avis if his aura was still on his belongings. As it was, no amount of scrying did any good, even with Izuku and his mom pooling their powers together. Izuku’s hair was a veritable mop from how much he had run his fingers through it in frustration.

No one knew what had caused the disappearances or if they were even related. Popsicle insisted that they had to be connected. His familiar’s raven form was generally wise, with a stronger mental capacity that had him considering angles Izuku couldn’t even imagine. Still, Izuku didn’t want it to be true. If the disappearances were connected, that meant someone knew about the tengu and were after them. Fingers crossed that whomever it was had a supernatural background. Izuku wasn’t ready for more non-magicals to know about their ‘society’, such as it was. He’d had enough of that for a whole month.

On the plus side, since Izuku and his mom hadn’t needed to stay for long at any of the tengu tribes, they were instead reimbursed for their services through other means. His mother had waived off any compensation, which meant Izuku got all the gifts for himself. In some cases, that was awesome (he now was the proud owner of a scarf that let you blend in with shadows and be nearly invisible in darkness). In other cases, well, he supposed he should be thankful. Among the tengu—tricksters and illusionists that they were—it was considered a great honor to have your form temporarily changed. The theory was that you would get to experience parts of life that were otherwise denied to you, which would give you wisdom and enlightenment.

In Izuku’s personal opinion, that was just the tengu’s way of saying that they were a mono-gendered species that could only procreate by forcibly turning some of their members into a second sex. But hey, yeah, great honor.

In shorter terms, Izuku was temporarily a girl. Specifically, he was still himself of boy-mind and boy-emotions, only with more girl-parts. Like the breasts. And the… lack of penis.

Izuku probably would have felt more honored by the ‘change’ if it weren’t the fifth time this had happened to him. It was always fun enough for the first day, trying to see if anything felt different emotionally or mentally through physical changes alone, and he definitely tried the whole ‘gaining wisdom and enlightenment' thing. But by the second day, he was tired of sitting down to pee. By the fourth, he was seriously considering a change in wardrobe. *(Running with a skirt on through the woods? Best. Feeling. Ever. And it ruined the whole point to be wearing underwear or have your*
That having been said… Izuku was thankful the form-change only lasted five days, or seven when he was unlucky.

But hey, one of the other tengu village’s gifts was a meditation stone that would help him recall any precognitive dreams. Which was cool and potentially very useful, considering his weird dreams of late.

Popsicle pecked at Izuku’s boob again.

He swatted his familiar in the beak. Damn bird. “Just turn into a snake already. I’m tired of the pecking.”

Izuku managed to make it to homeroom with over ten minutes to spare. It probably didn’t bode well for the rest of his day that the first person he ran into (Kirishima) asked what he did over the long weekend. Izuku’s response of ‘uhhh… nothing?’ was likely not very convincing, but he was a bit distracted with Popsicle trying to find a comfortable position to slither into around his neck/chest area. Honestly, his nipples were typically more sensitive in his, er, normal form compared to this one with larger, uh, breasts, but he was still in a sensitive stage of Very Aware Of His Chest that his familiar was Not Helping With.

“Hey, are you okay today, man?” Kirishima again.

“Uh… yeah, just uhm, yeah.” Izuku decided that not-talking was probably the smarter idea right about now.

“You seem like you’re acting a bit weird. Your voice is higher, too. Are you sick?” Izuku wasn’t sure if he wanted to hug or run away from Kirishima for how concerned he was being. Best packmate ever. On the other hand, Kirishima had a bad habit of his concern always being poorly timed and putting Izuku into an embarrassing situation.

Izuku put down his backpack beside his chair and fished out his English notes for after homeroom. Kacchan sat slumped over in front of him, head in his hands as he glared at the board. Izuku bit his lip and rearranged the pencils on his desk. Six more minutes until class started.

Kirishima had turned back to talk to Kaminari. Apparently, Kaminari spent the weekend playing video games and watching videos online. Kirishima had also played video games, but he did some physical training as well. Izuku thought back to the punching bag in Kirishima’s room, all the training videos, his bed. That was such a comfy bed.

Sero, who sat beside Izuku, was talking to Jirou in front of him about their weekends, as well. She’d apparently gone to some concert at a local cafe while his dad had taken him camping. Izuku wondered if these were the sorts of things normal people did—attending concerts, going camping, playing video games. Apparently, no one else spent their free time fighting in tournaments and creating protection wards and getting turned into girls. Ugh, he really needed to stop focusing on that. It would be easier if Popsicle would just stop moving.

“Can you get comfortable already?” Izuku whispered to his chest. He wasn’t quite sure if he was talking to his familiar or his body. Either way, the question stood.

“Hey Midoriya, what about you?”

Izuku turned toward Sero at the question. Huh? Him what?
“What did you do this weekend?” Sero’s face was earnest and friendly enough, and he waited so patiently for an answer, that Izuku felt guilty trying to dodge the question again.

“Uhm, I got to, uh, visit some old friends and, uh, spar with them?”

“Spar with them? Oh wait, you know some kind of martial arts, right?”

Izuku liked Sero. He was capable, affable, fought hard but smiled when they were done. He didn’t seem like someone who let things bother him or weigh him down. Must be nice.

“Oh, yeah. I learned judo from… them.” Izuku scratched his cheek, unsure how to expound further, and decided to switch the focus altogether. “What about you? You said you were camping?”

Sero nodded enthusiastically, his black hair flopping around his jaw and falling into his dark eyes before he brushed it back. “Yeah, my dad likes to take me to this one spot. My mom’s really traditional and doesn’t like camping at all, but my dad’s got a quirk that needs to be near a lot of nature every couple of weeks, so…”

“It’s like a bonding exercise?”

Sero laughed. Izuku considered how many times he’d seen Sero smile. It seemed to happen a lot, the rows of perfect straight teeth aligning. It was nice. “Yeah, precisely.”

“Aw man, that’s so manly!” Kirishima butted in from Sero’s other side. “My dad and I don’t have any bonding things like that.”

Kirishima seemed so enamored with the idea of bonding that Izuku found words tumbling out of his mouth before he could even focus on them. “I got to hang out with my mom, too. We traveled around a lot this weekend.”

Sero smiled, impressed. “Whoa, really? I thought you said you met up with friends and sparred?”

Izuku flushed in response, unsure how to clarify. He wasn’t sure why he mentioned it anyway; Kirishima had just seemed so interested in Sero when he said something about bonding with his dad. “Oh yeah, we, uh, did that, too. Only stayed a couple hours at each place, though, so… uh… but it was fun!”

He really thought he was getting better at this whole conversation thing up until now. Thankfully, he was saved by the bell, or more specifically by the rising caterpillar form of Mr. Aizawa. “It’s the second week of school. You should be able to get quiet faster than that.” He sounded like he hadn’t gotten much sleep. Then again, Mr. Aizawa generally didn’t get much sleep, so what else was new.

“As most but not all of you are aware, the U.A. Sports Festival is a highly publicized, mandatory event that occurs once a year. Through your actions at the festival, you can become recognized by pro-heroes and recruited into their agencies. Typically, recruiting does not happen for first years. However, due to recent events, the public eye has been turned on you.”

Izuku shifted in his seat. Having the public eye on him didn’t sound good.

“For those of you who aren’t aware, the festival consists of three events that will test your athleticism, your quirk usage, your creativity, your quick thinking, and your personal drive. Typically, it does this by pitting you against each other and making you fight your way to the top. Those at the top win and become recognized by the pros, are offered internships, and possibly jobs in the future. Those at the bottom remain unknown, have less choices for internships, and less chances when they seek to get a job after high school, many ending up as career sidekicks. Keep this in mind
when you decide exactly how hard you want to fight to win. In two weeks, you will effectively be deciding the course of your life. So no pressure.”

By the end of Mr. Aizawa’s speech, Izuku felt like his pack leader was speaking directly to him. **How hard he wanted to fight to win?** So he had to decide whether he wanted to be recognized and get a job, or not recognized and maybe not get a job. The more the public recognized him, the more he would be known, and the more danger he might get into. The less they recognized him, the safer he would be; but it might screw up his chances if he wanted to be a hero as a full-time job. Izuku still hadn’t decided what he wanted to do in addition to pro-heroism as a career. Very few heroes were full-time. Most had side jobs while they waited for the call to come in, whether that was modeling, hosting a show, advertising, etc. Recovery Girl used to work at a hospital part-time, and Present Mic had his own radio show before he became a teacher. Izuku enjoyed doing magical stuff during his downtime, but he wondered how feasible that would be as his ‘second job’ if he became well-known for doing hero work. He didn’t want anyone peeking into those ‘side activities’ if they would accidentally reveal the supernatural world.

It all came back to that, didn’t it? How much did he want to become known as a hero? He’d always imagined working in the shadows to save the day, swooping into a scene under the cover of darkness like Eraserhead. He’d also imagined smiling bright and standing tall, pausing a building before it could collapse, stopping a fire before it could hit a bus, and so on. His imagination had always been bigger than his pragmatism. He needed to think about what he could do with just the ability to explode objects that he could encase in a protective circle. That’s what his ability was currently registered as, right? In the future, he might not have to worry about casting protective circles as often. Most of the demons currently sensed his magic because he hadn’t hit his majority yet. Once he was out of high school, the circles wouldn’t be as necessary or important. So he needed to envision using his exploding power, and perhaps Popsicle’s abilities, in order to do hero work. In which case, his supposed ‘quirk’ was primarily destructive, meaning Izuku would be more suited for anti-villain activities than, say, being a rescue hero.

While Izuku was caught pondering his future hero career, most of the class had gone wild thinking about the Sports Festival. Some of them were discussing previous festivals and activities they had seen the students put through. Others were just talking about how excited they were and how much they were going to train. No one made plans to train together.

Izuku shifted in his seat, uncomfortable again due to Popsicle’s shifting around his chest/collarbone area. He could swear the damn snake was doing it on purpose.

Ten minutes later, Aizawa crawled up to his desk in his sleeping bag. He didn’t typically make a speech about the Sports Festival more than ‘good luck, suckers’, and now he understood why. Some of them were even jumping up and down in excitement. Iida seemed to be trying to get the students settled back into their seats, but the class rep was in the midst of it all exclaiming about something with his hands. Seeing the chaos that his speech had wrought, Aizawa tried to repress a smirk. He was just going to let Present Mic deal with this, in return for his friend’s incessant poking and prodding last night. That sounded like a good plan.

At the end of class, Aizawa shuffled out of homeroom still zipped into his sleeping bag, sniggering as he passed Hizashi in the hallway. His friend yelled after him, “Seriously, you know you’re just getting the sleeping bag dirty, Shouta!”

When Present Mic finally entered Class 1-A a minute later, he had a sudden understanding of why his friend was laughing so much. **Damn it, what had Shouta done to rile them up?**
By lunchtime, none of Izuku’s classmates had noticed his new, uh, developments. Everyone was still too excited, talking between classes about the Sports Festival. Izuku had tried, rather unsuccessfully, to understand what the big deal was about the festival. Apparently, every other one of his classmates had grown up watching the U.A. Sports Festival as though it was the pinnacle of competitive gaming. Izuku supposed that a large competitive game, combined with the exceptional quirks of the students competing and the infatuation of their modern day society with quirks, was what resulted in this infectious enthusiasm and obsession with the festival. Still, it seemed a bit much.

The upcoming Sports Festival had also spawned a much different set of conversations during lunch period, centered around why each of them wanted to become a hero. Iida had been the first to broach the subject, reminiscing about watching his brother compete at the festival. It was the first time he truly understood what a hero was since there had been some rescue game during the second round. From there, he had watched his brother compete in two more festivals, get an internship, and eventually head up his own pro-hero agency with about one hundred sidekicks of various quirks and abilities.

“I aspire to be a hero like him someday. A hero who others can look up to and trust. A leader.”

The table grew silent around Iida. Izuku stared at him slightly slack-jawed. He’d never heard someone just come out and say they wanted to be a hero like that. Izuku had wanted to become one for years, but he always bumbled his way through explanations about his ambition to his mom. Most of it was written down in journals, or scrawled out on papers that he burned. Izuku tried to imagine Iida as the sort of hero he aspired to be, a gleaming suit of armor standing tall and directing other heroes about where to go, rushing into situations before others could get there, defending the city. His heart fluttered at the image of Iida in his suit, helping a little girl with her icecream. Izuku shook his head; he really needed to stop letting his imagination get away from him. He blamed all the magic he’d done over the weekend. He still felt like he was buzzing, so it was no wonder his mind kept running away from him.

Uraraka laughed self-deprecatingly across from Izuku. “Well, now I feel real silly. My dream is nothing like that.”

Izuku turned toward her, leaning one of his shoulders against Iida, who stiffened next to him and dropped his pudding cup. “Why do you want to be a hero?”

She laughed self-consciously again as she tucked her hair behind her ear and looked off to the side. Izuku smelled something like berries wafting towards him from her motion. Did her hair smell like strawberries? “I just want to earn money, I guess.” She peeked over at their expressions before turning to look away again.

“My parents, they own a construction company, but there’s never enough work. They’ve always provided for me and tried to live a comfortable life, but we basically live off coupons half the time.” Uraraka let out a self-deprecating laugh and bit her lip, her expression firming as she turned toward them once more. “I want to become a hero and make enough money that they don’t have to worry, anymore. I want to be able to provide for them, after everything they’ve done for me.”

“I think it is an admirable goal, to help your family,” Iida said softly. Izuku nodded his head in agreement beside him.

Uraraka smiled back at them hesitantly. “You really think so?”
“I think you’re amazing, Uraraka,” Izuku answered, his voice so earnest that Uraraka found herself blushing and tucking her hair behind her ear once again.

Asui ignored the Uraraka’s fumbling as she chewed on a piece of bread. “I’ve never really thought about why I want to be a hero. I just like to help people, and my quirk seems useful for a lot of situations. It seemed like the thing to do.”

Her deadpan response had the rest of them smiling and chuckling.

“What about you, Midoriya?” Asui asked, her bread now torn in two.

Uraraka stopped giggling and turned toward him as well, a smile still on her face. “Yeah, why do you want to be a hero?”

Izuku chewed at his lip, unsure how to respond. He could show them the videos of All Might and Eraserhead, point to them and say ‘this is why’, but that wasn’t really an answer, was it? Even if All Might and Eraserhead had never existed, Izuku would have still been this way. “I suppose… I’ve always wanted to protect the innocent. I’ve spent my whole life trying to help, trying to stop people from getting hurt.” The others grew silent around him as his voice grew serious. Iida turned to face him, no longer eating. Izuku's next words were almost a whisper, said lightly enough that they could be hidden in the noise of voices around them. “I was attacked, when I was a kid, and I remember wishing that a hero was there to save me… because that’s what heroes did, they saved people. And then I just started saving myself, and I never stopped. I want to be that hero for someone else, the one who appears when no one else does, the only one who can help.”

Uraraka’s eyes held a worrisome amount of tears. “Midoriya…”

“That being said, I’m not really sure about this Sports Festival. I don’t know what kind of hero agency I would want to work at, where would allow me to help the most. And I don’t like the idea of fighting my friends.” Izuku fiddled with the food left on his plate, his appetite lost to his musing.

Uraraka bit her lip. “I know what you mean, but no one would get mad at you for winning. Everyone’s going to be trying their best, so there’s no reason for you to try less than that. Otherwise, everyone else will be getting stronger while you stay still.”

“This conversation started getting really serious,” Asui chirped.

Iida turned back toward the table, staring at his tray as he agreed with Uraraka. Izuku could still feel the warmth of Iida's arm against his, and it calmed him. “It would be more insulting to the class if you did not fight at your best. There is honor in fighting for what you believe in. If you truly want to be a hero, then you must give the festival your all. Plus Ultra!”

Asui and Uraraka grinned at Iida’s exclamation and added in their own cheer of ‘Plus Ultra!’

The lunch bell rang, and Izuku moved to gather his tray. As he went to throw it away, he saw Shinsou walk by. Izuku called out to him, but he didn’t respond. Izuku tried not let himself pout as he shuffled with his friends back to class. He hadn’t gotten to hang out with Shinsou since he started bringing Popsicle to school, due to one after-school conversation followed by the next. He wondered how the other boy was doing. Every class got to compete in the festival, right? Maybe that was a chance for Shinsou to transfer out of General Education and into a hero course. Izuku wondered if that was his plan and, if so, whether he was planning to train hard for the next two weeks like the rest of Izuku’s classmates.

Kirishima popped up beside Izuku and threw an arm around his shoulder. “Hey, man, what was with
the ‘Plus Ultra’ over at your table? What were you talking about?”

Izuku flushed as Kirishima’s hand grazed his, uh, chest protrusions. Izuku could see the moment it dawned on Kirishima that something was different, his fingers purposefully exerting more pressure on the lump on Izuku’s chest before a blush stole over his face. Popsicle’s head emerged from beneath Izuku’s collar and hissed at Kirishima, causing the other boy to retract his arm and stumble away from Izuku and into Bakugou.

“Watch where you’re going, shitty hair!”

Kirishima flailed a bit and grabbed at Bakugou's arm as he leaned toward his ear. “Uh, Bakugou… Midoriya is a dude, right?”

“What the fuck are you on about?”

Izuku butted in before Kirishima could get any further in his questioning. “Don’t worry about it, Kirishima. It will, uh, go away in a few days. It’s just temporary.”

Kirishima nodded slowly, still looking flushed, as he opened and closed his mouth several times as though debating what else to ask.

Meanwhile, Bakugou glared at both of them in turn. “What the fuck is going on? Shitty hair? Deku?”

Izuku scratched at his neck, suddenly nervous. He didn’t know how Kacchan would react to the information, but he doubted it would be positive. It wasn’t even that big of a deal! Izuku tried to grin at his friend, but he could feel the strain on his cheeks. “Uhh, don’t worry about it, Kacchan. It’s only, um, a bit of temporary body modification?”

“Body what—”

The second bell rung. “Oh, class is about to start. We gotta hurry!” Izuku took the bell as his chance to run toward class, Iida shouting behind him not to run in the hallways as Bakugou yelled loud enough for the whole lunchroom to hear for Deku to ‘get the fuck back here, I’m not done talking with you, stupid fucking shithead’.

Bakugou didn’t have to wait long to question Izuku about what exact ‘body modifications’ he had ‘temporarily’. After lunch, All Might announced another series of hero training where they would get to use their quirks in creative ways to solve various scenarios. Everyone in class was enthused about the exercise except Bakugou, who kept turning around to glare at Izuku and trying to grab hold of his arm as he rushed to the locker room.

By the time the rest of the Class 1-A boys got to the locker room, Izuku had already changed into his pants and had finished unbuttoning his school shirt. Iida was the first to open the door, but Kaminari was the first to notice that Izuku didn’t have the same firm pectorals that he normally did. “Uhhh… man? Why do you have boobs?” Which then caused each subsequent guy who walked through the locker room doors to stare, blush, and try not to stare some more at Izuku as he continued to undress right in front of them. Several of them failed, their wide eyes and gaping mouths only causing the next person to repeat their actions.

Bakugou busted in the locker room door, still raging. “Alright, Deku, tell me what the fuck is going on before I blow your—” He stopped in place, taking in the sight of a topless Izuku reaching for his costume hoodie, his curly bangs obscuring his eyes. Bakugou stormed over, grabbed Izuku’s blazer, and shoved it against Izuku’s chest. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing, changing in here?”
He hissed, marching Izuku to the other side of the lockers where Todoroki and Tokoyami typically changed into their costumes as a measure of privacy. Both of them were currently in various states of undress. Bakugou glared at them and pointed with his free hand to the other side of the room. He growled at them to ‘get out’, making sure that Izuku’s chest was still covered by the blazer.

Tokoyami had already departed and Todoroki was almost around to the other side of the lockers when Bakugou decided enough was enough and shoved Izuku against the lockers, the blazer caught between his hand and Izuku’s breasts. He leaned in, glaring, and growled. “What the fuck is going on, Izuku?”

Izuku blushed in response, not used to Kacchan using his actual name. “I, uh, might have been turned into a girl for the next few days?”

Bakugou narrowed his eyes. “The next few—seriously?” He shoved off of Izuku, causing him to fumble with the blazer. Todoroki still stood at the corner of the lockers, glaring at Bakugou as though debating whether to intervene. Izuku shook his head at the other boy and smiled. He appreciated the concern, but he was fine.

Bakugou paced back and forth, small explosions coming out of his hands, as their classmates’ voices got louder on the other side of the lockers. He stalked back toward Izuku and leaned in close, speaking low enough that his words wouldn’t be overheard. “Was it a quirk, or something else?”

Izuku bit his lip, his heart fluttering at the hot breath along his ear. “It was, uh, meant to be a gift, like an honor, by someone I helped.”

Bakugou punched his fist into the locker beside Izuku’s head and pulled back to glare at him. “Seriously?”

Izuku flushed and dryly chuckled as he looked at the ground. “Yeah.”

Bakugou ducked his head and hid it in Izuku’s bare shoulder, gritting his teeth as he tried to control the urge to punch Izuku in the fucking face for putting himself in this situation. *He let people change his body, just like that? Who the fuck allows that sort of thing? This shit better be changed back before the Sports Festival. He refused to fight Deku in a body the boy wasn’t completely familiar with.*

Bakugou leaned back to peer at Deku again. The stupid shit was still blushing and looking up at him all hesitant. Fucking *fuck.* “Just put your shirt on, and go to the showers next time to change, stupid Deku.”

Izuku bit his lip and nodded as Bakugou stormed away toward the other side of the lockers. He heard Bakugou shout something about ‘what the fuck are you looking at, you fucking extras’ while Izuku struggled into his hoodie. By the time Izuku got back to his costume box and finished slipping on his savate boots, most of his fellow classmates had left the room to escape Bakugou’s attempts to shove any and all classmates caught staring at Midoriya into a locker. When he attempted to shove Todoroki, the other teen turned around and iced Kacchan to a different locker. He then squinted his eyes at Midoriya, as though attempting to discern what was happening from Midoriya’s body stance alone. Bakugou growled at Todoroki and tried to explode his face, but the other boy dodged and took several steps away and toward Izuku.

“Come back here where I can fight you, half-and-half bastard!”

Todoroki merely turned in response, gave Kacchan a quick up-and-down appraisal, before scoffing in disinterest. “You can try.”
Izuku finished tying up his boots and moved to intercept, his voice hesitant and pleading. “Todoroki, can you unfreeze Kacchan? I think the exercise is going to start soon…”

Todoroki turned his mismatched eyes toward Izuku, taking in the other student’s appearance. The hoodie for Midoriya’s costume was baggy enough that you couldn’t see from the shirt alone, but Todoroki had seen the edges of what lay beneath. If Todoroki focused, he could also tell that the other boy’s voice was higher. *What could have caused that?* “Only if you’ll tell me what happened.”

Izuku bit his lip and considered his response, Todoroki’s eyes drilling into him as Bakugou attacked the ice attaching his arm to the locker. Izuku decided to smile and try to blow the whole thing off. People did weird things with quirks, right? “I was turned into a girl over the weekend. Should be changed back by Wednesday, no big deal.”

Todoroki didn’t seem to find his flippant attitude humorous. “Turned by who?”

Izuku shrugged back at him, refusing to be cowed while his packmate was frozen and in need of help. “A family friend.” The tengu were kind of like family friends, after all.

“Metamorphic quirk use is forbidden on minors,” responded Todoroki, who was being a total turd about the whole thing.

Izuku sighed, watching Kacchan for another second, before switching his gaze to Todoroki, who hadn’t moved an inch. He was still looming over Izuku and seemed simultaneously concerned and uncaring. Izuku knew the look well; Kacchan had perfected it. He wondered how Todoroki would feel about being compared to Bakugou. “Todoroki, it’s not that big of a deal. They’re just breasts.” The other boy didn’t respond, so Izuku grabbed his hand and raised it up to his own chest, pressing the fingertips against his shirt. “They’re a bit bouncy, but they don’t impede my ability to fight.”

Todoroki’s cheeks turned a light pink as Bakugou shouted behind them ‘what the fuck did Deku think he was doing; the half and half bastard better get his hands off you’ or something like that. Izuku ignored him as he tried to pour the feeling that everything was okay from his eyes to Todoroki’s. The other boy shifted his feet and moved closer, seeming even taller next to Izuku. He put more pressure on Izuku’s breast, widening his fingers to encompass nearly half of his chest. Todoroki’s brows furrowed, and he looked so confused that Izuku took pity on the other boy, dragging his hand away from his body and squeezing it in consolidation.

“Don’t worry about me, Todoroki. I can handle this. I’ve done it before.”

Bakugou continued to rant behind them. “Deku, stop holding his hand!”

Izuku rolled his eyes and let go of Todoroki’s hand. He moved aside and gestured for Todoroki to head out of the locker room. Todoroki turned his head to the side and raised an eyebrow in Bakugou’s direction, even while he kept his eyes focused on Izuku.

Izuku smiled. “I’ll take care of him.”

Todoroki nodded his head and left the room to Izuku’s voice saying ‘Alright, Kacchan, stay very still,’ a smirk on his face and a flush still spread across his cheeks. *Why did Midoriya grab his hand like that? And why was it still tingling?*

By the time Izuku made it outside for the exercise with Kacchan, everyone in their class knew that Izuku had developed a new set of, uh, hardware. The girls were really nice about it, offering him any advice if he needed it. Yaoyorozu offered to make Izuku a girl’s school uniform, if he wanted to try it out, and Uraraka said she would let him borrow some hair clips if he wanted to try getting his bangs
out of his face. Izuku agreed to the second, but declined the first. Something to keep his bangs out of his eyes? Yes, definitely.

Meanwhile, some of the other boys were acting a bit strange around Izuku, not sure whether they should treat him like a girl or a boy at this point. Oh well, they’d figure it out. It was only two more days.

Right before the end of school bell, Mr. Aizawa asked Midoriya to stay behind to discuss the use of his familiar during the Sports Festival. The rest of Class 1-A laughed as Popsicle in raven form flew over to Aizawa’s desk and perched on it to stare at their teacher. Everyone packed their bags and made to head out of class, only to run into a crowd outside the door of 1-A.

Uraraka, who was the first to open the door, shouted a surprised ‘What the heck!’ as several of her classmates tried to peer around her.

Bakugou shoved his way to the front to stare at the crowd surrounding the door before scoffing. “Looks like some losers appeared to check out the competition. They probably want a good look at the class that faced a villain ambush, before the big battle coming up.” He turned to the growing crowd with another sneer and snarled, “It’s useless to try, so why don’t you fuck off, you damn mob.”

Iida tried to interrupt from the back of the room that Bakugou shouldn’t go calling people he didn’t know a ‘mob’, but the rest of the class stayed back, torn between interfering and wanting to see what would happen. While Bakugou might not have the best attitude about it, there really shouldn’t have been a crowd forming outside their classroom doorway in the first place. Izuku could hear more than see a student come forward through the mob, talking about how he had wanted to see what the Class 1-A students were made of but not didn’t know that all the students in the Heroics Course were this arrogant.

The newcomer got out a drawling ‘Guess I’m disillusioned, now’ before Izuku was speeding out the door and jumping on him with a shout of ‘Purple eyes!’

Izuku was smiling, glad to finally catch his friend and refusing to let him go like earlier at lunch. Hitoshi, meanwhile, attempted not to fall backward from the sudden weight on his chest that had begun running its hands through his hair. His pale skin flushed as his wide eyes tried to take in the mass of green hair before him.

Midoriya? Wait, since when does Midoriya have breasts?

Izuku got a few nuzzles in, dragging his nose through Hitoshi’s hair, before Bakugou pulled him off by the scruff of his collar. Izuku tried to stay holding Hitoshi, but Bakugou would have none of it, dumping Izuku onto the ground beside the door and putting a foot in front of him so he couldn’t jump forward again. Izuku tried to stand up and pull on Kacchan’s arm until he moved aside.

Meanwhile, Iida came up beside them to exact his fervent arm-waving lecture technique on Izuku. “Midoriya, that is not appropriate conduct for students on school premises.”

Izuku pouted at Iida, thinking both he and Kacchan were being ridiculous. He just wanted to hug his friend who he hadn't seen in over a week. “Why not?”

Iida huffed back at him in response and put his hands on his hips. The crowd around the doorway, both inside the room and out, stared on in fascination. “Because the rules clearly state that no
fraternization in the hallways is acceptable.”

Izuku furrowed his brows. “What’s fraternization?”

“It…” Iida paused and seemed to stumble over his words. “Well, it is when one student conducts inappropriate physical acts with another student.”

Izuku continued to pout. “But why would hugging Hitoshi be inappropriate?”

Iida cleared his throat and adjusted his stance. “Midoriya, you are currently in a more, um, female form, and as such there are social mores that dictate what physical actions are appropriate and inappropriate.”

“Like what?”

The crowd was nearly silent around them as Iida flushed and pulled at his collar to loosen his tie. “I… well, there is, um, there are certain parts of your current body that should not, uh, make contact with certain parts of… other… students’ bodies…”

Izuku stared back at Iida as he trailed off. “What, like my breasts?”

Bakugou made a noise like the sound of a dying animal. Hitoshi and other students in the front row of the ‘mob’ turned to look at the kid who was dressed like a boy, had jumped on top of another boy, and was possibly actually a girl.

Iida sputtered out a ‘Precisely!’ as he tried to gain control over his blushing.

Izuku slumped against the classroom’s entrance windows and used his hands to push at the lumps on his chest. “But they’re just bigger versions of what I normally have. And squishier.”

The drama-loving half of Class 1-A had officially moved closer to the door to get a better view. Jirou, Uraraka, and Yaoyorozu stood huddled together near the entrance.

Jirou was the first to speak as Midoriya began feeling himself up in the hallway and Iida moved to wave his hands in front of Midoriya’s chest in a motion to make him desist. “I can’t actually believe they’re having this conversation right now.”

Uraraka stood with her mouth agape. “Should we stop them?”

Jirou smiled and leaned against the wall, her ear jacks flopping against her shoulder. “Oh no, this is gold.”

Yaoyorozu turned toward the other girl with a friendly smile. “Jirou, would you like some popcorn?”

Jirou nodded emphatically. “Definitely.”

Meanwhile, Bakugou had torn Iida away from Midoriya and shoved him into the wall beside the door. “Oy, four-eyes, why the fuck are you treating Deku different because he has breasts?”

Iida sputtered. “What? I object! I am not treating Midoriya any different in regards to—”

“Yeah, you are!” Jirou piped up from inside the classroom as Yaoyorozu handed her an opened bag of popcorn. Uraraka nodded her agreement, and Yaoyorozu raised an eyebrow.

"But I..." Iida flushed, hesitated, and then turned away from Bakugou to offer a bow in Izuku's direction. “Midoriya, I apologize, I did not mean to cause any offense in regards to, uh, the gender
that you, er, perceive yourself as?”

Jirou chomped on the popcorn Yaoyarozu made, both of them staring with wide eyes at Iida apologizing in the hallway. Uraraka stood beside them with her hand over her gaping mouth while Dark Shadow attempted to stray away from Tokoyami to get a better look.

Izuku scrunches up his nose and turned to Iida. “Why would I be offended?”

Iida cleared his throat and raised up from his bow. His hands twitched at his sides, wanting to gesture as he talked. “Well, I do not want you to think that I perceive you as any less or different…”

“I don’t think that.”

“. . .I was just concerned about how laws of proper school behavior apply in this situation, and—wait, you aren’t offended?”

Izuku shook his head, his green bangs falling over his eyes as he smiled at Iida. “Of course not. I just wanna be able to say hi to Hitoshi.”

In the background, a suddenly blushing Hitoshi shifted his feet, looking awkward. He’d come to check out the rest of Class 1-A, but then Midoriya had greeted him a bit too friendly, and now he wasn’t able to move backward because he was at the front of the ‘mob’ of students. Maybe he had to reform his opinion of the Heroics Course. Maybe they were all just insane.

Iida shifted his feet and moved to clarify his former lecturing of Midoriya. “Yes, well, generally students greet each other without such, uh, excessive physical contact.”

Izuku, of course, only pouted in response. “But I missed him, and it feels good to touch him.”

Bakugou made another dying noise. “Deku, what the fuck have I told you about... asking about this shit?”

The mob outside the classroom nearly took a step back at the total-dickhead-from-before doing a turn-around to lecture a friend about PDA.

“Oh yeah...” Izuku bit his lips and nodded his head before turning to Hitoshi. “Hey Hitoshi, can I put my nose in your neck?”

The crowd went silent. Hitoshi stared back at him, unsure how to respond. One student could be overheard saying ‘Oh my god, what is up with Class 1-A?’ Hitoshi shook his head, denying Izuku’s request.

Izuku pouted and dropped his head to stare at the floor. Bakugou groaned next to him as Iida turned his head back and forth, trying to look at Midoriya and Hitoshi at the same time. Hitoshi was still blushing, and Midoriya looked like a kicked puppy. Bakugou tried to rein in the desire to shove the creepy kid’s face into the floor. He didn't want to have to deal with a puppy-eyed Deku. That was seriously the fucking worst.

Another student piped up. “I heard they fought villains last week, but no one said they were crazy…” There were murmurs of assent.

Izuku looked up at Hitoshi and tried again. “What about if I run my hands through your hair? It’s pretty, and I missed it.”

Hitoshi sighed and closed his eyes, feeling completely done with the Heroics Course. “No.”
The majority of the mob was now staring at Izuku as though he was a total freak. Bakugou tried not to groan again. This was why Deku wasn't allowed to make friends Bakugou didn't approve of. Kirishima would have allowed Izuku to touch his hair, but no, not this stupid creepy extra. What did Deku even see in him?

Someone near the front of the crowd whispered to their friend something about 'Is everyone in their class used to this? They don't even seem phased!'

Which officially caught Bakugou’s attention. He was fed up with all the back-talk happening in the crowd. He turned his glare toward the mob and sneered at every person on the front row. “What the fuck did you say, you extras?! What the fuck are you even doing here?”

Some guy at the front stepped forward to say, “We are Class 1-B. We came to see what the competition looked like—”

But Bakugou was having none of it. That wasn't what he was asking. What were the fucking idiots doing standing around? Bakugou growled and stalked forward. “No shit. And decided to stay for the show? Does this look like your FUCKING BUSINESS to you?”

Kirishima came up behind Bakugou and put a hand on his shoulder. “Whoa, man, calm down—”

Kacchan shrugged the hand off and glared behind him. “Shut up, Shitty Hair.”

Izuku frowned at his friend. “Kacchan, don’t be mean to Kirishima…”

Someone else in the crowd muttered, "You are all insane."

Iida finally began using his chopping arms of justice to lecture the crowd. “It is highly unbecoming of U.A. students to engage in insulting discourse toward each other—”

A girl at the front shouted, 'And what about him?' as she pointed at Bakugou.

“—including Bakugou, who I have previously lectured on the appropriate social conduct for—”

Bakugou snorted. “Shut the fuck up, four eyes, no one cares about your shitty rules.”

Iida groaned, about ready to give up. He used a hand to massage his temples. He turned to face Bakugou, who had stalked back to join him at the doorway. “You should at least endeavor to learn the names of your classmates—”

Bakugou snorted dismissively in Iida's face and scowled at him. “I don’t have time to waste on you nerds. I’ll know your name when you mean something.”

From his stance behind Bakugou, Kirishima whistled. “Bakugou, that’s kind of harsh.”

Izuku tried to peek around the doorway to his friend. “Kirishima, he’s just—”

“What, you think you’re on their level, Kirishima?” Bakugou sneered. The sneer was slightly derailed by the fact that he had actually used Kirishima’s name, however, causing Kirishima to give Bakugou the equivalent of heart eyes. Bakugou scoffed and turned back toward the mob, only to see Deku also giving him heart eyes. What the fuck. “Keh, whatever. I’m heading home. Walk with me if you want. And Deku, stop flirting with that creepy kid. And no touching him, unless I tell you that you can, got it?”

Another groan could be heard from inside the classroom, this time from Kaminari. “Dude, are you
still trying to control Midoriya?"

Sero, who was standing beside Kaminari, nodded his head. “You know you can’t just tell people what to do like that. Especially not your friends.”

Thankfully, a voice of reason cut through the tension humming between Bakugou and his classmates. Aizawa crawled out of his sleeping bag hibernation to shout at his homeroom students, “Everyone clear out of the hallway. You’re blocking traffic, and now is not the time to be discussing your sexuality.”

Izuku peaked around the doorway again. “What’s sexuality?”

Aizawa drew his sleeping bag over his head. “Nope.”

Izuku pouted and turned to Bakugou. “Kacchan, what does he mean our sexuality?”

Bakugou shook his head and hoisted his backpack over his shoulder. He growled, “I’m leaving,” as he began to shove his way through the crowd.

Izuku turned his pout on Kirishima. “Kirishima?”

Kirishima stuttered for a bit before blushing and adjusting his bag’s straps. “Uhhhhh later man!” He took off after Bakugou.

Class 1-A began filing out of the classroom behind Kirishima, some of them giving Izuku consoling pats on the shoulder, others smiling, others avoiding his eyes. Uraraka shouted back at him that she would bring her hair clips for him to borrow to school tomorrow, and Sero blushed when he met Izuku’s eyes before saying that he’d see him tomorrow morning. With the drama finished, the ‘mob’ outside Class 1-A dispersed. Izuku traipsed back into his homeroom, shoulders slumped.

The sleeping bag on the floor moved. “So, about your familiar...”

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When he got home that night, Izuku told his mom about the weird encounter outside the classroom earlier that day. When he explained how they tried to lecture him on hugging people, she laughed and told him he had good friends. When he got to that part about Mr. Aizawa telling them to stop talking about their sexuality in the middle of the doorway, Inko spit out her tea.

“Mom, what is it? No one would talk about it after Mr. Aizawa said something.”

Inko sighed. She supposed typical teenage boys found out about this stuff through online videos and conversations with their friends, in addition to whatever passed for sex education in schools these days. Izuku hadn’t had access to friends his age or computers in general, so Inko supposed the burden fell to her. Still, it was such an awkward subject to broach on a normal day, and Izuku had already had his friends talk to him about appropriate conduct at school while he had a female body.

“Oh, well, Izuku? What do you know about sex?”

Izuku shook his head, his eyes wide and innocent. “Nothing.”

Inko really hated being put in this position. Surely he’d heard about something with the werewolves?
They weren’t exactly secret in their, uh, activities. He’d probably slept beside them engaging in these sort of things more than once, but he still didn’t know?

“All right, honey. Well, uh, Izuku… sex is when—”

A loud crash and some screaming outside had Izuku running to the window. “Mom, I think someone’s hurt!”

Inko tried very hard not to feel grateful for whatever was happening outside.

Maybe she’d just write Izuku a note about all of it later, or get him a book. Those sounded like good options.

Chapter End Notes

I apologize for this coming out a day late. I had to get my bff beta's help due to tone switches. I wanted to give you a more lighthearted chapter after the USJ while still showing the fall-out. The full picture took a bit of balancing.

Let me know what you did/didn't like! I'm currently debating on shipping. If anyone has any opinions on whether I should continue the Dekubowl or focus on a certain ship, feel free to vote. Two main ships are currently trying to happen within the fic: Bakugou/Kirishima/Deku and Todoroki/Deku/Iida. I'm not sure one person alone can control the boy, but feel free to vote otherwise if you think so.

Next chapter follows the two weeks of training/friendships before the Sports Festival. All I have planned so far is a class training exercise that is serious, Izuku going over to Iida's house to do homework, and Uraraka/Deku bonding over fuzzy sweaters. I'm up for any suggestions of things you'd like to see before the next plot point.
They Interfere Because They Care

Chapter Summary

In which members of Class 1-A attempt to figure out the situation with Bakugou, and nothing goes as planned. But hey, Izuku's making friends at least?

In other words: Poor Sero is confused, Iida needs to get with the picture, Kirishima's flustered all the time, Uraraka's a good bro(?), and Bakugou is the only one who understands Deku. Not necessarily in that order.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Part 1: Tuesday (13 Days and Counting)

When Uraraka approached Izuku on Tuesday morning with light blue hair clips, one for each side of his hair, she hadn’t really had a plan beyond making Izuku feel more comfortable. He was very sweet in this puppy sort of way, but he didn’t always seem to get things. During their first week of school, she’d helped him find a way to talk to a friend over the weekend. He must have been so lonely in his life, in order to not know how to talk to someone or invite them out. In her way, Uraraka wanted to try her best to help him feel more normal.

When she heard and later saw that Midoriya had suddenly gained more, uh, parts than usual on his body, she found herself swelling with sympathy. She knew what it was like to feel out of place, to have parts of your body grow suddenly and feel ashamed and unsure of how to deal with them. Uraraka doubted that she could understand what fully changing into another sex would feel like (growing a penis? ew), but she bet it would feel embarrassing and uncomfortable. Izuku didn’t seem as distressed as she would have been, but she still wanted to help. She had offered to bring him hair clips, spending the night before searching for where her second clip had fallen behind her dresser. She didn’t pin her hair up as much as she used to, so she was fine with loaning him the barrettes for a while.

Izuku seemed confused but happy when she gave them to him the following morning. Uraraka offered to pin Izuku’s bangs back for him, and he agreed enthusiastically. Yaoyorozu then offered to create a mirror so that he could see what it looked like, two blue barrettes holding his green bangs back from his eyes. He smiled and turned to thank her, tossing his hair back and forth to see if his bangs would fall out from the barrettes. When the hair remained in place, he laughed.

Uraraka received a much more enthusiastic hug than she had anticipated. The closeness of his body against hers should have made her feel uncomfortable, but it didn’t. She was flustered, sure, because that was the normal reaction when someone just jumps on you like that. But she ended up smiling instead of shrinking away, Izuku’s energetic form drawing back from her before she could suggest he get ready for homeroom. She didn’t think a boy had ever hugged her like that before. Temporary girl. Whatever.

Uraraka wasn’t sure what prompted her to invite him over to her apartment later to try on clothes, but something about his posture seemed so loose and confident and open to trying new things. Yaoyorozu had offered to make him an outfit, earlier, but he had said it would be too cold. Uraraka
considered that, if his only hesitation about wearing girl clothing while he temporarily had a more girlish figure was that it would make him cold, then it was her duty as his friend and support system to offer her own warmer girl clothes. You know, just in case he wanted to try them out. She hadn’t truly expected him to agree. Although, after he acquiesced, he said something about his mom not coming home until very late… so she figured he might just be lonely as well.

Uraraka’s parents still lived in her old house, but she had her own apartment in the city near to U.A. to keep transportation costs down. She’d worked out the finances with her parents, and it would actually be cheaper for her to rent an apartment near to U.A. rather than to ride the train and two buses to and from school, twice a day. Sometimes, in that small apartment with one bedroom and a view of a billboard, it got lonely for her, too. Maybe it would be fun to hang out with a friend during the week and not just over the weekend. So even though Uraraka hadn’t planned for Izuku to accept her invitation, she was glad he did.

Izuku pattered around her kitchen, humming, as he walked toward the floor-length window at the other end of the room. “I love your apartment, Uraraka! It’s so warm.” He turned to her and grinned, and Uraraka’s heart fluttered. Izuku was so sweet and forthright. She’d never met anyone else like him, always traipsing around after people and smiling bright. Then suddenly he’d do something like choke out Todoroki during the battle trial, and she’d be reminded that Oh yeah, this strange and funny boy is planning to become a hero, too. She shook her flustered feelings away and focused on helping her friend.

“My, uh, bedroom is over this way. Honestly, I’ve not got that many clothes, but I thought you might enjoy trying them on and seeing if any of them felt more comfortable than your clothes? I can show you where to get pretty much everything here, if you want to buy something similar.” Uraraka shuffled through her drawers. “Oh! You said you liked warm things, right? Or, well, you said you didn’t like to be cold, which is kind of the same thing. What about this?”

She handed Izuku a soft white sweater. It was a bit large on her; she had bought it for days when she felt frumpy or overweight. The sweater was still cute, though; it had a black orchid stitched in the upper right corner but was otherwise plain—which she figured Izuku would appreciate. He didn’t really seem like a butterflies and kittens sort of guy. Temporary girl. Whatever.

Of course, she hadn’t quite expected that Izuku would be this, uh, unashamed of his body. Her body. Whatever. Right after she handed over the sweater, Izuku shrugged his blazer to the floor and started unbuttoning his top shirt before Uraraka even wrapped her mind around the fact that she should be turning away for this. Uraraka turned to face the window, the sounds of Izuku’s shirt falling to the floor behind her. She waited a few more seconds for him to change. “Uh, does it fit alright?”

Izuku was silent behind her for much longer than it should have taken him to put on a sweater. Hesitant, Uraraka started to turn around. “...Izuku?”

Apparently, his silence had been a good thing. Izuku stood with his eyes open and mouth agape, trailing his fingers over the sweater material. When he looked up at her, Uraraka could have sworn he had hearts in his eyes. Her heart fluttered again. He was the most adorable puppy-turned-human she had ever seen, and she used to go to kindergarten with someone who had a dog quirk. Between the smile stretching across his face, the hairclips pinning his bangs back, and the oversized white sweater that managed to fall off even one of his shoulders (she really must have gotten that three sizes too big)… he almost looked like a complete girl.

Uraraka smiled, feeling triumphant. _He liked it! And he looked, uh, good._ Uraraka blushed and tried not to focus on the fact that she was slightly more attracted to him when he was dressed like this than in his normal boy’s blazer. Alright, more than slightly. Boys in girls’ clothing were cute, okay?
Izuku’s wonder-filled expression melted her heart. “I didn’t even know something this soft existed…”

“Aw, I’m glad you like it.” Uraraka wished the pants that she usually wore with that sweater were still clean. Although… Uraraka tapped at her chin as she tried to remember where she put those fluffy Halloween shorts that her mom had gotten her. She’d dressed as a witch for some Halloween party at her school last year, and her mom had thought she was so adorable that she’d bought Uraraka a pair of white shorts with bats and pumpkins on them. She didn’t wear them often because her gray pants were her favorites, but they should be… aha!

Uraraka found the fuzzy shorts at the back of her bottom drawer. They looked like they would fit Izuku. She was a bit rounder in that region, anyway, so she figured they would have similar sizes in derrieres. “Hey, what about these? They’re really soft, too, and they’re much warmer than normal shorts.”

Izuku padded over to her dresser, hands still trailing across the sweater. “Are they as soft as the sweater?”

Uraraka smiled, candy-sweet. “Yup!” She threw the shorts at his face and left the room before he could decide to strip in front of her again. “I’m going to make us some tea!”

She got out of her bedroom just in time, the sound of pants hitting the floor reaching her ears at the same time as she rounded the corner of the kitchen. Uraraka breathed a sigh of relief. She didn’t know how to go about telling Izuku not to just, you know, change in front of people without warning them. She also wasn’t quite sure she wanted to change that about him. It was awkward, sure, but it was also really funny when she thought about it. And her Mama always said it wasn’t right to try and change people into something only you wanted them to become. Rather than chancing seeing more than she should, Uraraka decided to stare resolutely inside her tea drawer as she shouted toward the bedroom, “What kind of tea do you like? Matcha, roasted, or jasmine?”

“Anything!” came the shout from the bedroom.

Uraraka had more roasted green tea than she knew what to do with, so she decided to make two cups of that. Besides, in her opinion, roasted green tea went well with fuzzy sweaters, anyway.

Izuku traipsed out of her bedroom in the white sweater and fuzzy bat shorts, which only reached his mid-thigh. He seemed to be shaking his legs about in delight. “They’re so loose but warm at the same time!”

Uraraka smiled, pleased and slightly glowing from the way he beamed at her. “Aw, do you like them?”

“Mmm-hmm!” Izuku laughed and ran to jump on her couch, bouncing a few times before he slid his fingers underneath his thighs. “So do you live here alone? I didn’t see another bed in your room.”

“Oh yeah, they had never discussed this.” “Yeah, I’m renting this apartment to save money on school transportation. I don’t get to see my parents as often as I’d like, so it doesn’t really feel like home yet, but… I’m hoping it will, soon.”

“I’ve always considered home to be wherever friends are, though. The last time I really felt like I had a home was with my old pack.”
Uraraka strained the tea bags and picked up both mugs to carry into her living room. “Your pack?”

Izuku nodded. “Yeah, it’s… uh, it’s kind of like a really close group of friends? But you spend the night over at each other’s places all the time and do everything together like, uh, bathing and sparring and running in the woods.”

Uraraka giggled as she handed over the tea. “Sounds like you were really close.”

Izuku’s smile turned a bit sad. “Yeah, I miss them… but I’m starting a new pack here.” His eyes raised from his mug, enthusiasm returning at the thought. “Kacchan and Kirishima are in it so far.”

Uraraka grinned back, wondering if this ‘pack’ thing was why he’d been crawling all over those two. She couldn’t help but find it cute. She’d probably freak out if he did it to her, but it was adorable when he did it to someone else. Especially Bakugou. The memory of Bakugou grabbing Izuku off Todoroki and plopping him down on Kirishima sprang to her mind, causing her to giggle again. “I’m glad you have them. Although… I mean, I’m not sure I’d be comfortable bathing together or anything, but you know I’m always here for you, too.”

Uraraka was of the firm opinion that Izuku’s answering smile could have blinded anyone.

“Also… I’ve got a closet with jackets, sweaters, and a few blouses that you might find comfortable, if you’re interested in trying more things on. You might even find you like them…”

Izuku was definitely interested.

Halfway through trying on her clothes, Izuku paused in admiring his outfit to walk over to where she was sitting on her bed so that he could kneel at her feet and tug on her sleeve. “I didn’t know how good it felt, to hang out like this. Do you think we can still do it, when I’m not, uh, you-know…?” A girl.

Uraraka felt warmth flooding through her chest again, that feeling associated with good deeds and making the people you cared about smile. “Of course. Anytime. It gets kinda lonely here, ya know?”

Izuku’s returning smile was fond and sad. “Yeah, I know exactly what you mean.” Izuku was silent for a few seconds as he stared at the floor, but the sunlight streaming in through the bedroom windows caused him to be torn out of his remuneration by something glinting off her ears. Her hair usually covered that part of her, but she currently had her hair tucked behind her ear, causing something to sparkle. “What’s that on your ear?”

Uraraka tilted her head to show off her earring while looking at him strangely. “You don’t know what an earring is?”

Izuku blushed. “I mean, I’ve seen them before sometimes, but I never actually knew someone who had one. What are they for?”

Uraraka snickered. “They’re not really for anything. They just look nice.” She shifted on the bed to get closer to Izuku and pointed at her earring. “See how the earring is right in the middle of my earlobe? It kind of shows off your ears. A lot of girls who pull back their hair wear earrings, or if you have really short hair.” Uraraka turned back to face Izuku. “Ya know… you’d probably look really cute with your ears pierced!”

Izuku blushed. “You think so?”

“Definitely!” Uraraka flushed at how quickly she answered him. “I mean, uh, I read a lot of novels where the cool guys have earrings. I always thought it made them seem more mature.”
Izuku nodded and turned toward her mirror. He tilted his head, looking at his ears.

“I’ve had earrings ever since I was born. My mom used to get me a new set for each birthday, so I have several. My favorites are always the studs. Those are the earrings like the ones I’m wearing now.” She pulled at her lobe to show off the style. “There are other earrings that dangle or are in the shape of hoops and stuff. But I like studs that are made of real stones. I’m wearing my favorites right now; they’re made of turquoise.”

Izuku turned back toward Uraraka to admire her ears again. He held out his hand. “Can I see them?”

Uraraka shifted backward, slightly hesitant. “I mean, you aren’t supposed to share earrings without cleaning them first…”

Izuku shook his hands in an apologetic gesture. “Oh no, sorry, I didn’t mean like that. I just meant, uh, turquoise is a stone that’s good for luck? Or, uh, it can be good for luck, but you have to have a friend bless them for you. I just, um, wanted to bless yours? I’m sorry, is that weird? I didn’t mean it to be weird.”

“No, it’s fine. Here.” She took out her posts and handed them to Izuku. “Is there any specific ritual you have to do?”

Izuku’s smile was shy and mysterious as he cupped his hands over the posts. Uraraka could swear he winked at her before leaning down to whisper into the hole between his palms. A few seconds later, he handed her earrings back. Uraraka blushed and tuck her hair behind her ear before accepting them. She walked over to her mirror to put the earrings back in. Once they were both situated in her ears, she rubbed at her earlobes with both hands. The earrings felt warm and… hopeful? It was hard to place, but she definitely felt like something was different.

“Oh, I can feel that! Or I feel something, at least.” Uraraka turned toward Izuku to thank him, but her breath was caught by the image he made, now in a long-sleeved red shirt with a scoop neck, the bat shorts, and bare feet. Uraraka wondered if anyone else had ever gotten to see this side of him. Her. Whatever.

Uraraka smiled. “Thank you for the blessing.” She felt blessed.

When Izuku got home later that night, his mother was both surprised and intrigued to hear that he wanted to pierce his ears. “Could it be an early birthday present? I’ll probably be too busy doing final exams to celebrate otherwise…”

Inko asked him who had put this idea in his head.

Izuku’s response was long-winded and lasted most of dinner, but it consisted of a girl named Uraraka and his dream of buying a pair of labradorite earrings to help him cast magic. He’d been researching the magical properties of different stones ever since he got home, and one of their ancestor’s journals mentioned a labradorite pendant that helped her focus her magic.

Inko sighed. She figured it had to be something like that. He’d been wearing a girl’s sweater all evening, and there were several journals spread out over his bed. She wondered whatever had happened to Kacchan and that Kirishima boy. Wasn’t Izuku trying to hang out with them?
Part 2: Wednesday (12 Days and Counting)

Wednesday morning came around without much fanfare. Izuku still had breasts during homeroom, and Bakugou kept shifting moody eyes at him and asking Izuku ‘when the fuck those things on his chest would go down’. Izuku smiled, happy that Kacchan cared.

Homeroom ended up being a bit of a surprise. Mr. Aizawa didn’t typically assign them any work for such a short class, but he was afraid All Might would forget to hand out the project assignment after Hero Studies that day. Mr. Aizawa paired Izuku up with Iida for a team project where they had to help their teammate reflect on their past and current training, ways to use their powers, and ways to use their body apart from their powers. The partner activity was supposed to help each student come up with new ideas for how to use their quirk. There were tons of hero analysis companies out there whose sole job was to find innovative ways for heroes to use their abilities, which this exercise helped mimic.

They had until Friday to complete the project and would have to turn in a report on what they discussed. Participation was mandatory. Bakugou was not happy (probably because he had to help someone else use their quirk), but he had been partnered with Sero, so the results could have been worse. Izuku was a bit sad he hadn’t been paired with Kacchan again. He wanted another excuse to go over to Kacchan’s house and spend the night. But Izuku didn’t not like Iida and would be interested in getting to know him further, preferably somewhere the deputy class representative couldn’t shout at Izuku for running in the hallways.

Izuku shifted in his seat, his breasts aching. The tengu’s “gift” was supposed to go away sometime today, but he had no idea when. He hoped the uncomfortable feeling in his chest signified it would be soon. While he enjoyed borrowing Uraraka’s clothes and wearing them at home (and yes, her clothes definitely smelled like strawberries—he wasn’t wrong before), he was ready to use the bathroom normally again. He felt like he’d lost a bit of muscle mass with all the estrogen in his system, or lack of testosterone or whatever. Ugh, he knew way too much about the differences in male and female bodies, now.

When Mr. Aizawa finished handing out assignments, he walked over to his sleeping bag, crawled in, and promptly went to sleep. Izuku never stopped being jealous of how quickly he could do that.

The uncomfortable feeling got worse without something else to focus on, so Izuku crawled out of his seat and sat down at Bakugou’s feet, kneecaps to his chest as he tried to breathe through the sudden queasy feeling. Thankfully, Kacchan didn’t say anything except to look at him askance and sigh in defeat, resting his head on his fist while scrawling something in his notebook.

A few minutes later, the Aizawa caterpillar started crawling its way out of the room, deciding to completely ignore the student curled up on the floor with his head in another student’s lap. Present Mic had finished all the orange juice in their apartment that morning and not saved him a glass, so Aizawa figured his friend had it coming.

Ten minutes passed, and Present Mic walked into Class 1-A only to immediately begin cursing Shouta. What was the payback for this time? Present Mic sighed, strolled up to the teacher’s desk, and asked Midoriya to please get up off the floor and stop laying on top of his classmates. The boy looked back at him, betrayed, and Present Mic warred between vindication and guilt as Midoriya crawled back up into his desk and hunched over its flat surface.
Two hours of uncomfortable feelings and wishing for them to end went by, and Izuku reached the point where every minute felt like he was going to throw up. The feeling around his chest hadn’t stopped, and he had this vague sensation of something moving beneath his hands from where he had them pressed against his chest. There also seemed to be something growing in his… Izuku paused, thinking. *Growing in his pants...*

Izuku got out of his desk and tried to stroll casually towards the classroom entrance, Cementoss droning on about something in their latest literature reading. Izuku opened the door, intent on heading toward the bathroom or the nurse’s office, somewhere not-here where he could get a better handle on what was happening to him.

Cementoss cleared his throat once Izuku reached the classroom door and asked if Midoriya needed to use the restroom.

With one hand on the doorway, Izuku peered curiously at his teacher. “Mmm-hmm!” He opened the door and left the room.

The class, previously listening with weary eyes to their teacher, stood at attention and collectively dropped their jaws. Iida in particular could be found with a furious flush on his face as he walked briskly toward the door following Izuku’s exit. He opened the door and shouted at Midoriya that he was supposed to ask for permission before leaving the classroom.

Izuku kept walking, the most innocent fuck-off smile on his face, as he answered that no such rule existed in the rulebook.

Iida stood with his hand on the door, gaping, while he stared at Izuku’s form retreating in the complete opposite direction of the restroom.

Izuku ended up breaking into the faculty lounge, explaining the weird feeling in his body, and bumming a juice box off of Mr. Aizawa, who told him to rest on the couch for the rest of the period until his body settled down. Izuku smiled, his chest warm and happy, when his pack leader shifted his sleeping bag over next to the couch. Just having him nearby made breathing through the nausea easier.

Izuku returned to class before lunch and slumped behind Bakugou, still warm and buzzing from the companionship.

Most of the class was busy filling out some worksheet, which the teacher allowed Izuku to take home and finish by the next day. Sero had already finished his worksheet, and he leaned over to ask if Midoriya was okay. Sero’s black hair fell into his eyes, and his genuine smile made Izuku’s blood thrum through his veins as he grinned back.

Izuku answered in a whisper, not wanting to disturb the testy Bakugou in front of him. “Yeah, everything’s okay now. All changed back.”

Sero flushed in response. “Oh, you mean the uh—“ he waved his hand at his chest.

Izuku nodded, “Yeah.”

“So you feel better? I mean, you seemed like you were kind of sick, earlier…”

A smile stole over Izuku’s face at the other student’s attention. He hadn’t expected anyone outside of pack to notice that he wasn’t feeling well. Lately, he had gotten used to Kirishima and Kacchan keeping an eye on him, but not one of their other classmates. “Were you looking out for me?
Sero’s cheeks turned from a light pink flush to a vibrant red that stole down his jawline to his neck. “I just happened to notice when I, uh, looked over… a couple times.”

Izuku turned so that his chest was facing the other student, smile still soft and friendly. “I’m glad you noticed.”

Sero sputtered in response as Izuku gazed over at him fondly.

Izuku liked this feeling, a humming beneath his skin that he associated with other people caring about him. It was nice, pleasant, warm. Izuku looked down at his desk, bashful. It had been so long since someone other than his mom cared about him. First, Kirishima, and now Sero… he hoped the competition of the Sports Festival wouldn’t ruin it. He didn’t really understand what it was going to be like, competing against others, but he figured you weren’t supposed to go around hugging the people trying to beat you.

The lunch bell rang, not too long after that, and Izuku walked with Sero to lunch. Kaminari joined them at the end of the lunch table, the three of them digging into their lunches. Uraraka waved at Izuku as she went to join Tsuyu and Hagakure for lunch. Izuku had brought another bento from home, still too poor to afford buying a school lunch every day. After what seemed to be the usual chatter between Sero and Kaminari, Izuku found himself the center of their combined attention.

Kaminari looked a bit hesitant and awkward, fiddling with his chopsticks and looking off to the side as Izuku stared back guilelessly. “What’s up?”

Kaminari ducked his head and scratched at his neck in embarrassment. “Hey man, you know you can, uh, talk to us if you need something, right?”

Izuku’s eyebrows scrunched together, confused. “…like what?”

Kaminari and Sero shared hesitant looks. Kaminari went to laugh off the uncomfortable feeling he had whenever he confronted someone so upfront about something like this. He put his chopsticks down and leaned forward on his arms, closer to Izuku, blonde hair falling off to the side so that the lightning bolt looked like a streak of black instead. “You know that… Bakugou doesn’t have any right to pick you up or shove you around, right? And that you don’t have to ask his permission to do things.”

Izuku stared back at their dual earnest expressions, confused. “Why not?”

Kaminari huffed, shifting his arms. That apparently wasn’t the response he was going for. “Because he doesn’t own you.”

Izuku picked up a bit of his rice with his chopsticks, shifting his gaze back and forth between his two classmates. “So?”

Sero joined Kaminari in leaning forward. From here, Izuku could see that his eyes weren’t black; they were actually a very dark brown with some grey streaks extending out from his pupil. The combination was strangely fascinating. Sero opened his mouth once, twice, before settling on what he wanted to say. “When you, uh, allow him to do stuff like that to you and don’t protest him treating you like that, it kind of makes it seem like you’re, uh, letting him be in charge of you or something.”

Izuku finished chewing, still uncertain what the problem was. “Is that a bad thing?”

Sero stared back, unsure how to respond. “No? Not necessarily, but is that… do you want him to be in charge of you or something?”
Izuku used the opposite end of one of his chopsticks to scratch his eyebrow as he considered the question. “I mean… not all the time? There are some things he couldn’t… but about stuff like that, figuring out when it’s okay to, uh, touch or hug or whatever, then yeah. It’s nice to have someone tell me what it’s alright to do. I’m not, uh, really used to making friends, and I seem to keep getting things wrong by doing what feels right.” Izuku blushed at the end of his speech, embarrassed about what he perceived as one of his failures.

Sero cleared his throat, saliva caught on a cough. He tried to focus on breathing as he peered at the other boy. “So you like to be told what to do? As long as it’s about physical touching?”

“Yeah,” Izuku nodded agreeably before looking between his tablemates. “Is that… okay?”

Sero hurried to assure him. “What? Yeah, of course, as long as it’s what you want.”

“Yeah, man, we just wanted to make sure everything was, er, consensual. And stuff.” Kaminari blushed. He shoved some noodles in his mouth in an effort to shut himself up and to hide how awkward he felt about the conversation. It had needed to be discussed, but Kaminari wasn’t used to being put in a position of being the responsible one. Sero’s friendly confidence was more suited to that or, hell, Iida or Yaoyorozu. But no one else had made a move to speak up, so he figured it was up to him and Sero to nail down what the issue was with Midoriya himself.

There was a length of silence as Kaminari continued shoving noodles in his mouth, Izuku nibbled at bits of his rice while staring at Sero, and Sero focused all of his attention on Izuku’s posture. Izuku didn’t seem as shy now as he had a couple seconds ago.

Sero figured it was safe to ask. “So is it just Bakugou?”

Izuku cocked his head, a piece of rice falling from between his lips. “What?”

Sero wet his lips, gaze switching between the fallen rice and Izuku’s oblivious face. “Do you only like it when Bakugou tells you what to do?”

Kaminari coughed beside him, noodles trying to go down the wrong pipe. “Whoa, Sero, that’s kind of personal—”

Izuku shook his head. “No.”

“No?” Sero could feel a blush trying to steal its way across his ears.

Izuku shrugged his shoulders and lifted more delicate bites of rice to his mouth, his eyes peering up innocently beneath his eyelashes. “I like it in general.”

Sero nodded, automatic, mouth not remembering to close. “Oh. Okay. Uh, good.”

Kaminari’s wide eyes flitted back and forth between the two of them, the back of his hand still against his mouth from where he had been coughing.

“That’s… good?” Izuku peered up at Sero, his head tilted and eyebrows scrunched together.

Sero nodded his head before shaking it, a yes and then a no. “Yeah, no, that’s uh…” he cleared his throat, resting his arm on the table and trying to seem nonchalant. “I mean, it’s good that you’re open to, uh, other people. Doing that.”

Kaminari’s eyes went wider as he focused his gaze on Sero, wondering what the fuck his friend was doing or trying to say. Kaminari searched around, hoping for a distraction, and looked upon the
approaching form of one of their classmates carrying over what seemed to be a microwaved lunch.
“Oh, hey, it’s Tokoyami!”

Izuku twisted around faster than Sero could keep track of, a smile lighting upon his face as he saw his friend. “Hey, Tokoyami! Dark Shadow! Want to join us?”

Tokoyami paused, analyzing the atmosphere at the table. “Would I be interrupting something?”

“Izuku turned toward his friend, all innocent posture, and asked, “Can I touch Dark Shadow again?”

After the last lunchroom debacle with Midoriya’s familiar, Tokoyami figured nothing Midoriya did right now could live up to that. “As you wish.”

He was wrong.

Izuku smiled and went to bop heads with Dark Shadow, who was peering over Tokoyami’s shoulder at him. Normally, things probably would have ended there; but Izuku was feeling kind of strange after the weird conversation with Sero and Kaminari, so what he really wanted was a hug. And Dark Shadow was right there and warm and comfortable, so he figured Why not? Except there should have been a distinct reason ‘why not’, such as Tokoyami’s widening eyes and stiffening posture.

Tokoyami opened his beak to say something but was halted, one of Dark Shadow’s “hands” holding his mouth shut. Tokoyami glared at Dark Shadow, who took advantage of his silence to make himself even bigger and envelop Midoriya in an even larger hug.

Meanwhile, Kaminari sat across the table from the threesome with his mouth agape. He’d seen something like this happen a couple tables away last week, but to be right across from it was hella awkward, especially since Tokoyami did not seem to be a willing participant at the moment. Kaminari raised a hand up to reach across the table and pull on Midoriya’s sleeve or something—only for Sero to make the first move.

“This time, Izuku obeyed immediately, turning around toward Sero with large questioning eyes, as if to say ‘what did I do wrong?’

“Sit down in your seat.” Sero’s heart beat loudly in his chest as he tried to instill his voice with as much confidence as possible. It was nowhere near Bakugou-level (that boy had enough rage and will to move mountains), but he thought he had definitely reached Iida or Todoroki levels. And lo and behold, Midoriya submitted, letting go of Dark Shadow and returning to his seat.

Izuku was blushing and silent for a few seconds before looking up at Sero. “Did I do something wrong?”

Sero’s eyes shifted over to Tokoyami, who had gained control over his familiar again, his beak free to speak. Sero returned his gaze to Izuku. “You made Tokoyami uncomfortable.”

“But I asked!” Izuku turned pleading eyes toward Tokoyami. “Did I ask wrong? I don’t understand…”
Tokoyami sighed. “Midoriya, I should apologize. I did not specify in what manner you could touch Dark Shadow, and his response was… overzealous.” Tokoyami paused in an internal debate, the feathers near the back of his neck ruffling, before he continued. “It would be best if you considered Dark Shadow as more than a familiar. He has… feelings and emotions like a person, and can respond appropriately.”

Izuku looked confused. “But I was treating him like a person.”

If Tokoyami could have cocked an eyebrow, Sero bet he would have. Instead, Tokoyami tilted his head and turned toward Izuku. “Would you have used the same behavior with me?”

Izuku nodded his head enthusiastically. “Of course! If you said I could touch you.”

“So by touching, you meant hugging.”

Izuku continued to smile, oblivious. “Well, they’re the same thing.”

There was a pause as each of the three other table members took that in stride. Kaminari looked over at Sero, his eyebrows raised. In turn, Sero raised his eyebrows at Tokoyami, who shook his head.

Sero sighed. He didn’t really like being put in the position to lecture someone, but he did take on the burden of telling him what to do earlier. Not that it was much of a burden. “Midoriya… I think I know what the problem is.” Izuku turned his gaze to Sero. “When you ask if you can touch someone, they expect that you’re only going to touch them with your hands. If you want to hug someone, you have to ask that specifically. Otherwise, you might make them uncomfortable. Does that… make sense?”

Izuku stared at Sero, his eyes seeming to glaze over in thought before awakening again. “I don’t really understand the difference, but if you say I should be more specific, then I can try.” His smile seemed to say ‘See? I can be reasonable’, and the other members of the table breathed a collective sigh.

“I think that would help everyone be more comfortable.” Sero tried to make sure his voice sounded firm and certain, even though he was still internally reeling from trying to deal with Izuku logic.

Izuku smiled. “Okay!” He went to devour more of his rice before pausing, a thought overtaking his mind. “But Kacchan doesn’t make me be specific. As long as he allows me to touch him, he lets me do anything.” He tilted his head in question as he peered back up at Sero.

Kaminari blushed at the implication of that statement and joked, “Ahhh I don’t think he’d let you do anything, man.”

Izuku shrugged in response. “Kacchan hasn’t told me to stop, and I’ve touched him in a lot of different ways.”

Kirishima, who was walking past their table to return his tray to the front of the cafeteria, tripped over his feet, somehow managing to knock over most of the dishes on his tray. Kaminari simultaneously choked on his tea, causing him to beat his chest as his eyes watered. Sero gaped at Izuku, not even sure where to begin trying to clarify that remark.

“I would advise you to ignore his statement. Sometimes, ignorance is the better part of valor,” Tokoyami quoted, nodding his head at his own sage advice. Sero and Kaminari looked askance at each other before deciding to agree.

There were a few seconds of silence before Izuku continued, still confused. “But what’s the
“Everything,” quipped Kaminari, at the same time as Sero suggested that it might be because Bakugou and Midoriya were already close friends. That idea seemed to click with Izuku.

“Oh, it’s because we’re pack! So I can do it with Kirishima, too!”

Kirishima, having finished rebalancing the items on his tray, turned toward their table with what were definitely not panicked eyes. Nope. His cocky posture seemed to have a bit of a twitch to it, as though he were nervous about something. “I really feel like I need to be caught up on this conversation. What are you going to do with me?”

Izuku smiled at Kirishima, his eyes sparkling. “Touch you!”

Sero groaned and ran a hand through his hair, the black strands falling back to frame his face. Sighing, he turned toward Kirishima. “He seems to have come to the conclusion that, as long as you say that he can touch you, then he can touch you in any way he wants. Short story? Touching means hugs.”

Kaminari nodded, a rakish grin on his face as he wiggled his eyebrows. “Yeah, and it might mean more, but we haven’t clarified that part.”

“Oh. Okay. Uh, right. I’m going to go… put away my tray now.” Kirishima said, backing away with a blush on his face. He tripped on his feet again and fell into Bakugou, who pushed him upright, grumbling about ‘watching where the fuck he was shoving his shitty hair’ or something like that. Kirishima nodded, friendly and earnest, trying to laugh all manly and get rid of the breathlessness in his chest.

The lunch period basically devolved from there.

Before the end of school, Iida approached Izuku asking about his schedule for the next couple of days. They needed to work on their partner project, and they could either go out somewhere to discuss it like a cafe or they could head back to one of their respective houses. Izuku informed Iida about his mom taking on extra shifts at work this week, so his apartment was empty. Iida, ever the responsible one, suggested that his house would be a better location since they would both have supervision and, possibly, snacks.

Izuku was more than willing to go along with this idea, tempted by the image of seeing where Iida lived. In his mind, he saw Iida’s suit of armor gleaming in the halls of a strange castle. Did people even live in castles anymore? Izuku could see Iida living in one.

It took about thirty minutes for Izuku and Iida to get to the Iida Family residence, most of which Iida spent catching Izuku up on what happened in fourth period while he was gone. Izuku kept looking over his shoulder, feeling slightly paranoid. It felt like there was an itch between his shoulder blades, which he usually associated with the feeling of someone following him. But no matter where he turned, no one seemed to be watching. He didn’t hear any consistent footsteps behind them, either. Izuku tried to shrug off the worry for another time, but then Iida started sending him concerned glances for how twitchy he was acting.

Once he was behind the solid doors of the Iida residence, Izuku finally felt like he could breathe. He
leaned his forehead against the door, using the solid wood to cool his face, as he rolled his shoulders. Whatever that feeling was, it was gone now.

“Midoriya, are you alright?”

Izuku half-turned toward Iida and smiled. “Yeah, just had a weird feeling.”

“Like your feeling before the USJ event?”

Izuku looked at Iida curiously.

A light blush stole over Iida’s face. “I overheard you that day, and it seemed as though you got feelings related to potential events…”

Izuku shook his head. “I only get feelings like that when Popsicle’s in his raven form. He’s a snake right now.”

“Oh, right. Of course. You have your familiar with you?”

Izuku used two fingers to pull his shirt collar away from his neck, baring his collarbone. Or baring what would have been his collarbone if the snake weren’t coiled around it.

“Is he always with you?”

Izuku nodded. “Ever since I filled out the paperwork, I’ve been allowed to bring him with me everywhere at school.”

Iida pointed toward the stairway in the middle of the room, suggesting they head upstairs to his bedroom first. “Since I have not noticed him until now, I suppose he stays in his snake form around you neck?”

“Yeah, unless he’s hot, and then he shrinks and settles around my wrists instead. Sometimes I put him in my backpack if he starts driving me crazy.” Izuku flushed at Iida’s intent gaze being directed at him. “Did I do something?”

Iida shook his head, his black hair falling to frame his glasses before he pushed the hair back. “No, I apologize, I did not mean to stare. I haven’t met many people with familiars. You and Tokoyami are the first, but your quirks seem very different. I only now noticed that I do not fully understand how your familiar quirk is linked to your other quirk.”

Izuku’s breath hitched as he realized that he and Iida would be openly discussing his abilities tonight. That meant Izuku would be detailing how he had two quirks that were somehow combined into a single quirk (just like Todoroki’s quirk was “icy hot” and not “ice quirk and fire quirk”). Izuku let out a shaky breath and nibbled at his lips as they continued up the stairs into the hallway. He wondered if there was a way to laugh off the question… but if they’d be discussing the topic soon, anyway, then he needed to come up with an answer quickly.

“Uh… yeah, it’s… um, that part of my quirk is just me having a, uh, familiar. Popsicle’s able to shapeshift, but I don’t really understand that, uh, part of it. But something about his shapeshifting is like, uh, rearranging molecules? And I can, uh, do something like that, too? That’s what causes the explosions?” Izuku stumbled over half of the explanation, but he managed to get something out. *Shit, didn’t Mr. Aizawa remember that Izuku had a curse preventing him from discussing his abilities? Was this a test of some sort, trying to make him find a way to talk about it with anyone who asked?*

“Hmm, that sounds complicated. Is it a combination of your parents’ quirks?”
Izuku wondered if Iida could hear him gulp. “Uh, not really, but the familiar thing is kind of inherited.” That was true enough. All witches had familiars, after all. They just didn’t tend to be as special as Popsicle. Izuku wondered, once again, where Popsicle had actually gotten his ability to shapeshift. Was he originally a wolf that had a spell cast on him to change form, or was he naturally born a shapeshifter? Popsicle never answered when Izuku asked.

Iida hummed as though Izuku’s explanation made sense, his blue eyes narrowing in thought from behind his rectangular glasses. “I suppose you inherited your familiar in the same way I inherited my speed. The engine quirk has been passed down in one form or another to most of my family, but I developed engines on my legs whereas my brother Tensei had engines appear on his arms.”

Izuku nodded his head quickly, jumping on the excuse. “Yeah, I think it’s like that. My familiar, uh, got my quirk somehow, and now he can change form and size like, uh, Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow…” Izuku trailed off, unsure how to fabricate the story further. He hoped that would work for now.

Iida had entered his room and put down his backpack. He was currently rifling through his bag for notes. Apparently, he had sketched out a plan for how they should organize information for their report about their current quirk use, their non-quirk physical abilities, and future ways to use their quirks or focus their physical abilities.

Izuku took a deep breath, hoping for the best. This assignment seemed like something straight out of a horror novel, for him. Talking about his ability? That was a no. Talking about further ways he could use his ability that he wasn’t allowed to fully reveal to his partner? Definite no.

Izuku put on a brave face and tried to smile, hoping Iida couldn’t see how tense he was. Everyone was nervous about discussing their abilities, right? The more someone else knew about your quirk, the more they could take advantage of your weaknesses, like Aoyami’s stomach ache following prolonged laser use or Kacchan’s pain if his explosions were too powerful. Being apprehensive about discussing your quirk was completely normal… he hoped.

Thankfully, Iida had this way of discussing quirks and abilities logically and forthright that somehow managed to put Izuku at ease. The curse didn’t prevent Izuku from talking about potential things he could do (like exploding the air beneath him, which could cause him almost to hover in mid-air). It just prevented him from talking about what he was. Izuku relaxed, the corners of his mouth curling into a slow, lazy grin, as he hugged one of Iida’s pillows to his chest. He had always admired Iida’s ability to discuss quirk-use in a candid manner, ever since their battle trial together.

Before Izuku knew it, two hours had passed by, and Iida’s mom was home. Izuku sat curled against one of Iida’s bedposts while Iida lay on his stomach on the bed. His face was near to Izuku’s, his hair having fallen forward around his glasses again. They had just finished talking about potential quirk uses for both of them. Izuku had tried to ignore how his abilities kept being called “a quirk,” the lie feeling sour on his tongue.

Iida’s calves were currently elevated. Apparently, due to the engines being located on his calves, the backs of Iida’s legs generally hurt by the end of the day; and propping them up like this helped ease some of the tension off of his calves.

Izuku kept looking over at the engines, wanting to feel them, as Iida unwittingly put them on display. Were they made of metal? Were they naturally hot, or were they the same temperature as his skin? Was Iida naturally warmer, in order to provide the energy needed to the engines? And did the rest of his calves feel like an engine, or just really tough muscle? Could his calves be massaged? Would it feel good to him?
Izuku had honestly been distracted more than half of the time they were supposed to be working. He blamed Iida’s calves for being laid bare like that. Izuku’s hands twitched, wanting to grasp and feel.

Iida’s mom knocked at the bedroom door, and Iida bade her to enter.

“Oh! Tenya, I didn’t know we would be having a guest.”

“Forgive me, mother. It must have slipped my mind to text you. I will endeavor to be more vigilant next time. This is Izuku Midoriya. We are working on a project about our quirk use.”

Izuwa waived from his spot against the bed, not wanting to get up when he’d only just gotten comfortable.

“I was about to heat up some dinner. Will your friend be staying?”

Iida looked over at Izuku, as if offering him an out, but Izuku didn’t want to leave. His mom wouldn’t be home until very late, and he would rather not sit at home in the empty apartment without company. And Popsicle didn’t count as company.

Iida bit his lip and lifted his head to look at Iida. “My mom isn’t home, so I’m fine staying.”

Iida nodded as his mom left the room to prepare dinner. Iida ducked his head, not quite looking at Izuku, as he admitted, “I’ve never had a friend over for dinner.”

Izuku softly grinned back. “Neither have I.”

Iida stared at Midoriya, his fingers picking at the outside edges of his notes. Iida’s dark blue eyes reminded Izuku of something, but he couldn’t remember what. The night sky? Blueberries? Those strange rocks he’d discovered in the vampire’s cave? Izuku stared back at Iida, resting his head on the corner of Iida’s comforter, patient, waiting. The other boy obviously had something he wanted to say.

Iida cleared his throat and looked away with reddening cheeks, shifting his focus over toward his laptop. “Would you be interested in watching some clips of old Sports Festivals?”

Izuku bit his lip as an idea blossomed in his head. “Can we watch the ones you were talking about, with your brother?”

Iida’s eyes turned back toward Izuku, lighting up as he grinned. The movement made his face seem younger and more free. Izuku wondered what Iida would have been like when he was too young to understand rules, if maybe he smiled more or laughed. Most of the time that Izuku spent with Iida, his classmate had a stern look on his face and was chopping the air with his hands to emphasize which rules had been broken in the past five minutes.

It could be overwhelming, at times, to have that sort of fervor shoved in your face. It might have helped if Izuku had grown up familiar with having a list of rules like those at U.A., but it wasn’t part of his worldview and never had been. School rules often took second place next to Izuku’s needs and desires, and he didn’t really have the ability to convince his brain to change his priorities. It was the same way with unspoken social rules, although part of Izuku’s problem with those was not knowing they existed.

In turn, Iida often got frustrated with Izuku because of his lack of regard for school rules, which in turn prevented Izuku from approaching the other boy openly for friendship. Izuku wanted to make friends with his classmates and form them into a new pack. But how could someone like Iida get past seeing rules all the time to be comfortable with something like a pack? The other boy’s current
friendships seem to be based around some sort of regimented order, while a pack was a close-knit chaos.

In addition, for as frustrated as Iida must be with Izuku most of the time, Izuku was equally frustrated with Iida. He respected the other student; he admired his passion, his drive, and his ambition. Whenever Izuku remembered Iida’s words at lunch the previous day, when he had been speaking about what kind of hero he wanted to be, Izuku felt his heart get all warm and his breath get lighter. He kept imagining Iida in his metal suit, standing tall…

It would be an honor to have someone like that in his pack, but Izuku didn’t know how to get Iida to agree or to be okay with the inherent lack of rules that came with a pack. Well, alright, it wasn’t exactly a lack of rules. The rules were just different. Packs generally had a hierarchal structure, with the people in the middle vying to impose their wills on those at the bottom. The only “rules” were those of pack members with stronger wills exerting that will against those below them. If Iida joined the pack, he would probably have to be near the top of the hierarchy, or he would go insane. But Izuku couldn’t see Kacchan giving up his position easily.

He tried to imagine it, both Kacchan and Iida in his pack. Izuku thought back to their shouting match on Monday in the hallway. *Maybe it would work out…*

“Do you want to see clips from Tensei’s first festival? Or the last one?”

Izu glanced upward to find that Iida already had his laptop set up on his bed and was gesturing Izuku to join him. Izuku felt as his heart began beating faster; he stood up and slowly approached the center of Iida’s bed. He’d stayed on the ground up until now, afraid to invade the other’s space after that big discussion about touching he’d had with Sero and Kaminari during lunch. But Iida was inviting him onto his bed, which meant it was okay to lay beside him, right?

Izuku pressed his lips together, worried, as he raised one knee and then another onto the bed, slowly crawling next to Iida and lying down on his stomach next to him. He was afraid to meet the other teen’s eyes. They were touching from hip to toe. Izuku shifted in his position, in palpably nervous, Iida’s warmth a slow burn against Izuku’s hip and leg. “Can we watch all of them?”

Iida’s returning smile made a light, airy sensation fill Izuku’s chest. His brain felt like it was swimming, as though he was breathing helium instead of oxygen.

“We probably only have time for one of the festivals right now… but we could watch more after dinner?” The way Iida trailed off at the end of his statement sounded like a question. He was giving Izuku another out, another chance to leave him. Izuku wondered why Iida kept expecting him to want to leave. Is that what people usually did to Iida? Hang out for only a few minutes and then abandon him?

It didn’t matter. Izuku didn’t have anywhere else he wanted to go; and even if something were to come up, unless it contained Kacchan, Izuku would choose to stay here. Maybe even then.

Izuku nudged his shoulder into Iida’s, trying to be careful not to jump all over someone who wasn’t pack. “Which is your favorite?”

Iida chose the first festival video and hit play, his smile growing wider and wider each time Midoriya gushed over something Tensei did on the screen. It was the first time Iida had felt this close to Midoriya since the battle trial when it had felt like both of their lives were on the line. The sense of victory afterward, and the camaraderie, had felt similar to this but not entirely. There was something about lying next to a friend on your bed, sharing a thing you loved, that filled Iida’s chest with a combination of sadness and affection. It felt oddly like sentiment, something closer to his heart than
he was quite used to. Iida found that he wanted it to stay.

Over dinner, they ended up discussing what had happened during different Sports Festivals at U.A. in the past. Since most of Iida’s family were into hero work in one capacity or another, Iida had grown up watching the Sports Festival as a family tradition. For every obstacle course that Iida would recall, his mother would chime in about another from when Iida was too young to remember. She even recollected Eraserhead and Present Mic’s debut, which Izuku listened to with relish.

Izuku discussed with Iida and Iida’s parents his continued hesitation about the competitive aspect of the games. He simply couldn’t understand why there was such a focus on beating your classmates rather than working with them. Only one out of three rounds during the Sports Festival typically focused on teamwork. The first round was a free-for-all, the second was a collaborative exercise, and the third was a fighting tournament. Iida’s mom tried to explain how competitive the hero industry was, but even with both her and Iida detailing how public favor and scoring a win against a villain changed your hero rating, Izuku couldn’t understand.

Izuku typically had an innate rasp of hero/villain situations, due to his background with fighting demons and trying to protect innocents. But the magical world didn’t have anything like this, two magical people clamoring for attention. Witches typically tried to hide their powers; there was no competitiveness because being known was something to be feared, not desired. The best way to survive was to team up with other magical beings, for each person to use their strengths to solve a problem—like the werewolves asking Izuku and his mom for protection wards and offering physical defense. But pro-heroism as an industry relied on public opinion; the more popular a hero was, the more money they had, and the more resources they could afford in order to do more good works and be a better and more popular hero.

It was a recursive cycle that Izuku already doubted he had the patience for. So much of what a “hero” needed to be these days went against his nature. Why couldn’t heroes just create packs that fought together to solve problems, take down villains, and save the innocent? Sure, Izuku understood working alone if no one else was nearby. But if they were nearby and could help, why not work together? It went against everything Izuku was used to and everything he stood for.

When he tried to express these thoughts to Iida and his parents, the other boy said he understood Izuku’s reasoning and admired his passion for collaboration, but the industry just wasn’t set up that way anymore. Iida’s dad pointed out that the purpose behind the Sports Festival had always been to introduce the students at U.A. to the pro-hero industry, and thus it would necessarily be competitive by nature. Izuku pouted for a full five minutes after Iida concurred and the conversation was considered finished.

He still didn’t have to like it or agree.

Throughout dinner, there were a couple of moments where Iida would begin to criticize something Izuku was doing (don’t eat on the floor when there’s a chair to sit on, don’t sit cross-legged in your chair, don’t reach across the table to get something when you could ask someone to pass it, be nicer when asking someone to pass you something, etc ). However, each time felt more like a gentle reprimand filled with logical reasoning behind it, rather than the emphatic shouting hand chops that he usually displayed at school. Izuku wondered what the difference was.

If Iida would lecture him this way all the time, Izuku pondered, he would be more likely to listen.
The smile at the end of each reprimand was probably what made the difference. Izuku didn’t know where the smiles came from, but each was soft, grateful in a way, as though he appreciated how well Izuku was listening to him. Maybe that was the trick? Maybe if Izuku paid more attention to him at school rather than ignoring him and continuing to do what he wanted (running in the halls, nuzzling Kacchan), then Iida would give him more of those smiles and gentle reprimands instead of shouting.

He wouldn’t stop nuzzling Kacchan, though. Izuku refused to make that compromise.

Izuku learned over dinner that Iida had four brothers, Tensei being the eldest. Every one of the brothers had already graduated high school and had their own apartment somewhere; and each of them would visit one night a week for dinner with Iida’s parents. Wednesday just so happened to be the only weekday where one of his brothers wasn’t present. More importantly, if Izuku came back tomorrow, he’d get to meet Tensei.

Izuku secretly planned to finish just enough of their project by the end of the night so that he would have an excuse to be back tomorrow. Izuku had a feeling that, if he got to meet Tensei, then Iida’s behavior around his brother would give Izuku insight into whether Iida would make a good packmate. The bond with his brother was the key. Packmates were a lot like brothers, in a way; so if Iida was a good brother, then he would probably be a good packmate. At least, that was what Izuku hoped.

After dinner, Iida taught Izuku how to politely show his thanks for being allowed to stay over for dinner. Izuku tried to be nice about pointing out that he had been invited to stay, so why did he need to be thankful when the other person had offered. Iida got upset and lectured Izuku about learning to be grateful for things even if they were offered them. Izuku tried not to point out his recent situation with the tengu, where he shouldn’t have been expected to be grateful for what they had ‘offered’ him. That likely wasn’t the other boy’s point.

Izuku walked up to Iida’s bedroom with his metaphorical tail between his legs and curled up on the floor at Iida’s bedpost. He tried not to pout and whine following the unpleasant feeling in his chest, but his wobbly smile and hesitant voice when Iida joined him likely sent out all the signals he was trying to avoid. Izuku couldn’t help but feel shaky and uncertain, and he wasn’t sure why. Thankfully, Iida had enough empathy to feel guilty about the whole situation, and he invited Izuku up onto his bed to watch more Sports Festival videos. Izuku and his slightly-tearful smile accepted. The warmth returning to his hip and legs as he lay down once more next to Iida helped him calm down, and minutes later they were both exclaiming and smiling over Tensei’s performance again.

Thirty minutes into the videos, Iida noticed that Izuku was humming and leaning his shoulder against Iida’s, much closer than he had been earlier. The green haired teen’s toes were casually caressing Iida’s foot, causing Iida to become uncomfortable. Not bad-uncomfortable, just… Iida wasn’t sure how he felt about it. Prickly. Nervous. Uncertain if he should shift over or stay still. More importantly, though, it made him paranoid his parents would walk in on them.

Iida paused before the next video and turned to Izuku, whose cheek was now also against Iida’s shoulder. He cleared his throat, unsure how to phrase what he wanted to say without upsetting Midoriya. The question needed to be asked, but he wasn’t sure where to begin. It’s not that Iida didn’t appreciate Izuku being, uh, friendly with him, but he didn’t want his mother to walk in on the two of them lying on a bed together with Izuku acting this way. It would be very awkward.

Iida decided that candor was probably the best approach with the other boy. “Midoriya… do you realize that it is inappropriate for you to be laying your head against me in such a manner? And, uh, touching my feet?”
Izuku’s freckled cheeks turned scarlet, and he quickly shifted to the edge of the bed away from Iida. This was the second time he’d been told not to touch someone today.

“I do not mean to make you uncomfortable, but… I would not want my mother to come in and see you leaning against me like that.”

Izuku took a large chunk of his lip between his teeth, feeling like he was about to be kicked out.

Iida sighed. He hadn’t meant to make the other boy upset. He just… Midoriya didn’t seem to understand. And Iida wasn’t sure he understood Midoriya, either.

This time when Iida spoke, his voice was much softer, no hint of censure in his tone. “Why do you touch everyone so often? During class with Bakugou, then Kirishima…” Iida hung his head, frustrated at being unable to discern the urge behind the other boy’s actions. Iida’s blue eyes turned to pierce Izuku in place, like an arrow against a tree. “You would not act this way without some reason…” He trailed off before sighing, “Do you even know why you do it?”

Izuku’s blush seemed to seer heat across the back of his neck and chest, as his eyes fought to look anywhere else but at Iida. He didn’t want to be forced to leave, but he had a feeling that the wrong answer would have him pushed out the door within minutes. He had been enjoying watching videos with Iida just a second ago, warm and full and happy. For a second, it had almost felt like pack.

What was so wrong about wanting to lean against people, to nuzzle them or hug them or hold their hands?

“I need it,” Izuku whispered, fixating his stare on Iida’s blanket. It was a dark blue, like Iida’s eyes. Izuku took a fortifying breath and raised his head to gaze back at the other boy. “When I… when I touch someone that I care about, it, uh, calms me down? I can get overwhelmed about a lot of things, but grasping and touching, just leaning against someone, it helps. I don’t mean to make anyone uncomfortable. It doesn’t feel uncomfortable to me. It just feels warm and safe, and…” Izuku paused and shrugged a bit helplessly, his voice deepening as he continued. “I don’t often feel warm or safe.”

Iida returned to nibbling at his lip as he searched the other boy’s eyes for any sort of recognition or understanding. He wanted so badly for Iida to understand, though he didn’t know why the desire to be accepted felt so strong.

Iida stared back at Izuku, cataloguing every twitch and sigh, how he bit at his lips and looked away. Iida hadn’t meant to make Izuku nervous or afraid. He’d just wanted… Iida exhaled. He didn’t know exactly what he wanted, except for his mother not to walk in on Izuku almost cuddling her son on his bed. He couldn’t imagine the shame. But… if it really meant that much to Izuku… depriving him of touch seemed equivalent to forcing a puppy to stay in its cage outdoors while it was raining, its eyes peering up at you, looking so abandoned.

Slowly, tentatively, Iida reached his left hand toward Izuku. He didn’t know rightly what he was doing until he had already done it, cupping his hand around the back of the other boy’s neck. Iida swallowed, throat dry, and tried to focus on smiling in what he hoped looked like acceptance. He didn’t want his timidity and anxiety to show through. After all, Iida wasn’t distressed by the thought of touching Midoriya; he simply wasn’t used to initiating physical contact. He couldn’t even remember the last time he had hugged Tensei, and Iida was closest to him out of all of his family members.

Izuku peered back at Iida, guileless, open, confused, his expectation of rejection mirroring Iida’s earlier worries that Izuku would want to leave. The hand on the back of his neck felt warm, and Izuku decided to take what contact he was given. He closed his eyes, the corners of his mouth lifting into a smile as he leaned his head back against Iida’s palm. Izuku shivered. He’d never realized how
sensitive his neck was to heat, the pressure of the other boy’s thumb causing pleasant tingles all the way down Izuku’s arms. Izuku’s eyelids drooped open slower than normal as he fought to focus on Iida’s dark blue eyes inches away. Izuku licked his lips before breaking the silence. “Can we watch more videos?”

Izuku dreamed that night of flying over the edge of the werewolves’ forest, where he had never been allowed to pass. The woods tapered off into broad grassland, but it wasn’t actually a grassland. There were still trees there, but they were drifting, hovering twenty meters above the ground. Roots stretched out below the tree trunks, trying to reach the earth below, but they were never able to touch, cursed to float for eternity.

Izuku reached out his hand as he flew toward them; the trees didn’t feel like bark but flesh, resembling Kirishima’s skin in hardened form. No matter how hard he tried, Izuku couldn’t push them down. He floated above the earth, watching a fire bloom across the grassland, trying to shout a warning to what he didn’t know. The trees flew, silent.

Izuku woke up to stare at water stains on the ceiling, trapped in a broken sense of feeling alone. Popsicle huffed next to him in wolf-form, and Izuku wasn’t sure whether to be thankful that his dream wasn’t a premonition or whether to think that it was still trying to tell him something.

The trees would never be able to find home upon the ground, and neither could he. Izuku traced the edges of the stains with his eyes, blinking away tears as he shivered. Popsicle whined in his sleep next to him, sensing Izuku’s distress through the bond. Izuku turned toward him, nuzzling his face in the back of Popsicle’s neck, as he tried to stop himself from shaking. He felt empty and cold, his hands reaching toward nothing at all, and the sensation refused to go away.

Part 3: Thursday (11 Days and Counting)

The following morning, Iida wasn’t quite sure how to react near Midoriya. The other boy kept staring at him, offering an ingenuous smile every time Iida nodded his head in recognition of Midoriya’s scrutiny. Iida felt strangely rewarded for paying attention to the other boy. It was a disconcerting feeling that Iida couldn’t admit to disliking.

Izuku, meanwhile, kept twitching out his right hand and grasping for Iida’s presence as though the other boy were a phantom limb, something missing from Izuku’s body. He had the distinct impression that he might have already accepted Iida into his pack, despite planning to see how Iida interacted with his brother before deciding whether he would be able to get along with Kacchan in pack settings. Maybe it would be okay for Kacchan to have a rival in the pack, someone to keep him on his toes.

Speaking of Kacchan, he had stormed through the classroom door only to shove his bag down next to his desk and growl at Izuku. “Deku, why the fuck do you keep eye-fucking four-eyes?”

Izuku didn’t know what ‘eye-fucking’ was, but he blushed anyway, embarrassed at being caught. He didn’t know why he felt flustered, either. He had just missed Iida and wanted to see him again later
that day. That wasn’t a bad thing, and it wasn’t something Kacchan should be upset at him for.

From his seat beside Izuku, Sero’s face flushed with second-hand embarrassment as he shifted in his seat, staring between Izuku and Bakugou. Sero wasn’t about to let Bakugou walk all over Midoriya, not after their discussion the day before. Sero’s voice was loud and clear, brooking no argument, when he decided to address the other teen. “Midoriya can look at whoever he wants, Bakugou.”

Kacchan turned his glare onto Sero, and Izuku’s eyes widened at Sero’s suicide attempt. He’d thought the other boy had more self-preservation instincts than that. Jirou also looked behind her chair at Sero, her deadpan eyes almost bulging out of her head.

“That wasn’t a bad thing, and it wasn’t something Kacchan should be upset at him for.”

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“Who the fuck said you could interrupt, triangle mouth?” Bakugou leaned over in his seat, his imposing muscled form only enhanced by the smoke seen rising from his hands. His spiky blonde hair made it seem as though he was already exploding, on the inside.

“Midoriya can look at whoever he wants as long as the staring is consensual. It shouldn’t be any of your business.” Sero stated clearly, not ready to back down. Sero’s smile had melted into a frown, his shoulders down and his chest pressed outward.

Together, Sero and Bakugou looked like a pair of posturing peacocks. Izuku wasn’t sure if he found the notion funny or subduing.

Jirou shouted across Sero’s head to Yaoyorozu, asking for popcorn.

Kirishima leaned over from his seat next to Sero to put his hand on the other boy’s arm, trying to disarm the situation. “Whoa, man, calm down. Hey, Bakubro, no need to yell. Everyone can hear you just fine.”

Bakugou swung around to glower at Kirishima. “What, now you want a piece of me, too, shitty hair?”

“Aw, man, are you back to calling me shitty hair again? I thought we’d leveled up to last-name basis!” Kirishima leaned over to get a look at Bakugou from around Jirou, his smile affable and so damn sincere that everyone else around him found themselves relaxing. Except of course Bakugou, whom it was meant for. “You’re wounding my heart.”

Bakugo rose out of his chair, heading toward Kirishima and Sero to show them exactly what he could wound, only for Izuku to reach out a hand and slide it up under Bakugou’s shirt, Izuku’s fingers trailing across the explosive teen’s abs. Bakugou would deny the shivers that broke out on his arms to anyone who dared ask, but he couldn’t deny that he stopped in his tracks, furious eyes lowering to glare at the boy beneath him.

“Kacchan, I missed you.”

Everyone else pondered what strange power Izuku seemed to hold over the explosive teen as Bakugou’s shoulders stopped tensing and he dropped into his chair, huffing and grumbling about ‘Deku taking his fucking hands off him’. Bakugou turned to glare at the board instead of his fellow students, anger mollified. Sero turned his surprised eyes and somewhat gaping mouth to Izuku, who was fondly trailing his fingers over Bakugou’s neck and smiling at the other boy’s back.

Mr. Aizawa shuffled out of his sleeping bag, took in the mood of the classroom, and decided to ignore the Midoriya situation for another day. “Good, you got quiet on your own. Training areas five through seven will be open-access to first years starting next Monday, from 7am to 7pm. Feel free to take advantage of them for unrestrained quirk use on school grounds. That is all.” He crawled back
into his sleeping bag and went back to sleep.

“I wonder why they’re not open until then,” Kaminari questioned, Kirishima nodding in agreement behind him.

“Yeah, training at home is hard. I can lift weights, stretch, and go running, but that’s about it. Those areas sound useful.” Because of course Kirishima cared about physical training.

“Hey Sero?”

Sero turned toward his left to face Izuku, who had stopped touching Bakugou and had turned his body towards Sero’s. “Hey, what’s up?”

“We’re friends now, right?”

Sero smiled, his perfect teeth gleaming. He was glad the other boy thought that. “Yeah, of course we are. I mean, as long as you want to be.”

Cocking his head, Izuku returned his smile with the intensity of the sun. “Then can I feel the cellophane openings in your elbows?”

Sero’s mouth dropped open, slightly weirded out. “Uhhh… what?”

“I really want to know what they feel like. Are they solid, like bone? Or are they more like a muscle? Can I massage them?” The last part was asked with a bit too much enthusiasm, Midoriya already starting to inch forward in his seat out of excitement.

Sero’s face began reddening with each new question from Izuku. The other boy wanted to… grope his arms?

From a couple feet away, Bakugou’s laugh was sudden and startling. It was also, obviously, meant to make fun of Sero. Bakugou didn’t stop howling in laughter for two minutes, all the while Sero abashedly offered his elbows to Izuku’s wandering hands. His cellophane protrusions were definitely more like muscle and could be massaged, much to the interest of Izuku and the pleasure of Sero. Izuku kept making odd cooing noises at the muscles beneath his fingers, the skin made soft by the chemicals needed to produce cellophane from his body.

Izuku’s smile was infectious as he massaged Sero’s elbows, causing the other boy to grin back dopily. Sero somehow managed the presence of mind to side-eye Bakugou. He wanted to knock Bakugou’s head off for laughing so hard, but he was afraid the explosive teen would only think better of him if he did. Violence seemed like the way to Bakugou’s heart. What a non-intuitive hero-in-training.

Once he finished his laughing fit, Bakugou turned toward Sero, shoulders simultaneously loose and domineering. The other boy threw Sero an assessing glower, causing Sero’s heart to stop for a couple of seconds, before the laziest derisive smirk stole over Bakugou’s face. It gave Sero more violent urges, like the desire to slam the other teen’s head into his desk or make out with him or something. Neither urge was normal for him. Either way, Sero got Bakugou’s message loud and clear. ‘I don’t know if you’re good enough for Izuku, but you’re making him happy, so you can stay.’

Sero wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

He didn’t like Bakugou. The other teen was cocky and abrasive; he tried to control Midoriya and tell him who he could or couldn’t touch. On the other hand, Midoriya was fine with that and, to a certain extent, encouraged it. Sero was torn between wanting to stop Bakugou from being so controlling and
wanting to become the one that Midoriya listened to, instead. *Did Sero just want Midoriya to pay attention to him, or did he want Midoriya to ignore Bakugou? Or did he want both Bakugou and Midoriya to focus on him, instead?* Sero wasn’t quite sure, and the ambivalence of his own desires frustrated him.

Sero threw an uncertain smile towards Bakugou. *It didn’t really matter; two could play at this game.*

The bell rang. Homeroom was over.

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Of all the things Sero was expecting on his way to lunch, it wasn’t for Bakugou to grab his upper arm and drag him into the bathroom as he was passing it by. Within seconds, the world was twisting before his eyes, and the back of his head was impacting the bathroom wall.

“Bakugou, what—“

The other teen’s red eyes filled Sero’s vision, hot breath caressing his face on the edge of Bakuguo’s growl. “Do you know what the fuck you’re doing with Deku?”

“Uhhh…” Sero’s throat began to collapse on itself beneath the pressure of Bakuguo’s palm. Sero gurgled, tongue hitting the roof of his mouth. He grasped at Bakugou’s wrist to relieve the pressure, struggling past a breath.

“You shouldn’t step into shit you don’t understand.” Bakugou’s nose was right next to Sero’s cheekbone, his eyes trained on the other boy’s pupils and gasps, waiting for the other teen to reach his limit. Bakugou grunted at the sight of Sero’s pupils growing large and pushed off the other teen, causing him to slump against the wall.

Sero rubbed at his throat. What was the other kid thinking, attacking him like that? They went to a school for heroes. Sero coughed, trying to gain back his breathing equilibrium. “And what don’t I understand?”

“Kch. Whatever.” Bakugou sneered at him and walked away to wash his hands. It wasn’t until Bakugou started toweling them off that he turned toward Sero once more, his gaze considering, checking Sero head to toe for flaws. “Check out some books on wolf pack behavior.”

Sero stared back incredulously, still rubbing his throat, uncertain whether he was being threatened or offered advice. He eyed the other teen as he strolled toward the door, wary of another attack but curious despite himself. “Wolf packs? Seriously?”

Bakugou had one hand on the handle as he tilted his head back to glare at Sero over his shoulder. “You think I’d joke about this shit, you extra? I don’t care what the fuck your name is or what you want… but if you’re going to be stepping between me and Deku, get your shit straight.”

Bakugou turned to leave, but paused after twisting the doorknob. He stared at the door, not acknowledging Sero’s presence, and growled at its sleek surface. “And don’t fucking try to boss me around like that again.”

Sero felt his hackles rise, both defensive and offensive, torn between reactions. “Or what?”

Bakugou’s returning grin was reminiscent of earlier; it curled at the edges into something dark and
powerful, his red eyes gleaming like a demon on the hunt. When Sero took a step back into the wall, Bakugo’s grin morphed into a leering smirk, behavior flipping in an instant.

Sero felt the urge again to punch his damn face. Heroes were meant to protect and to serve, to stand up against the wrongs of society. What right did Bakugou have to play at danger like this?

Except it wasn’t all danger, was it? Bakugo’s hand reached out to splay against Sero’s chest, right above his heart. He leaned in, smirking red eyes and all, close enough that Sero found himself gulping.

“Fucking try me and see.”

The explosive teen left the restroom on a whiff of smoke, and Sero found himself coughing as he tried to process what just happened and what his reaction should be. Anger? Confusion? Lust? Sero shook his head, trying to get a hold of himself. He had figured out enough damn kinks about his sexuality already with Midoriya. He didn’t need another.

Was this the sort of thing you were supposed to go to a teacher about, or do something about on your own? The teachers hadn’t seemed to address Bakugo’s anger issues yet. Wouldn’t make sense for them to start now. And was that what this was? Just Bakugou attacking him out of anger for Sero standing up for Bakugo’s not-boyfriend? But then why try to give him advice to help deal with Midoriya?

He thought Bakugou had been kidding about that ‘Deku being raised by a wolves’ stuff. Was he not?

If he wasn’t kidding… did that have something to do with his weird relationship with Midoriya? And more importantly, how would that impact Sero?

Chapter End Notes

Once again, not-beta’d. I looked it over 2x, so hopefully everything is grammatically correct with the right spelling.

Let me know what you did/didn’t like! Comments help me brainstorm.

I’ve decided to just continue Deku-bowling until everyone figures out their shit, which might take awhile since we’re only like a month into school; but let me know if you want more scenes with XXX person. Also, let me know how "Bakugou is borderline asexual" sounds to you, because I'm trying to fight it but he keeps ending up that way in future chapter snippets. (Edit: not "Bakugou is platonic," just "Bakugou has issues with closeness especially in regards to more sexual acts but isn't completely against them," which then comes out as anger issues. Keep in mind the story is currently still rated T for Teen.)

Next chapter contains: some hero training with Todoroki/Kirishima/Deku that gets really serious, Iida and Tensei conducting their own version of sex ed, and Kirishima/Bakugou/Deku hangout times. I'm still up for any suggestions of things you'd like to see before the next plot point! I was going to do the two weeks before the Sports
Festival in a single chapter, but shit got long and no one trains seriously until the second week.
Lessons in Idiosyncracies

Chapter Summary

Kirishima learns more about Izuku's wolf culture, the Iida family conducts an Izuku-centric sex ed program, and oh yeah there's this long section where the essence of the story is: Todoroki and Izuku really need to get a therapist, and Kirishima should be paid if they're going to make him do it.

Also: Bakugou decides to be an irl troll, and the BakuKiriDeku ship takes off from shore. With some IidaDeku in a row boat beside it.

Chapter Notes

TRIGGER WARNING: pretty explicit panic attack, if you’re sensitive to that, during the third room in the Hero Studies class exercise. Also, in Part 2, the dubcon with Kirishima and BakuDeku doesn’t end up dubcon. Just innocent stuff. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Part 1: Thursday afternoon (11 days and counting)

Lunch was a surprisingly somber affair. Izuku sat between Sero and Iida, completely baffled by his classmates’ twitching and nervous looks. Uraraka tried to keep a conversation going with Kaminari, who was being overtly friendly and asking her out for coffee sometime. Asui kept accusing him of asking Uraraka out on a date, and Uraraka kept having to stumble through an embarrassed explanation of what a ‘date’ was to a continually confused Midoriya while she shot Kaminari flustered glances and awkward smiles.

Two tables away, Kirishima sat with Bakugou, wondering why the explosive teen was silently glaring at Sero, who kept sending strange looks back over their way. Kirishima had the vague sense he was interrupting something by sitting between them. It eventually bothered him enough that he decided to speak up.

“Bakubro, what’s going on? You keep staring at them.” Kirishima was kind enough not to point out who.

Bakugou scoffed and shoved his chopsticks into his rice, stirring the spicy mixture around with another huff. He kept making noises like that. He also kept avoiding Kirishima’s attempts at prodding for more info, which had begun as ambiguous hints before culminating in his current line of questioning. “Did you read those damn books I gave you?”

Kirishima swallowed another mouthful of noodles, nodding. “The wolf ones? Yeah. I’m still not sure what they have to do with Midoriya, though.”

“Fucking really?” The look the other teen sent Kirishima made it pretty clear how many brain cells Kirishima was thought to possess.
Kirishima leaned closer to Bakugou, his voice lowering to a hush as though afraid the other students nearby would overhear. “Dude, are you really saying that Midoriya was raised by wolves? I thought you were kidding. He’s got a mom, right?”

Bakugou shoved his chopsticks in Kirishima’s face, causing the other boy to harden his cheek in defense. Bakugou smirked at the response before focusing a threatening glare on the red-head. “Don’t fucking talking to him about it. Something happened, and just… yeah, he was.” Bakugou stabbed at his food with his chopsticks. “It’s why he does that—” Bakugou waved his free hand around, scowl still firmly on his face.

“What, so he’s really physically affectionate because something happened and he was raised by wolves?”

Bakugou hunched over his food and returned to staring at Sero. “Yeah. Why the fuck do you think I keep shoving him on you?” Bakugou turned his glower toward Kirishima, gesturing violence with his chopsticks. “You better fucking take care of him, alright?”

Kirishima’s answering smile was very taken-aback and uncertain. “Uh, I’m sure he can take care of himself, but I’ll definitely be there for him if he needs me. I think he’s a really cool guy.”

Bakugou snorted. “Yeah, sure you fucking do.”

“I do!”

Red eyes pinned Kirishima in place. “Just because I let you stare at him doesn’t mean I’m gonna allow you to be a fucking idiot about it.”

Kirishima gulped, slightly embarrassed about what Bakugou was implying. “What do you mean by that?”

Bakugou scowled. “You gonna make me fucking spell it out for you?” The explosive teen turned away, gritting his teeth and biting at the back of his tongue with his molars. Fucking hell. “Deku wants you to fucking invite him over to your place so he can get in your fucking bed and have you fucking hold his shitty ass.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Are you being fucking obtuse on purpose?! He wants to cuddle.” Bakugou poured a load of water into his mouth, swirled it around, and swallowed—as though to get rid of a bad taste. Affectionate words, probably.

Kirishima, meanwhile, blushed. “The books didn’t say anything about holding each other!”

Bakugou glared at him. “No, they said that alphas order around betas, and I’m telling you to fucking hold him before he fucking starts to cry about you not liking him.”

Kirishima pushed his noodles away from him, appetite suddenly lost. He used both hands to wipe at his face, confused and suddenly horny. What the hell.

“Look, it’s not fucking rocket science. All his fucking pack are dead, and he’s not got anyone else, so he’s chosen us. And I’m not comfortable with that shit like you are.”

“Wait, what? You think I’m comfortable with…” Kirishima quieted his voice and looked around before continuing, “…cuddling?”
Bakugou’s face was scrunched up as though he was angry the conversation was still going on. “You constantly put your fucking arm around everyone. What’s the difference?”

Kirishima’s face flushed completely scarlet in a hazy approximation of his hair color. “There’s a big difference between being friendly and—” Kirishima waved his hand.

Bakugou frowned at him, simultaneously serious and angry. “I’m not saying you can have sex with Deku—”

Kirishima choked on his own spit.

“—I’m saying you can lay in a bed with him. There’s a difference. Get your head out of your porno fantasies.”

Kirishima moved to shush the other boy. “Whoa, hey, we don’t use the p-word on campus grounds.”

Bakugou gave him a look like ‘seriously?’

Kirishima buried his head in his hands and groaned. He peered up between his fingers at the other teen. “So I just ask him to sleep over or something?”

“Yes,” Bakugou growled, deciding abandon any further attempts at eating. He didn’t have the stomach for it anymore. “Fuck, I’m so done with this conversation.” He stood up to return his tray to the back of the lunchroom, pausing on his first step to peer back at the other teen, red eyes smoldering. “And if you’re fucking interested in Deku, do something about it before tape-for-arms figures this shit out.”

Kirishima stared after Bakugou’s retreating form in dismay.

Tables away, Uraraka laughed at something Asui said, and Izuku watched as Kacchan stormed off toward the back of the lunchroom, leaving Kirishima looking lost. Izuku furrowed his brows, wondering what that was all about.

After lunch, their Heroes Studies class was planned to be some complicated escape room exercise, meant to simulate getting trapped in an unknown location. The students were supposed to focus on using their problem-solving abilities with limited quirk use (unless a quirk would directly help solve their problem). The students were excited by the exercise’s potential, and Izuku found himself chatting animatedly with Iida on their way to the locker rooms.

Today was going to be the first day he would be able to use the new belt that Mr. Aizawa had suggested Izuku get designed by the Support Course. Theoretically, the belt would allow him to project five stones outward in all directions. Izuku had been keeping three sets of five stones in his backpack, in the hopes of stocking the belt with back-up stones. Over time, he could keep storing more and more in the belt; and it should have enough room for six or seven rounds of protection circles. Izuku wasn’t sure whether the belt would come in use in the escape room, but he hoped he would get to use it at least once today.

If he and his mom were going to be putting up wards around the school on Saturday night, as his mom had planned with Principal Nedzu, then he wouldn’t be very likely to need the stones for fighting on school grounds anymore. Next weekend, his mom had agreed to put up a second round
of wards around the arena where the Sports Festival would be held, as an extra precaution against the possibility of the League of Villains attacking again, so Izuku wouldn't be needing the belt for the Sports Festival, either. Maybe it would come in use for the hero internships, which were set to begin a week after the Sports Festival?

Either way, Izuku was excited to try his belt out. He wasn’t sure what radius the stones could be projected in or whether the circle radius could be altered on the belt, but the latter would be ideal. The purpose of the belt was for Izuku to be as efficient at casting his circles as possible, both with speed and secrecy. The black belt slid perfectly through the loops on his pants, settling somewhere above his hips. Kirishima said he thought it looked really cool, which made Izuku smile.

Thursday’s training exercise ended up being not one, not two, but three whole escape rooms that the students had to make their way through in under an hour and a half. The Escape Building, as it was dubbed, apparently contained thirty-six different rooms with varying puzzles that needed to be solved in order to get to the next room. The rooms were set up so that three rooms were connected sequentially, and the main point of access to the first room was through the main hallway on one of the three floors of the building. They would be solving the rooms in pairs (and one group of three), to practice their cooperation in addition with their problem-solving abilities.

Izuku was paired up with Kirishima, which he was really happy about, and Todoroki. He still didn’t know how to feel about the latter. He hadn’t gotten the opportunity to interact or talk with Todoroki since the USJ attack, other than a few glances on the bus back to school and the group circle in the classroom. The other boy hadn’t spoken to Izuku since then, except for that weird moment with Kacchan behind the lockers. Izuku wondered how it would be to partner with Todoroki in an exercise requiring less actual danger. Torodoki fascinated Izuku, although he couldn’t put his finger on exactly why. During their first fight, the other boy had been able to ice a whole building, as well as to fasten both Iida and Izuku to the wall with large chunks of ice. Izuku and Todoroki were both long and short-distance fighters, able to fight on each side of the field, and Izuku couldn’t deny looking forward to the opportunity to work more with the other teen for that similarity alone. They had the potential to work really well together.

‘Potential’ being the key word here, because he also made Izuku feel really weird. One-on-one, Todoroki was an awkward person to talk to. He didn’t say much, and he always had this look in his eye as though he wasn’t sure whether he should deign to pay attention to you. Izuku was caught between wanting to shy away from Todoroki and wanting Todoroki to pay attention to him. But then at the USJ... and on the bus... and in that group circle... Todoroki had a different side to him, didn’t he? Something overwhelmingly capable but worrismoly fragile. His capability was obvious; he had helped Cementoss immensely during the USJ fight by freezing villains left and right. But the fragile part was harder for Izuku to put his finger on. Izuku wasn’t the best person at understanding other people’s behavior. A lot of it went over his head, or didn’t align with things he’d been taught or experienced earlier in his life. Maybe it had something to do with being raised primarily beside supernatural creatures of some sort or another, but Izuku had trouble ‘human-ing’ sometimes. Still, even he was able to sense something strange about Todoroki.

On the bus back from USJ, Izuku had been caught up in his own world, shaken from the villain attack, tearing himself up over his own culpability in the students being endangered by demons, and unable to escape memories of his old pack. He’d calmed down after a while, only to look up and see Todoroki’s gaze in the mirror at the front of the bus. The area around the other boy's eyes looked tight and unfeeling, and it wasn’t normal. The behavior wasn’t a normal reaction to a villain attack like that. Even at the back of the bus, Izuku felt like he could sense something behind Todoroki’s eyes. It made Izuku hurt, and he couldn’t understand why. He had wanted to reach out and grab hold of Todoroki, to cuddle up against his chest and help the other boy figure out how to breathe. Not that he wasn’t breathing already, but... the desire was still there. Because something was wrong.
In the group circle back in the classroom, Izuku had managed to sneak his feet onto Todoroki’s lap, hoping that the physical contact would help ground him like it helped Izuku. But then he’d shoved Izuku’s legs off of him and called him a pup, and Izuku couldn’t let Todoroki think of him like that. He wasn’t a pup. He was capable; he was a fighter. Izuku had pinned Todoroki down, and the other boy’s eyes had been so pretty and he’d been so lost and Izuku hadn’t been able to breathe from how much he wanted to help the other boy. Kacchan had ripped him away from that, though, and forced him to keep his distance. Izuku hadn’t wanted to keep his distance. He wanted to get back on top of Todoroki and figure out what was wrong. He wanted to hug him and hold him and not let him out of the classroom until he could determine why Todoroki was treating his elbow injury as though it was the end of the world.

Todoroki’s elbow seemed better now. Izuku was glad.

Izuku shook his head and tried to focus on the task at hand.

Todoroki and Kirishima were leading the way to the third door on the third floor; it was at the very end of the hallway once they reached the top of the stairs. Izuku had a strange feeling about the exercise they were about to start. He’d been asked to leave Popsicle behind with All Might, since a three-person team shouldn’t have a second advantage of a fourth member, even if that fourth member could only talk to Izuku. He didn’t like leaving Popsicle behind. He’d gotten so used to Popsicle’s weight around his collarbone that having him gone felt strange, like he’d left something very important behind on a long journey.

Kirishima kept shooting Izuku glances over his shoulder, full of sunshine smiles and support, while simultaneously trying to engage Todoroki in conversation. Both gestures failed, Todoroki refusing to respond and Izuku unable to be assuaged with looks alone.

Kirishima sighed in temporary defeat and slowed his pace to walk next to Izuku. “You ready for the exercise? I’m pumped.”

Izuku tried to manage a smile, still feeling empty and alone. He really needed to start separating from Popsicle more often. He couldn’t afford to be this distracted in a fight.

Kirishima stared at the smaller boy beside him and sighed. Kirishima looked behind him to see if the other teams had already entered their first room, and they had. Flashes of Bakugou’s conversation earlier flitted through his brain, and Kirishima debated whether to act normally or to avoid touching Midoriya. He wasn’t always throwing his arm around people, was he? Kirishima decided ‘to hell with it,’ and threw his arm around Midoriya, drawing him close. When the other boy’s ear was only a few inches away, Kirishima leaned in to ask, “Hey, are you okay?”

Izuku nodded, feeling a more genuine smile spread across his face at the physical contact. Even with only their torsos touching, Kirishima was a pleasant warmth next to Izuku, helping his worries over his familiar fade away into the background. Pack-pack-pack thrummed through his veins. “Yeah, just feels weird without Popsicle.”

Izuku could feel Kirishima’s cheek brush his as the other boy nodded. Kirishima gave him another lop-sided, sharp-toothed grin. “Don’t worry, it’s only for about an hour. And the sooner we beat these rooms, the sooner you’ll see him. So let’s just focus on clearing each stage as quickly as possible, yeah?”

Izuku ducked his head and laughed. “Yeah, okay. Sorry about—”

“Whoa, hey, don’t be sorry. The two of you seem kind of attached at the hip these days.”
Izuku nodded. “He’s kind of being overprotective about the whole USJ attack.”

“Yeah, he seemed kind of stressed when he appeared next to Bakugou and I. He kept trying to run off, toward you I guess, before turning back to protect us. I’m sorry you two were separated, but I’m also kind of glad he was there. That familiar of yours can be vicious.”

Izuku’s laugh this time was darker and tinged with something Kirishima didn’t understand. “Oh, I know.”

“Conversation’s over, you two. Let’s get started on the first room.” Todoroki had reached the door at the end of the hall and had his hand ready on the doorknob.

Kirishima and Izuku looked at each other with a final smile before hurrying over to the other teen.

“Alright, let’s do this!” Kirishima cheered, starting to harden the front of his body in case there was an attack. “I’ll go first, just in case.”

Todoroki nodded at the logic and stepped back, ready to defend from afar. Izuku raised his hands up in a loose boxing stance. None of them knew what lay behind the door. Danger? A mystery? It didn’t really matter. The three of them were all strong and capable, had ended up at the center of the attack at the USJ while their classmates were fighting in the wings. Whatever was inside these rooms, they could face it.

And, well, they were mostly correct. What All Might had failed to mention was that they would be solving a puzzle at the same time as the room went to hell around them. Each room had some limiting physical factor that would affect the students—one room would get colder the longer the students were in there, another warmer. One had moving walls, another moving floors. One had noises projected into it that got louder and louder, and another made them unable to talk altogether. Some rooms had very obvious exits, the locked door to the next room appearing at the beginning with only a key needing to be found. Other rooms had doors that wouldn’t appear until certain physical conditions were met, or the students shouted the right word, or someone pressed in the right place on the wall, and so on.

The first room that they walked into had every surface covered with some slick substance. All three of them tripped their way around the room, falling onto their asses one second and their faces the next. Todoroki was, expectedly, the most graceful. The walls were structured to look like every section was a secret door, so they had to feel their way around the room trying to press on the right part of the wall to find the correct opening. After about thirteen minutes of feeling their way around, to no avail, Izuku had the bright idea that the exit might be through the ceiling.

Kirishima thanked his lucky stars that Midoriya was an out-of-the-box thinker 24/7, because they managed to get through that room in twenty minutes. Of course, they’d had to figure out a way to get themselves up to the ceiling without slipping and falling every time that they moved, but Todoroki managed some sort of ice stepping stool thing that froze itself to the slick floor and allowed them to get up high enough.

The second room they fell into more than walked into, since they had to crawl across ceiling tiles as though they were a floor before eventually falling through a vent. Apparently, the vent was there for a reason. Once they were solidly on the ground, the vent started sucking out all the air in the room. At first, the effect wasn’t that noticeable. There was a whirring sound somewhere that none of them could pinpoint, and they were all three distracted trying each one of about three hundred keys stored on a desk in order to unlock the obvious door on the other end of the room. They were only halfway through the keys when Todoroki stumbled against the wall, breathing slow and turning an indiscernible expression toward Kirishima and Izuku.
“Are either of you having trouble breathing.” It was hard to tell whether he was asking a question or demanding something from them, but Todoroki definitely looked paler than normal. It was a bit hard to tell since Todoroki tended to glare at you if you stared at him too long, so comparing his skin tone one minute to the next was surprisingly difficult; but it was still noticeable, especially around the lip region, which seemed much more blue than Izuku’s or Kirishima’s lips.

Suddenly worried at the non-sequitur, Kirishima left Izuku to keep trying keys in the door while he went searching around the room for the source of the whirring. When he’d located the origin of the noise as the vent, reached a hand up, and noticed the air moving in the direction of the vent… well, Kirishima only became more concerned.

“Uh, guys, what’s the likelihood that U.A. would be likely to suffocate us until we were unconscious?”

Todoroki’s eyes pierced Kirishima’s, each of them processing the answer at the same time. Very likely.

Kirishima rushed back over to Izuku’s door-unlocking attempts, wondering how to speed up the process.

Izuku peered back at Kirishima as his fingers fumbled to the next key on the keychain he was currently working through. “Is there a faster way to do this? The keys all look the same.”

Todoroki shook his head as he leaned against the wall, dazed from lack of air, his eyes half-lidded. Since half of his quirk was fire, Todoroki had always been more sensitive to changes in oxygen. Technically, his childhood quirk doctor had explained that Todoroki generated fire by absorbing more oxygen than normal people and releasing that oxygen in combustion form as fire. *This wouldn’t typically be a problem except, Todoroki mused, in situations where the oxygen levels were low. Like this room.* Even if he didn’t use his fire, his body still drew in oxygen and stored it in his body. He had used his ice in the previous room, which used less of his oxygen reserves than using fire typically did, but it had still depleted his body enough that he needed more oxygen than he was currently getting to breathe properly.

But Todoroki wasn’t his father’s supposed successor for nothing. Even if his quirk wouldn’t be useful, he still had a highly analytical mind, which he could focus toward solving the problem with the keys. The difficulty was: Todoroki had been trying to figure out a pattern to the keys this whole time. Some of the keys worked better than others, but he had ruled out the handle or bottom edge as being likely factors in what connected them. Also, he was starting not to think as clearly due to the lack of oxygen. *Shit.*

“Todoroki, how much longer is it safe for you to breathe like this?” Midoriya was the one speaking, his teeth biting at his lips as his eyebrows scrunched, trying to focus.

Todoroki was tempted to smile. *Izuku Midoriya, ever the worrier, always wanting to help.* Todoroki slumped further against the wall, peering at Midoriya beneath heavy eyelids. *The other boy was really cute when he was concentrating. Wait... what was the question again? Oh yeah, oxygen. “Don’t worry. They won’t allow us to die. The door will likely open automatically when I pass out.”*

Kirishima broke into the conversation, totally not okay with the thought of Todoroki passing out or Todoroki’s implication that he was going to pass out before they were successful with the keys. “Dude, that’s not what he asked. He asked how much longer it was safe, not if you have a suicide wish.”
Midoriya continued to chew on his lips in thought. “I have a back-up plan, but I’m not really sure it’s a good idea. If I do it, then we can’t use a key anymore… but it will probably open the door?”

He didn’t sound so sure.

Kirishima swiveled his head to look at the other teen. “Define ‘probably’.”

Todoroki narrowed his eyes while leaning against the wall closer to the door, two steps ahead even if with his mind not thinking as clearly. “You plan to explode the lock.”

Midoriya nodded, quickly glancing over at Todoroki between key attempts. “It should work. We’re probably not supposed to do that. We should just find the right key. But at the same time, you seem to be reacting stronger to the air disappearing, I guess because of your quirk.”

Todoroki had forgotten that, despite his lack of awareness of social customs, Izuku Midoriya was rather clever sometimes.

“I would say not to worry about me and keep trying the keys,” Todoroki began, “but we aren’t sure what the next room will be.” Todoroki paused for a couple seconds before continuing, his mind trying to focus as he shifted his legs closer to his chest. “Since there are three of us, I would estimate it should have taken fifteen minutes for us to run out of air. But I consume oxygen more rapidly, so I would lower that estimate to about ten minutes to be safe.”

The clock on the wall acted as a stopwatch, telling them how long they had already been in the room. Eight minutes and counting. They didn’t have much more time, especially considering they were only averaging trying about twenty keys per minute. With what Todoroki had earlier estimated to be about three hundred keys in all… they definitely wouldn’t have enough time to try all the keys. If they couldn’t figure out which keys were more likely to work in the lock in under two minutes, then they couldn’t get through the door using a key. Not feasibly. Not unless something in the room’s conditions started changing. And then they wouldn't be able to breathe, and they would fail the exercise.

Izuku let out a slow breath and reached into his pockets to pull out his stones. He placed three in a semi-circle behind him and two against the door. As long as the stone was touching the object he was casting on, the protection circle would hold. He focused on activating it, willing to leave the stones behind if it meant Todoroki would be able to breathe as soon as possible. “Alright, I’m going to try exploding the lock.”

Izuku took another breath, noting how much weaker the air seemed than earlier. He leaned closer to the door and focused on the image in his mind of only exploding the interior of the lock. They didn’t want to destroy the door entirely, at the risk of the air being sucked out of the next room as well. Otherwise, Todoroki would have just frozen the door and Kirishima could have punched a hardened fist through it. They needed the door intact. If Izuku could just explode the mechanism keeping the lock in place...

Typically, Izuku had to fling out his hands in order to focus his power on speeding up the molecules in a certain area. However, when he wanted the finest precision out of his power, it actually worked best for him to close his eyes, relax his hands by his side, and focus on the area solely with his mind. He couldn’t focus well in the middle of a fight; but when it was a situation like this, no one moving around him, just him and the lock, nothing to disturb his focus... Izuku was positive that he could do it.

Within seconds, there was a loud popping sound, and the lock was destroyed. Izuku placed his hand on the door handle, ready to turn it, only for Todoroki to place his right hand on top of Izuku’s. His
skin was ice-cold. Of course, it was also his right hand, which Izuku remembered was colder anyway, so perhaps that wasn’t as much of a worry.

“We should… get ready to run quickly into the next room, otherwise the air…”

“…it will whoosh out, won’t it?” Kirishima interrupted Todoroki’s slow gasps, inching closer behind Midoriya.

Izuku nodded his head and stood up, Kirishima right behind him. Todoroki took a couple seconds more to struggle to his feet before nodding.

Izuku opened the door and quickly rushed through, turning a sharp left so that Kirishima could hurry through behind him. Todoroki used the doorway as a pivot point, swinging his body around and hitting the opposite wall with a smack. Kirishima quickly shoved the door closed before they felt much of the new room’s air whoosh past them into the previous room.

They were safe.

Kirishima leaned against the door and started laughing, a cheerful ray of sunshine once more. “Well, that’s two doors down, and one to go. Everyone ready?”

Izuku smiled and nodded, worries temporarily gone.

“Todoroki?”

Slowly but surely, Todoroki nodded as well, his lips beginning to change color from blue to pink.

Izuku watched the transformation in fascination. Izuku had never noticed how pretty Todoroki’s lips were before. They looked soft. Did Todoroki’s quirk make his lips soft? Were they more hydrated because of the ice? Were they half-cold and half-hot, like the rest of his body? Izuku had only gotten to see what the temperature difference on his torso felt like. However, it probably wasn’t the best time to ask Todoroki to let Izuku see.

Their third and final escape room was mostly empty, like the second room, except for a couple boxes in the far corner of the room, filled with what seemed to be supplies. The three of them hurried over to open the boxes, paranoid about running out of time once again. At most, they had only spent about thirty minutes of the hour and a half time they had been allotted. Obviously, finishing the whole exercise faster was better, but they had about an hour before they would be kicked out of the room. That should have been enough time.

Should have.

The physical change in the third room was, like the second, hard to discern at first. They thought it had something to do with oxygen again, because after a couple minutes it started getting a bit more difficult to breathe. That wouldn’t have made sense, though, to have two air depletion rooms in a row. But Izuku was particularly sensitive to the physical difference of this room, and once he noticed it, he couldn’t stop.

“It’s getting warmer in here.”

Kirishima turned toward him, still rifling through blankets. “Warmer? Like they’re raising the thermostat?”

Izuku sniffed at the air and took a step back. Whatever it was, it wasn’t a smell he enjoyed.
Todoroki was the first to figure it out. “It smells like fire.”

Kirishima gaped at Todoroki, incensed. “What, so now they’re going to try burning us alive? What is with these escape rooms?!”

Todoroki ignored Kirishima as he continued rifling through the boxes. “The boxes were filled with thermal blankets. We are likely meant to use them to suppress our response to the increasing heat of the room.”

“But there’s no door.” Kirishima was right. The panels of the third room resembled their first room, where they had to find which panel was the door. And if the room was going to be heating up, soon, that didn’t bode well for trying out the panels with their hands.

They all seemed to realize that at the same time, each of them scrambling to an opposite side of the room to test the walls for trap doors. None of them succeeded. They met back in the middle to try to formulate another method to check the ceiling tiles. Fifteen minutes passed on the clock with no success.

Kirishima started pacing, hands trailing against the walls to see if he could feel anything out of place. He pounded his fist against one of the sections, trying to determine if his hardened fist could illicit a response. “Seriously?! What are we not thinking of?”

Midoriya eyed the corners of the room, wondering. “We tried everywhere, right? Corners, walls, ceiling, floor…”

Kirishima nodded. “Yeah, all of them.”

Todoroki sat down atop the thermal blanket pallet they had made for themselves in the middle of the room. “What if there is a certain trigger?”

Midoriya lifted his head to look at him. “A trigger? Like what?”

“If the room is getting progressively warmer, perhaps at a certain level of heat, something will happen that will allow us to determine a way to escape.”

Kirishima buried his head in his hands and slumped down onto the pallet as well, groaning. “So you’re saying we should wait?”

Todoroki lifted his shoulder in a vague imitation of a shrug. “We have tried everywhere. At least for now, investigating more will net us no gain.”

After half a minute of silence, Todoroki suggested they reexamine the boxes for other clues. There was only one: on the inside of one of the box flaps, hidden in the corner, was written ‘When it is time, you will learn.’ They all theorized that meant the walls would heat up to a certain point that they would either get a message or see the outline of the door. It ended up being the former.

After five more minutes passed, a message appeared low on one of the walls. It was the first part of a riddle. Already, the room was uncomfortable to sit in. With no breeze or fan to blow away the heat, the three of them were left sweating on blankets. Kirishima was the most comfortable, his bare chest being much cooler than Todoroki’s long-sleeved costume. Izuku was also relatively comfortable since his shirt was sleeveless; however, he was also more sensitive to heat in general.

Now, anyone that knew Izuku Midoriya and spent time with him knew that he loved warm things. He loved to cuddle, and he loved to burrow in blankets, and he loved to drink warm things. However, he only enjoyed warm things because he also enjoyed cold environments. He liked the
room to be cold and the blankets to be warm. A warm blanket was pointless in a warm room.

In point of fact, when it came to warm environments, Izuku didn’t really care for them. Being hot and sweaty wasn’t his idea of a fun time, unless the sweat involved wrestling and the hot involved skin-on-skin contact. But something like this, where the air wasn’t only warm but also dry, he didn’t find it pleasant at all. Whatever was heating the room was acting like a fire and drawing all the moisture out of the air. Maybe Todoroki was right. Maybe something really was burning.

Five minutes later, they were still waiting for another riddle to appear. Instead, the entire section of wall holding the previous riddle slid down into the ground. Behind it were glass windows that showed what was beyond the room, and that was when they realized that the four walls surrounding them hadn’t been a room at all. Those walls had been protecting them from the real room. Because on the other side of the windows, reaching all the way to the ceiling… there was a wall of fire.

“Holy shit,” Kirishima murmured, mesmerized by the sight of flames that high.

Shouto Todoroki suppressed a flinch, thinking of his father. Enji Todoroki didn’t often cover an entire wall in flames during their training together, but Shouto would be lying if he said it had never happened before. His father hadn’t been particularly pleased after what his mother had done to Shouto’s face, and his old man had taken the brunt of his anger out on Shouto whenever there weren’t enough villains to go around. It was the only time Shouto had cursed All Might. If the other hero weren’t so good at his job, his father would have been too busy to come home and do this.

Shouto had gotten good, and fast, at using his ice to block off fire attacks. He supposed he should thank his old man for making his mother’s power stronger, but he was still too busy hating him.

Meanwhile, Izuku found himself backing away toward the other side of the room, eyes wide, breathing slow, unable to look away from the flames. There was an actual wall of flames in front of him. A wall behind a barricade of glass. How hot would the glass have to get for it to melt or break? How much more heat would have to be kept inside until it all came falling down around them? Was that the trick? Were they supposed to wait until the room broke around them, and then make a run for it? Could Todoroki’s ice stand up to that kind of heat? How were other students supposed to get out of here if they couldn’t harden their bodies, like Kirishima, or create ice to stop the flames, like Todoroki? Thermal blankets couldn’t protect against flames that high...

Izuku couldn’t seem to make his breathing normal out.

He had used to find fire so pretty. It had been one of his favorite things, to create small fires and cook outside with his mom and the wolves. He’d made a game with the younger wolves of pausing the fire in time so that its flames were stagnant, and the younger wolves would take turns jumping through the flames and laughing because fire couldn’t hurt you when it was still. The movement of the flames was what burned you.

Izuku Midoriya didn’t hate many things in this world, nor did he often allow himself to feel afraid. There weren’t many things that could escape his ability to pause time. But his range of influence only went so far, and the entire forest had been in flames around them. Izuku knew that fire wasn’t what killed his pack—it was the demons and warlocks that did it—but fire was what trapped them in.

“Come now, show me your power. I know you can do it, Izuku-kun.” But he didn’t want to; using his powers would only summon more demons because the warlocks had destroyed the wards. But she wouldn’t let him go, and he couldn’t move, and he couldn’t save them, and they were screaming. “Do you know your part in this?” He refused he refused he refused. She wouldn’t let his face look away, and they were reaching for him, his pack needed his help—
“Hey, Midoriya, are you okay?”

Izuku’s eyes glazed over. He wasn’t seeing the wall of glass anymore, only windows into another time. A time he both loved to remember and wanted to forget, weeks spent running through the forest and laughing at the chase, whole nights spent cuddling four different packmates at once, and entire mornings spent wrestling and tumbling around, learning to fight. And then there had been the days spent alone afterward, trying to bury the children’s eyes and the screams; hours spent focusing on walls and forgetting there used to be trees. *Going to sleep one night amidst a pile of cuddling bodies, and the next waking up amidst...* Izuku swallowed, mouth dry, air thin.

“Midoriya?”

*His mom hadn’t gotten there until two days later, having gone off on an errand for the pack and leaving Izuku under their protection. He hadn’t known where to go, so he just stayed there, surrounded by death, and Popsicle lay beside him licking the tears off his face. Izuku hadn’t even moved the bodies, just slept amongst them until they started to decay. And werewolf bodies weren’t like normal humans; their bodies were made of earth, so they returned to the earth, slowly changing, their skin turning to bark, their feet fusing with the ground; and his mother hadn’t even known they were dead she thought they were just trees and Izuku was playing some game of hide and seek; but they weren’t hiding they were decaying and they would never come back—*

Kirishima was in front of his face. “Midoriya, are you okay? You’re crying...”

*And it was his fault, wasn’t it? It was always his fault. He was the one who brought the danger; the warlocks were after him. He didn’t know how they’d found him, but they had they had they had. He put his wolves in danger. The warlocks made the flames and he used his ability and the demons appeared and he brought this upon his pack and their hands were reaching out and he couldn’t save them...*

“Midoriya, snap out of it! Hey man, hey, calm down. Come on, come back to me...”

*And it had been years ago, honest to goodness years, and he could still see them, the fallen logs where their faces used to be, feet and hands having turned to roots. The trees were still flying and they couldn’t touch the ground—*

“Todoroki, I need your help! Midoriya’s not responding!”

“And it had all started with the wall of flames. But how were they supposed to know? How could they have escaped? Izuku had tried to freeze one section of the flames to help the wolves get out, and then demons had appeared, and he’d known he’d known he’d known the wards were down. Two of the teenagers got through, but then there were screams, and their bodies were flying backwards, and they weren’t moving... and he couldn’t cast magic without summoning more demons, but they were in trouble... they were in trouble, and Izuku didn’t know what to do—*

“Can you figure it out? I can’t leave him!”

*His pack leader had held on the longest, trying to keep the warlocks away. He’d killed all of the demons, but one of the warlocks was casting a moon glyph that prevented him from getting to them. And Izuku was crying he was reaching out he just had to get to him and it would all be okay—but he couldn’t get to him. He was too far away. He was too far away, and he would always be too far away. Izuku had to pack up the boxes and ship them away to his pack leader’s brother. He had to pack up their lives and leave the newly decaying trees and the forest that had burned around them.*
“Come on, Midoriya, come back to me. It’s okay, Todoroki’s going to figure it out. He’s going to figure it out. Shhh, come on, it’s okay…”

And it wasn’t until weeks later, after he and his mother had helped a young vampire girl and Izuku had his stomach and kidney removed and regrown all in one day, that Izuku managed to start crying and processing it all. But then he was crying, and he couldn’t stop crying. They would forage for berries, and he would be crying. They would fish in the lake, and he would be crying. They would climb trees and try to find their way to the nearest village, and he would still be crying. His mother kept trying to console him and to understand, but he couldn’t seem to get out any words beyond his pack leader being dead because of him and the rest of the pack being gone and he couldn’t he couldn’t he couldn’t.

He kept trying to smile so she would think he was okay, heroes always smiled, they smiled and it brightened up the world and told everyone that it was going to be okay, but it wasn’t going to be okay; it wasn’t it wasn’t it wasn’t; the trees were still burning in his mind, the flesh turning to wood, the dirt on the ground sinking and drawing them in, and he couldn’t breathe he couldn’t reach them he was going to die and his mom would be all alone—

“Todoroki, switch spots with me!”

“What?”

“He’s mumbling about being too hot. That might be what’s triggering him!”

“You think the heat is triggering him, but not the two walls surrounding us that are burning with ceiling-high flames?”

“Dude, seriously not the time for sarcasm. Get over here and cool him down or something!”

And then he was healing and feeling better, the smiles coming more often, the occasional laugh. They would be helping this little ghost boy find his mother, and then the boy disappeared, and they were only left with the mother, some wailing upset person that they couldn’t help, and it would all come back. The trees, the voices, the skin peeling back to muscle then to bone.

And he kept telling himself to stop it. To stop crying, to stop smiling. Stop it, stop it, stop it. Stop trying to be cheerful, stop getting over it, stop thinking that he could move on when his pack was gone and it was never coming back; heroes didn’t let their packs die; who did he think he was trying to smile like All Might to make it all okay, it was never going to be okay. Stop thinking he didn’t have to be alone because he did he did he and he always would. He couldn’t just wish the feelings away and move on. They wouldn’t go away. They would never go away.

“Crap! Another wall went down. Todoroki, I think I’ve got this figured out. We just need to… Todoroki? Todoroki, can you hear me?”

And he’d thought that if he got another pack and surrounded himself with more warmth, that he could somehow forget them. He could forget the hole that just kept swallowing him and the trees flying away and the way the trash collected on the beach and tried to bury him… but sometimes, he didn’t know what reality was, and he’d be on Iida’s bed, then Kirishima’s couch, then in that forest with the screams—

“Holy shit, seriously? Todoroki, I can’t have you freaking out, too, man. Come on, hey, Todoroki? Come on… I’m right here...”

He could still remember the snow falling—"Do you remember your part in this, Izuku-kun?"—and
his father’s grave, his mother’s hand on his shoulder... his father wasn’t supposed to be there; he wasn’t supposed to see; he wasn’t supposed to actually start to care about him and jump in front of Izuku and get—

“Todoroki, come on... hey, stop hurting me for petting your hair! You’re the one freaking out!”

“I am quite fine.”

“Well, you weren’t fine for the past three minutes that I’ve been holding you!”

“You’ve been... holding me?”

“Ow, do you really have to freeze me, too? What the hell, man? Look, I need you to use your flames —”

Sometimes, Izuku’s life made sense to him, some ordered sequence of events that happened one after the other. Then there would be times where it all melded together, the werewolves and the tengu and the vampire girl and the tentacle demon and the ghost and the mermaid; and at the end of it all, Izuku felt like a combination of everything that had happened to him, everything he’d moved away from and never looked back. Oh, there were the scales on his wrist, and the tengu claw marks in his shoulder, and his old pack leader’s claw marks on his back; but the scars acted like less of a reminder than his memories did, and he buried the bad ones deep beneath all the smiles and the laughter and the warmth.

He’d only allow himself to remember their warmth, the cuddle piles, the pack leader’s hand on his neck, and the feeling of safety. He wouldn’t let himself remember when that safety was ripped away by the fire... but now he didn’t have a choice. Two walls of fire surrounded him, the forest burning, the screams, his pack. ‘Do you know your part in this, Izuku-kun?’ He did he did he did, and he could never escape; it would always be around him; he could never escape he didn’t deserve to.

“I told you, I won’t use my fire side in battle. Stop asking.”

“Todoroki, damn it, stop being so selfish! Midoriya won’t respond at all. We need to get him out of here. Hell, a few seconds ago, you were being affected by the flames, too! If you use your flames, we can get out of here, I promise!”

“Not. Happening.”

“What is your issue?! I can kind of understand not wanting to use your flames to win an exercise, but this isn’t about that anymore. His sanity is on the line! Your sanity is on the line! We’re all going to go friggin’ insane if you don’t help us get out of here as quickly as possible!”

“It’s his power, and I will never submit to using it when there’s another way—”

“What part of this looks like there’s another way? Midoriya, hey, come on, calm down, it’s okay... damn it, Todoroki, he’s not moving, please—”

“Other students don’t have a heat power and manage to clear this room. Therefore, we can as well.”

“And how many of those other students start rocking on the floor and being unresponsive?!”

“I will not let my father—”

“What does your friggin’ father have to do with this?”
"He always has something to do with that power! I won’t let him—"

"He’s not even here! What does it matter what he thinks? I know your father’s Endeavor and all, but that doesn’t mean anything fire-related is his. It’s yours, not his! And you can use it to get us out of here! Come on, man, he’s not here. We’re the only ones here. He doesn’t have to know."

Three sides of walls had fallen, three new walls of glass and flame.

Shouto Todoroki had made a vow long ago to never use the quirk on the left side of his body. It was cursed. It had ruined his mother, and it had ruined him. There was nothing good about fire. It burned and ate at whatever it came in contact with. It made things shriveled and dead, scarred and disfigured. A power like that could never be used for something good. It could only destroy. And sure, you could focus that destruction on villains, but your hands were still being used to destroy. Death came so easily with flame, hand in hand, like lovers. Controlling it was hard; stopping it was near impossible. Shouto had the power to produce flame, not regulate it. Once the fire was out, it was out of control. His ice side let him mitigate some of the damage, freeze sections of a room caught by flame. But it couldn’t freeze the fire, only try to replace it. And his mother had never been able stop his old man’s hand once it came crashing down on her...

But Shouto Todoroki wasn’t a villain. He wasn’t a bad person. He didn’t look the other way when people were in pain because of him. He was going to be a hero like All Might, not like his father. He was going to save people and cause them to smile, not destroy villains and cause citizens to move back in fear. Shouto wasn’t sure why his old man had become a hero in the first place. Fame? Power? He could have gotten those as a villain. Maybe he hadn’t wanted to face All Might. Maybe he thought it would make the public like him. Maybe he actually had a heart and a reason beneath everything he’d done to Shouto. It didn’t matter. At the end of the day, all his old man knew was how to destroy everything good that came near him, and Shouto didn’t want to be the same.

Shouto bet that he would be facing a reckoning after this. Their actions in the escape rooms were probably being recorded along with their words, and he had said too much already. It would only look worse if he allowed this exercise to continue now that he knew how to stop it. Kirishima was right; this was the only way. Shouto just hated the price. He’d gotten by for the past eight years of his life on only using his left side to melt his ice. He wasn’t even done with his first semester of high school, and he’d been forced to use it twice. That didn’t bode well for the rest of Shouto’s hero career or his ambition to get to the top without the help of his old man.

He lit up his left side in flames and scorched the final wall.

They were going to get out of here.

Midoriya wasn’t going to suffer more because of him.

Kirishima had his head laying near Midoriya’s hand in Recovery Girl’s office. She had said Midoriya would ‘come back’ in a while, that whatever happened had probably triggered bad memories, which he was still fighting his way out of. Todoroki and Kirishima had gotten their third escape room’s door open with over thirty minutes to spare. Most of the other groups were still busy in their final rooms, which was not surprising considering Kirishima’s group had an extra person. Even if that extra person had gone somewhat catatonic near the end there.
Kirishima wondered what memories Midoriya was caught in, and why they were so bad. When he thought about it, he didn’t really know that much about Izuku Midoriya. He knew that the other boy normally seemed like a cute and sweet kid, all blushes and smiles. He had some idiosyncrasies like nuzzling Bakugou all the time or asking to touch parts of people’s bodies (that awkward moment with Midoriya’s fingers in his mouth comes to mind, and that time Kirishima heard Sero moaning in class over Midoriya massaging his elbows, which had all the rest of them blushing and staring at each other awkwardly because Aizawa apparently didn’t interfere with student behavior when he was hibernating). But other than that and his complete cluelessness about social customs, Midoriya just seemed like a normal kid. Innocent, but normal. Alright, way too innocent. Who doesn’t hear about sex until high school?

But behind that innocence, Kirishima had gotten used to Midoriya being strong. He was very athletic, had quick reflexes, and definitely had some sort of martial arts training. He had a cool explosion power when he actually deigned to use it, and he had the animal that always followed him around who seemed connected to him somehow. Popsicle was pretty awesome. Altogether, whenever Kirishima saw Midoriya standing next to his badass large wolf (in Kirishima’s imagination, Midoriya didn’t have a shirt on and was showing off his scars), Kirishima thought Midoriya was one of the manliest people he’d ever met. Well, other than Bakugou, who was the epitome of manliness, which Kirishima had figured was why Midoriya let Bakugou order him around a lot.

Turned out, it actually had something to do with wolf packs and Midoriya being raised by a wolf pack and Bakugou being an alpha? Kirishima was still figuring that part out.

Speaking of Bakugou… “I told you, I’m fucking fine! My arm guards are broken, so the blast overtaxed my muscles, but I’m going to be fucking fine. I don’t need a four-eyed babysitter.”

“I assure you, I do not intend to act as a ‘babysitter’. However, it is my duty as both your partner in this exercise and as the deputy class representative—”

“What the fuck, are you still going on about that? You’re a deputy rep. Take a fucking step back and let Kirishima worry about me instead. He’s fucking here anyway.”

Iida stepped far enough into the room to catch sight of Kirishima, laying his head next to Midoriya’s hand. “Midoriya, what…” Iida caught the unresponsive, glazed look in the green-haired boy’s eyes, the slack appearance of his mouth. “Kirishima, did something happen?”

Kirishima scratched at his head, somewhat abashed. It hadn’t been his fault, and he’d tried to get Todoroki to use his fire power as quickly as possible once he’d figured it out, but Kirishima still felt guilty. Probably because he couldn’t seem to pull Midoriya out of it. “Uh, kind of. We were caught in this room with walls of fire on all sides, and Midoriya kind of freaked out? I guess. He hasn’t really been moving or aware of much since then. I’ve been trying to sit here in case it helps, but…”

“Yes, he mentioned that touch helps him the other night. May I…?” Iida gestured to the side of the bed next to Midoriya’s other hand. Popsicle lay in snake form around his collarbone, trying to use his healing powers to bring his focus back to them.

“Yeah, sure, go ahead. Todoroki was here for a bit, but I kind of got the feeling he wasn’t much of a touchy person.”

Iida nodded and settled down in the chair next to Midoriya, having begun to completely ignore Bakugou’s presence, despite being the one to escort him to the nurse’s office. “Hmm, yes, I could have predicted that. Where is Recovery Girl?” He took Midoriya’s hand in his, initiating physical contact, hoping to help.

Kirishima raised his head off the bed to get a better look at Bakugou and Iida. “She stepped out for a
second, after telling me it was just a matter of waiting. What about you all? How did your exercise go?”

Iida looked a bit prissy as he started in on a tirade. “We ran out of time on our third room. Bakugou exploded all the filing cabinets, which I anticipate initially held the clue to escaping the room. He then proceeded to try to explode the door for thirty minutes and injured his arms in the process.”

Bakugou growled and shouted back at Iida, hair bristling like an angry dog. “It’s none of your fucking business what I do!”

Iida adjusted his glasses and squinted back at Bakugou. “Actually, as your partner, your actions directly affected me during the exercise. Bakugou, whatever anger issues you have seem to be affecting—”

“What the fuck are you talking about anger issues? I don’t have anger issues!”

Iida gave him a look. “You are currently shouting at me.”

“Fuck you, that’s why!”

Iida sighed. “I didn’t ask—”

“And move the fuck over!” Bakugou stopped hovering at the entrance to Midoriya’s section of the room.

Iida stared at him blankly, not comprehending why he should move. “...what?”

Bakugou stormed over to Midoriya’s bed, stepping on the chair between Iida’s legs in the process and leveraging himself up to lie next to the other teen. “Fucking damn it, I have to do everything myself. Seriously, Kirishima?”

Kirishima stared back, perplexed. Was there something else he should have done? “Uhh….”

“Oi, Deku…” Bakugou growled and move to cover Deku’s body with his, hip to hip, shoulder to shoulder. Ignoring the other boys in the room, he buried his head in Deku’s shoulder and bit at the juncture underneath his jawbone, where he knew the pulse would be. Skin filled his teeth as he felt the body beneath his shiver and twitch. A couple seconds later, a gasp could be heard in his ear, and Bakugou released his teeth and pulled back to look at the boy beneath him. When he spoke this time, his voice was much softer, being about as gentle as Bakugou could manage while lying on top of a boy on top of a bed in a nurse’s office in front of two other losers. “Oi, Deku… wake the fuck up.”

“...Kacchan?”

Kirishima wasn’t sure whether to breathe a sigh of relief or gape at the display in front of him, Bakugou hovering over Midoriya in a plank position, each of them gazing into each other’s eyes. It felt like the sort of moment you shouldn’t watch and that you definitely shouldn’t be near enough to see in the first place. His heart felt like it wanted to beat out of his chest, a weird jackrabbit rhythm that juxtaposed nicely next to the slow breaths Kirishima felt coming out of his mouth. He had no idea what was happening, and he had no clue how to look away.

On the other side of the bed, Iida was in much of the same boat, only he felt much more awkward and much more intent on separating the two boys. Midoriya didn’t even know what sex was. Bakugou shouldn’t be hovering over him like that...

The opening of the office door had Bakugou hastily scrambling off the bed, leaving Midoriya staring
after him confused and flushed and smiling like it was his fucking birthday.

Seriously, wasn’t Midoriya just comatose? How do you go from trauma to smiles in .3 seconds? Iida felt irately jealous of Bakugou, likely influenced by the simultaneous sensation of not knowing what was going on and not being able to solve something first. If only he had known that would bring Midoriya back, he could have offered to—well, alright, he probably would have asked that the other teens looked away and then offered to—well, it wasn’t much dissimilar from lying next to each other on his bed the other night, was it? Iida hated the feeling of not measuring up, especially when it was connected to the knowledge that he didn’t measure up because he didn’t know how to do something, like how to bite Midoriya on the shoulder in order to bring him back to life.

“Oh, it looks like I have a new customer! So what happened with you, dearie?” Recovery Girl was a small old lady, who had once been a popular pro-hero that saved other pro-heroes on the battlefield. She also used to be much taller, and much more attractive.

But of course, Bakugou wasn’t the sort of boy to care about who he was talking to. “What the fuck makes you think I’m here for me.”

Recovery Girl hummed as she walked closer to the young boy. “Well, your arm looks quite swollen to me. Physical activity, or overexerting your quirk?”

Bakugou mumbled something unintelligible, hiding embarrassment beneath a growl.

Recovery Girl shot him a piercing stare. “You know it’s hard for me to help you if you don’t speak to me clearly.”

Bakugou raised his head to glare at her, hair bristling and raising even higher in mimicry of his explosion powers. “I said it was my fucking quirk, alright?”

“Hmmm… seems like nothing a quick kiss won’t fix.” Recovery Girl nodded to herself and stepped closer to him, only for him to back several steps away and bump into Midoriya’s bed.

Iida wasn’t sure whether Bakugou looked scared or angry, or if him feeling the emotion of ‘scared’ could only ever be expressed as ‘angry’.

“The fuck, what?”

A couple minutes later, Kirishima ended up escorting—’it’s not a fucking escort, I’m just allowing your shit hair to walk with me’—Bakugou to the bus stop since his stamina was weakened by Recovery Girl’s healing quirk. Specifically, Bakugou looked surprisingly dead on his feet, which Recovery Girl attributed to him using up a lot of his stamina during whatever exercise he had been doing.

Iida was left to help Midoriya to his feet, speaking in soothing words about common topics: what work they had left on their project, how excited Iida was for Midoriya to meet his brother Tensei, how his mother had said he could invite Midoriya over anytime, etc. Midoriya nodded along to Iida’s soothing voice, gradually giving larger smiles and brighter eyes by the time Iida reached the bus stop.

Before the bus arrived, Iida had a long moment, spent basking in the glow of Midoriya’s smile, where he considered how good the other boy was at getting past his issues and moving on. Izuku Midoriya truly had a gift, or he himself was a gift. Some blessing sent down to the normal people of Japan, who only asked for a body hug and a bite on the neck as tribute. Iida flushed and promised to keep that thought in mind next time Midoriya found himself in similar straights to these. He
wondered if ‘Oi, Deku’ was some sort of catchphrase, or if that part wasn’t necessary. Would his first name work? ‘Izuku’ sounded odd on Iida’s tongue as he practiced it under his breath. *Izuku, Izuku, Izuku.*

It felt more intimate passing through Iida’s pursed lips than he imagined it should.

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**Iida Family Residence**

That night, Izuku found himself lying next to Iida on his bed again.

Their walk from the train station to Iida’s house went similarly to the afternoon before. This included the strange feeling Izuku got on the back of his neck, making him think someone was following him around. Once more, there was no one there, and the feeling went away once both boys were firmly behind the front door of Iida’s house. Izuku had even taken the precaution of having Popsicle transform into raven-form ahead of time, but he didn’t get any other senses that something was wrong.

Izuku wondered why it kept happening.

After taking off their shoes, Iida and Izuku had gone upstairs to finish their heroics assignment. It ended up taking the better part of two hours because Izuku started trying to show Iida certain judo throws that he thought the other boy could incorporate into his fighting abilities. Iida had enough control over his legs’ engines that he could activate them in small bursts, often using those bursts to strengthen his kicks. However, Izuku tried to show him how he might be able to use hand-grappling techniques in combination with his legs’ speed in order to execute forward, back, and side-throws more quickly and effectively.

Meanwhile, Iida was adamant that Izuku’s explosion ability could be used similarly to Bakugou’s if Izuku could only learn to better control his turns and flips in mid-air in coordination with where he sent his ‘blasts’. Izuku took the suggestion in stride, but he was pretty sure his ability required too much focus to allow him to just explode things while he was in mid-air. He made a note to try it out over the weekend or next week, when he would have more free time. All of their assignments were due by Friday to allow the students to focus solely on training in the week before the Sports Festival.

After both of them exerted themselves doing a couple demonstrations and trading physical techniques, Iida had decided to change out of his school uniform for more informal clothing. Izuku simply left his blazer on the floor with his tie, the top few buttons of his school shirt undone, since he did not have a change of clothes with him.

Of course, no one else who came to the house knew why the two boys were both covered in a thin sheen of sweat and laying on a bed together, so when Iida Tensei started opening the door into his brother’s bedroom to find Tenya lying next to a green-haired boy—both in casual clothes and bare feet, the younger boy leaning his head against Tenya’s shoulder, faces still somewhat red from their earlier activities—Iida didn’t know whether he should be worried about what his brother was up to. Especially when the video on Tenya’s laptop finished playing, Recovery Girl’s voice ringing out...

“And those are the basics of how sex between two adults works. Remember, kids: protection is key, and abstinence is important until you are ready to make those decisions about your life!”
Tensei focused on his younger brother’s flushed face, which had an added look of paranoia ever since Tensei entered the room. Tensei raised an eyebrow and tried to repress his grin.

“Yes, well, Midoriya, that is the video they showed at my junior high school about sexual education. Do you, uh, have any questions?” Tensei figured that Tenya’s clarification about the video was more for his brother’s sake than the other teen’s.

The green-haired boy, presumably Midoriya, was looking at the laptop inquisitively and confused. Tensei wondered whether the boy had even noticed his entrance.

“I still don’t get why people like to have sex.”

It had been years since Tensei had gotten to see his younger brother this embarrassed. The last time he could recall, Tenya had been excited to show him his control over his quirk, only to attempt turning a too-tight corner and getting a bloody nose and swollen cheek. He had flushed as red then as he was now.

Tenya’s mouth was gaping in what Tensei assumed was an inability to come up with an answer, so Tensei decided to jump into the boys’ discussion and save his brother from his embarrassment. “Have you never heard someone older discussing having sex and enjoying it?”

Tenya turned his gaping mouth toward his brother as the Midoriya boy whipped his head around to stare at the doorway, eyes curious. Tenya sat up quickly on his bed and gestured his arm to introduce his brother.

“Midoriya, this is my brother Tensei Iida. Tensei, this is my friend Izuku Midoriya.”

The other boy turned his interested eyes on Tensei, his voice surprisingly innocent among its candor. “Have you ever had sex?”

Tenya’s flush deepened as he turned on his ‘friend’, his voice taking on that scolding tone that Tensei knew so well. It had never been turned on him, but he’d overheard it in the direction of others, usually with his brother’s fervent hand-chopping occurring at the same time. “Midoriya, I told you beforehand that such acts are not to be discussed except in the most private of circumstances. Your first introduction to my brother does not constitute—”

Tensei butted in before Iida could continue. “Yeah, I have.” Tenya reflexively made a strange gurgling whine, which made Tensei’s grin rise even further. He was definitely going to enjoy this conversation. No matter how embarrassing it would be for him, it would be worse for Tenya, and it had been a long time since Tensei had gotten to screw with him like this. And that’s what older brothers were for, right? Since his brother wasn’t inviting him in, Tensei decided to lean on the doorway. “I take it you haven’t been introduced to Sex Ed before?”

Midoriya shook his head, green bangs flopping on his head. “Mr. Aizawa said something about not discussing our sexuality in the hallway, but that was it.”

Tenya cleared his throat, ever searching to clarify situations. “Midoriya did not seem to understand Mr. Aizawa’s connotation, so I took it upon myself as deputy class representative to introduce him to the sexual education videos that I had been taught. There were also other, er, extenuating circumstances.” (Namely Bakugou lying on top of Midoriya.)

Sure there were, Tensei mused, and endeavored to maintain a casual smile and avoid the playful tone that wanted to slip into his voice. He had to at least pretend he considered the situation as serious as Tenya did. “Well, that makes perfect sense to me. Looking out for your classmates and trying to...
make sure they’re as educated as possible about important things sounds like the responsibility of a class rep to me.” Tensei turned to look at the green-haired boy again, who was gazing up at Tenya as though he was proud of him. “What did you think of the video?”

Midoriya shrugged, still lying down on the bed as he rested his cheek on one of his arms. “I mean, they didn’t really explain much? They talked about how it worked and what penises—”

Tenya started coughing.

“—and vaginas are, but they didn’t really explain why people would want to have sex in the first place.”

For all that Tensei was trying to tease his brother by interfering with their conversation, even Tensei wasn’t used to that many specific words of *that* nature being used about *that* context in a non-private conversation. He found himself trying his best not to blush or sputter at how straightforward Tenya’s friend was being. *What a strange kid.*

Tenya didn’t manage the same diplomacy, both stammering and blushing as he attempted to rectify his friend’s behavior. “Midoriya, you-you cannot simply say such words in polite conversation. Referring to the, uh, specific body parts engaged in sex can itself be an inclination that—”

The other boy was clearly not understanding what he did wrong, so Tensei decided to butt into his brother’s diatribe yet again. “Tenya, don’t worry about it. Your friend doesn’t know about it, right?”

Tensei turned his gaze on the smaller boy who nodded, still obviously confused. Tenya continued blushing as he bowed his head in acquiescence of his brother’s request.

Tensei pushed off of the doorway, no longer leaning against it, and gestured toward his brother’s desk. “Can I come in? This conversation might go better if I’m sitting at your level.”

Tensei could pinpoint the exact moment his brother realized that he was being rude by making his brother stand outside of his room, as Tenya’s eyes widened and his arms began gesturing toward the desk. “Oh, of course!”

Tensei strolled over to his brother’s desk chair and turned it around to face the bed. He sat down with his legs splayed, elbows on his arms, and tried to relax his posture into something as approachable as possible for the sake of the Midoriya boy. *Sex Ed for High School Teenagers* hadn’t been Tensei’s intention when he came for his weekly family dinner, but Tensei was never one to shirk his duties as a brother or a hero. For now, that meant offering advice and wisdom to a child unknowing in the ways of men.

“So… what would you like to know?”

The Midoriya boy sat up into a cross-legged position and leaned forward on his hands, ever curious. “First of all, why do people do it?”

Tensei smiled and laughed out an awkward breath. It was a good question, but not something one generally asked another. Tensei remembered figuring out how to work his own junk at an age much younger than high school, probably back at the beginning of junior high. For this teen to have not discovered any of that yet was a bit strange, what with the internet and movies and just general talk with older friends or friends’ older siblings. If Midoriya weren’t so curious about it, Tensei would have expected that the boy might not be interested in sex at all. But he didn’t look grossed out by whatever that video had taught him, so that might mean he was interested enough to need to learn about it.
Tensei massaged his palm with the opposite thumb, wondering how best to describe it. He debated asking the younger boy if he’d ever masturbated. That would probably be the best way to explain it, but if the kid had done that, then he probably wouldn’t be asking this question. *Maybe Tenya still had those books on masturbation Tensei had given him when he’d gotten curious.* “With the right person, sex can feel really good. I can’t think of an exact comparison that you might be familiar with, but it can feel better than getting your muscles massaged when you’re sore or eating your favorite food.”

The other boy pursed his lips. “I don’t have a favorite food.”

“Well, is there something you do enjoy? More than anything else?”

Midoriya gave a hesitant glance toward Tenya, as if sizing Tensei’s brother up or remembering something they did together. “Mmmm… being warm? Like warm sweaters or baths or cuddling with Kacchan or Kirishima.”

Tensei shifted his eyes to look at Tenya, wondering if maybe he should be worried about his brother after all. *Midoriya enjoyed cuddling other boys? That wasn’t necessarily atypical behavior… for a young child…*

“Or when I was on Tokoyami’s lap and Dark Shadow stretched behind me—”

“Midoriya, I think he understands,” Tenya interrupted, face red enough to burst.

Now, it was Tensei’s turn to blush, uncertain whether the context was being described incorrectly or if he was actually way off base as to how much the Midoriya boy knew about these sort of things. Tensei moved to clear his throat and shake off the embarrassment. “Yes, well, that was a very good example. And with the right person, sex could feel like cuddling one of your friends, magnified by ten-fold. Think of it like… cuddling but with the excitement that comes with working out hard enough that your heart is racing.”

Tensei could have sworn the Midoriya kid’s eyes sparkled. “That sounds awesome.”

“Midoriya…” Tenya’s voice had a warning quality that swiftly turned into an exasperated glare that he focused at Tensei. “Brother, you are not helping the situation.” He turned back toward the green-haired boy, placing his hand on his shoulder.

Tensei couldn’t remember the last time he saw Tenya touch someone other than a family member. Even then… Tenya had stopped hugging his brothers right around when puberty hit. From his position by the desk, Tensei could see Tenya’s thumb moving back and forth across Midoriya’s collarbone. Tensei felt, subtly, like he was intruding on a private moment. Not that the conversation itself shouldn’t have been private—Sex Ed really shouldn’t be a family affair—but this moment in particular seemed like something Tensei shouldn’t be watching. *Also… when had his brother’s hands gotten so big?*

“Midoriya, my brother should have emphasized more the importance of choosing the correct person and waiting for the right time. There is also the important issue of consent. Sero mentioned you sometimes confuse what ‘touch’ can refer to, depending on the person. It will be especially imperative for you to be quite clear whether your intended partner fully consents to the particular activity of sex, and not just touching.”

Izuku nodded his head while biting his lip, peering up at Tenya beneath his eyelashes. “So… should I just wait for the other person to say or do something about it?”
Tenya sighed in relief. “That might be best.”

Izuku nodded as though making a serious decision before a smile broke out over his face. “Alright, I’ll ask Kacchan!”

Tenya paled. “No! Midoriya, you just said that you would wait for—”

“But Kacchan never initiates contact,” Izuku interrupted, a slight pout on his lips.

Tenya felt irrationally upset at Midoriya, although he couldn’t pinpoint exactly why. Tenya sighed again, this time nearing defeat as he tried to focus on not stumbling over his words. “If Bakugou does not initiate physical contact, then it is likely he is uninterested in it. That also means he would be unlikely to consent to, uh, sex. Midoriya, I truly think it would be best for you to wait—”

“What about Kirishima?” Izuku interrupted.

Tenya’s pale face was only flushed on his upper cheeks, now. “Why do you keep focusing on both of them specifically?! You spend your time with several members of our class. Sero, Kaminari, Tokoyami. Uraraka mentioned she spent time with you on Monday…”

“Yeah, but she doesn’t want to bathe together, so the sex thing would probably be weird.”

Tenya’s sputtering reached new levels. “I… wait, what are you—did she… I mean, when did you…” Tenya panted, as though he was running a marathon, slightly desperate eyes seeking out his friend’s as his voice raised an octave. “Midoriya, why were you having that conversation with her in the first place?”

Izuku shrugged at him, confused what the problem was. “We were talking about pack.”

Now it was Tenya’s turn to be perplexed. “A pack? What does a group have to do with your discussion?”

Izuku shrugged, causing Tenya’s thumb to slip lower on his chest, almost holding the other boy’s heart. “I was telling her about my former pack and things we did together, and how I wanted to do those things with Kacchan and Kirishima. But she didn’t want to bathe together, so I don’t know if she wants to be pack? I mean, we don’t have to bathe together. Hanging out is really fun, but I would want to hug her a lot more…”

Tenya shook his head and retracted his hand to massage at his temples. “I feel like we are having very separate conversations right now.”

Izuku blushed, suddenly bashful. “Oh, sorry.”

Tenya waived off the apology. “It’s alright, I just… I’m trying to understand, but I think we’re getting distracted.” Tenya sighed and took a deep breath to collect himself. “I know this is probably too much to ask, but I have a request to make.”

Izuku nodded his head, willing to agree.

“If you begin considering that you want to, uh, engage in sexual relations with someone, I want you to talk to me about it first. That way, we can try to make sure that it… that it will be safe for you. And that the other person is, uh, interested and actually consenting.” Tenya paused, considering the boy beside him. “Does that sound alright?”

Izuku smiled and nodded his head. “Mmm-hmm!”
Tenya breathed another sigh of relief. *Hopefully, at least for now, that would be the end of that.*

It wasn’t the end of it. Or rather, it probably would have been, but Tensei rejoined the conversation after having watched the two teens deck out whatever weirdness they were discussing. Tensei had attempted to stay out of it since he didn’t know the other students involved, but it sounded like this Midoriya boy was A) popular, B) didn’t seem to understand the process of courting someone, and C) had a complete lack of knowledge about social boundaries—for example, when it was appropriate for two teenagers to bathe together. At the end of the conversation, Tensei had decided his brother needed a bit more help—because honestly, offering to help decide your friend’s sex life wasn’t exactly normal, and Tenya was going to realize that sooner or later—and so Tensei tried to emphasize once more the idea of only having sex with a special person (and not some random sex worker in a hotel; he didn’t know what to expect with this kid, but he was worried about the possibility).

This time, Midoriya seemed to understand Tensei’s emphasis on “special person” as “mate,” and started drawing strange wolf parallels. About halfway through the green-haired teen’s explanation of how he knew you were supposed to wait for the right person to mate with, and how a mating bond is proven to your packmates by biting each other’s necks in front of the rest of the pack, and how you usually chose your mate around your majority… Tensei started getting really bizarre ideas about where this kid was raised.

At first, it seemed innocent. Midoriya said something about “mate,” and Tenya had agreed that “mate” was an outdated term for “sexual lover.” His brother had actually used those words without blushing, and Tensei had been temporarily proud. But seriously with the wolf parallels. Tensei wasn’t sure how to help the conversation at that point. *Did he give the boy a book on Japanese courting rituals? Should he treat him like he came from another culture and wanted to learn their ways? Did he choose the easy route and suggest a good therapist? This kid probably needed a therapist; there was no way that biting was a normal part of courting in any culture. And was this “mating” thing the only courting custom the boy had been exposed to?*

After all the talk of “mating” and “packs” was finished, the tone of the conversation seemed to change. Tenya had been the one to instigate it this time, charging straight ahead and asking who his friend was talking about when he mentioned his “pack” and who had taught him about “mating.” Tensei didn’t understand much of the conversation that followed, mostly because it was filled with long silences and inferences to things he hadn’t been present for. However, Tenya seemed vociferously repentant by the end of it, torn between bowing out an apology and enveloping the green-haired boy in his arms.

However, Tensei had managed to understand the part about ‘they’re all dead’ and ‘I’m all alone’ and ‘he died to save me’. It was hard to miss that, especially when Tenya immediately moved to embrace the other boy and run his fingers through his hair. Tensei wasn’t sure what was going on, but he had the feeling the comfort was needed. Tensei also didn’t miss the part where Tenya asked if that was the reason why he ‘needed touch’.

The Midoriya boy had nodded.

Tensei wanted to ask questions like: *Why did he need touch? Who was dead? Who had killed them? Had the authorities caught the person who did this?* But it didn’t seem like the time.

The Midoriya boy was much more quiet and subdued than he had been earlier, and Tensei had the feeling that his presence wouldn’t help the other boy get past whatever he was feeling. Tensei nodded his head at his brother and walked out of Tenya’s bedroom, his brother’s eyes following him all the way to the doorway. Tensei shut the door behind him and leaned the back of his head against...
it. Through the wood, he could hear Tenya murmuring soothing words, although he couldn’t tell what he said.

That was a very humorous, if exasperating and confusing, conversation followed by a very serious and depressing one. Tensei felt off-balance, unsure whether to walk away, uncertain how to help. He sighed and ran a hand over his face. He could start by distracting their mother when she got home, to give his brother more time to talk to the other boy. He hoped the conversation worked out alright and Midoriya could get back to his innocent curiosity of before. Tensei kind of liked the kid; and despite not understanding the exact circumstances, he knew Midoriya deserved better than what life had dealt him.

Over dinner that night, Tenya’s chair was closer to Midoriya’s than typically socially acceptable, and Tensei could see Tenya’s hand moving to rest on something beside him, covered by the table. Tensei didn’t mention it, and he gestured with his eyes and a shake of his head for his parents to ignore it, as well.

They seemed confused and silently inquisitive but willing to comply.

The conversation still managed to flow smoothly, Tensei updating his family on the weekly shenanigans at his hero agency. They’d been having a rather boring week, lately, so some of the support staff had decided to start a prank war. Nothing serious, and nothing that would interfere with their ability to function, but the pranks were still humorous for Tensei to walk across in the hallways whenever he came back from patrol.

An hour after dinner, when Tensei offered to escort a suddenly and strangely happy Midoriya to the bus stop on the way back to his own apartment, he also didn’t mention the fresh bite marks on the boy’s neck, which hadn’t been there during dinner. He figured there was a reason, likely connected to the boy’s wide smile… a reason he’d be grilling Tenya about next time he called for an update.

“He told me I could call him Izuku.” His brother’s voice was soft on the phone.

Tensei wanted to be supportive. “That’s… good, isn’t it?”

There was a huff on the other end of the phone, a long bout of silence. “I think he might be the first real friend I’ve ever had.”

“I’m glad for you. I always worried about you being alone.” Neither of them mentioned the subcontext.

Part 2: Friday (10 days and counting)

“Hey, Kacchan, have you ever masturbated?”

It wasn’t even first period, and Bakugou Katsuki already had the distinct feeling that Friday was going to suck. Any day that started with Deku asking fucking inappropriate questions never ended well.

“Deku?” Bakugou’s voice was set to a growl.

Izuku peered inquisitive eyes at Kacchan’s glare. “Yeah?”
“Don’t ever ask that question. Of anyone. Got it?”

Izuku nodded, wondering why but willing to concede to Kacchan’s superior knowledge. “Yeah, okay.”

Kirishima bounded over from his desk, curious about what was going on. Bakugou wasn’t always in a talkative mood before homeroom, and Kirishima liked to take advantage of any time he seemed willing to talk. “Hey guys, what’s up?”

Bakugou huffed and slumped in his seat, kicking his feet up on his desk while he gritted his teeth. “Fucking deal with Deku for me.”

Kirishima tried to guess at the connotation behind Bakugou’s stare. Yesterday, Bakugou had told Kirishima to invite Midoriya over and, uh, cuddle, hadn’t he? Is that what Bakugou meant by ‘dealing’ with Midoriya? Kirishima took a deep breath and walked over to crouch beside Midoriya. “So Midoriya, I was wondering something…”

“Mmm-hmm?” Izuku was biting at his lips again.

Kirishima quirked a smile at the familiar gesture, wondering whether he used chapstick. He always saw Midoriya chewing on his lips during class or lunch. *How did his lips look so soft if he didn’t use chapstick? Surely he used it.* Kirishima shook his head and tried to focus, forcing a laugh to disguise his preoccupation. “Would you be interested in hanging out after school? This week’s been killing me with the project and then training at home, so it’d be nice to get to hang out with friends for a bit.”

Izuku smiled tenderly in response and leaned closer to him. “I’d love to. Is Kacchan coming?”

Bakugou jerked his head to look at Kirishima, who looked at a loss of how to help, and scowled. “My parents aren’t home, so I was going to use downstairs to train.”

“When can we hang out next? I miss you.”

And of course Deku was fucking pouting, the little shit. “After the Sports Festival, where I’m going to cream you.”

Izuku had zero theories about what ‘cream’ meant, but it sounded tasty. If it was in conjunction with the Sports Festival, though, it was probably violent and not food-related at all. “But that’s so long…”

Bakugou refused to let Deku’s pouts move him.

Izuku sighed and turned back toward Kirishima, letting his frown disappear for a smile. “What do you want to do later, then?”

Kirishima scratched at his head. “Uhh… we could go back to my place? If you want, there’s a cafe near there, and we could, uh, get a drink first… or something…”
Izuku looked interested in that idea. “I’ve never been to a cafe before!”

“Seriously?” Kirishima returned the other teen’s smile. “That’s perfect then! Let’s see, they’ve got several different types of coffee and tea and bubble tea—”

Izuku tilted his head, curious. “What’s bubble tea?”

Bakugou interrupted their conversation, slumping in his seat and crossing his feet on his desk. “Deku, you’ll like it.”

Izuku turned to smile at Kacchan and then Kirishima again. *Kacchan was listening to them. Kacchan cared.* “I’ll get bubble tea, then!”

Deku really was easy to influence.

Izuku ended up getting the creamy milk bubble tea while Kirishima got a coffee drink. The cafe wasn’t very crowded, despite them going right after school ended, so Kirishima gestured for Izuku to sit with him at one of the corner tables. The other boy was staring around the room in wonder, gushing about how bright the cafe was and how pretty the decor was and there were so many things on the menu and did Kirishima see the cakes?

Kirishima laughed and nodded. He had to show Midoriya how to shake his bubble tea and how to insert the straw into the cup at the best angle. Midoriya kept smiling at him in response. Kirishima kept blushing. It went on for a couple minutes before a text from Bakugou shook him out of his stupor.

*Bakugou (3:41pm): is he in ur fucking bed yet*

Kirishima’s cheeks turned even redder, and Midoriya asked if he was okay.

Kirishima said he was fine and went to text Bakugou back.

*Kirishima (3:42pm): just got our drinks*

Kirishima sighed and shoved his phone back in his pants. *Why did this feel like a booty call? Holy shit.*

Izuku started up a conversation about his project with Iida and how he really enjoyed getting to analyze someone’s quirk and physical abilities together, since sometimes their classes only focused on their quirks.

Kirishima agreed. He’d gotten to pair up with Shoji, which was pretty cool since he didn’t really know the other boy that well. Both of their quirks had tons of possibilities with different physical fighting styles and abilities; and they had both gotten along really well when discussing cool ways for the other person to use their quirk. Kirishima hadn’t really known how to talk with Shoji beforehand, the mouths on the ends of the other boy's hands being kind of weird; but now he was used to it. Still, Izuku was lucky to pair up with someone that he sometimes ate lunch with. That had to have made the beginning of the project easier.

Kirishima’s pocket was buzzing again.
Kirishima flushed once more, his face only having just reached equilibrium. He sighed and fiddled with his cup. This whole thing with Bakugou and Midoriya and wolf packs and cuddling was really weird, alright? And he didn’t know how to deal. He wanted to be a good friend, and Bakugou had intimated that this was something Midoriya needed, but it was still really strange. Bakugou wasn’t making it easier with refusing to be there for it, but then texting to see if it was happening, and wanting to know when it happened. Like… seriously way more complicated than Kirishima wanted his Friday night to be. He was being honest earlier when he invited Midoriya to hang out. It had been a long week, and he just wanted to have some fun, play some video games, relax on the couch. Maybe cuddling was relaxing?

Bakugou (3:55pm): shitty hair do it or i’ll blast you

Kirishima couldn’t stop the slight smile that lit up his face, always somehow cheered whenever the explosive teen threatened violence. Midoriya noticed.

“Who’s that?” Izuku asked, pointing at Kirishima’s phone.

Kirishima tried not to be distracted by the way Midoriya kept sucking up his tapioca pearls from his tea, only to balance them on the edge of his tongue and roll them between his lips. That should seriously not be allowed in a cafe. Actually, maybe it wasn’t?

“Oh, just Bakugou, uh, checking in.” Kirishima wasn’t sure how much to say. They weren’t hiding anything from Midoriya. Bakugou had just suggested that Kirishima do something, and now he was planning to do it, and Bakugou kept texting him to, uh, hear about it or something. Kirishima wasn’t sure on that part, either.

Izuku smiled at Kirishima’s words, buoyed by the thought of Bakugou indirectly hanging out with them via text message. “Can you ask what he’s doing?”

Kirishima looked at him strangely. “Can’t you just text him?”

Izuku blushed. “I, uh, don’t really text or call unless it’s an emergency or my mom needs to know something. We don’t have that good of a phone plan.”

Kirishima nodded. That made a lot of sense, actually. Kirishima regularly texted several of their classmates, typically Bakugou and Kaminari and Sero and sometimes Iida (for class stuff), but he hadn’t had much phone contact with Midoriya. He thought it was just because he didn’t have the other boy’s number, but this was a more likely excuse. If Midoriya didn’t give out his number, then he couldn’t go over the number of calls or texts allowed on his plan. That was probably it.

Kirishima moved to text Bakugou.

Kirishima (4:01pm): he wants to know how youre doing

Bakugou (4:03pm): fucking fine did he get the drink

Kirishima passed the message along to Midoriya, who smiled.

Kirishima (4:04pm): yeah milk bubble tea

Kirishima thought that would be the end of that and put his phone away, only for it to buzz again a couple minutes later.
Bakugou (4:06pm): did you let him pay

Kirishima sighed.

Kirishima (4:07pm): no i got it

Bakugou (4:09pm): ill pay you back

Kirishima (4:11pm): you odn’t have to man it’s cool

Bakugou (4:12pm): shut the fuck up im paying end of discussion

Kirishima had a very strange feeling that he was taking Bakugou’s boyfriend out on a date, planning to get him into his bed, and getting reimbursed as though the date was Bakugou’s in the first place. He really didn’t understand what was going on.

Midoriya, meanwhile, was grinning his friggin’ head off. “Kacchan really cares about us, doesn’t he? He wants to make sure everything’s okay…”

Kirishima sighed and figured honesty was the best policy at this point. Maybe Midoriya would have some insight. “He told me he wants to pay for your drink.”

Izuku nodded like that was completely normal. “Of course he does.”

Kirishima could feel his leg twitching with the urge to kick something as his hand squeezed a temporary death grip on his coffee. Why did he expect Midoriya’s insight to make sense? Of course Bakugou and Midoriya were on the same weird wavelength together that no one else understood. Kirishima waved his phone in the air to emphasize he was talking about the Bakugou text conversation currently going on. “Look, just… does this have something to do with the pack thing? Bakugou said not to ask, but I’m kinda confused.”

Izuku smiled and leaned forward, hunching over his bubble tea. “Yeah, he’s just trying to take charge.”

Like that was simple. Like everything that was happening could be boiled down to Bakugou wanting to be in charge. Kirishima sighed again, pressing the corner of his phone against his forehead as he closed his eyes in exasperation. He had the vague desire to start whimpering. Actually, that made perfect sense.

Izuku was almost done with his tea, and Kirishima had chugged most of his coffee early on in the conversation. They wouldn’t need to stay at the cafe for longer, but Kirishima didn’t know what to do next. His mom had texted him right before they got to the cafe that she got off work early and would be home when he got there. That meant his mom would be home if he tried to drag Midoriya into his room and get him on his bed. Neither part would be difficult—Midoriya seemed to love Kirishima’s bed last time he was there—but Kirishima did wonder how he could hide the cuddling aspect from his parents. That didn’t seem like something he wanted to do near them, especially with his mother’s propensity toward asking one hundred questions when two would do.

Although… Kirishima pondered something as he stared at Midoriya, who was now unknowingly making a big show out of trying to suck down the last of the tapioca, his mouth enclosing over half of the straw, his cheeks puckered in… Kirishima flushed. Yeah, no, he wasn’t doing this alone. If Bakugou wanted to be in charge, he could be in charge in person. Go alpha go.

“Hey Midoriya, how would you feel about going over to Bakugou’s and surprising him? He’s probably done with his workout by now.”
Let it never be said that Izuku Midoriya couldn’t smile with all the intensity of the sun, when he wanted to.

Izuku rang the doorbell of the Bakugou house about the same time that Kirishima sent off a text telling Bakugou that they were outside. Therefore, since neither of them had given the teen much of a warning, it didn’t really come as a surprise that an angry, scowling Bakugou opened the door with a slam. What was a surprise was how quiet he was being. More simmering, less explode-y.

Very strange.

“Get inside.”

Izuku plodded in first, Kirishima following behind more hesitantly. The idea had seemed like a good one back at the cafe, but being faced with Bakugou’s silent-but-angry treatment had him reconsidering his options.

Bakugou slammed the door behind him, sneering at Kirishima as he forcefully shouldered past him. “Can’t fucking do anything on your own, can you?”

Izuku only continued to smile. “Can we go up to your room, Kacchan?”

Bakugou huffed like the dog he apparently was and gestured toward the stairwell with his head. “Just fucking do it already.”

Izuku bounded off up the stairs, humming under his breath. Kirishima moved to follow him, only to have his upper arm grabbed as he was forcefully dragged by the arm into the kitchen. Bakugou wasn’t even looking at him as he let go of Kirishima’s arm to grab a couple cups and an electric kettle. Was he making tea?

The room was silent except for the loud clatter of porcelain on countertop and the slam of a fist against wood. At least nothing was exploding. “Thought I told you to do this shit at your place.”

“Thought you wanted to be in charge,” Kirishima parroted back, teeth gleaming in an all-canine smile. Bakugou glared at him. Kirishima sighed, dropping his smile and holding his hands up in defeat. “Look, my parents were home, and if he really needs to, uh, to cuddle, then—”

Bakugou leaned over on the counter, his hands shoved over his ears. “Ugh, don’t fucking say that word, alright? Fuck.” He closed his eyes, his head seeming to droop for a few seconds before lifting. “You have no idea what it’s gonna be like now that he’s got both of us here.”

Kirishima had enough sense in his brain to get nervous. “Uh… what do you mean?”

Bakugou stood up and cracked his neck. Before Kirishima knew what was happening, Bakugou had pressed him up against the surface of the oven. He leaned close enough that Kirishima could almost feel his breath on his lips. “Just remember, you fucking chose this.”

Kirishima gulped, breathless and trying not to be horny and even more confused than earlier. *Kirishima really needed to understand what was happening, and he needed to understand it right now.* “Chose what?”
Bakugou pressed hard on Kirishima’s shoulders, pushing off of him and heading back toward the electric kettle, which had finished boiling water. Bakugou poured the water into the cups and dropped three teabags in. He glared over his shoulder at Kirishima and held out two of the mugs. “Fucking take this and follow me.”

Bakugou took his own mug and led the way upstairs, one anxious step at a time for Kirishima. The door to what Kirishima assumed was Bakugou’s bedroom was open, Midoriya’s humming coming from within. To his credit, Bakugou didn’t even pause for a step once he saw what was inside. Kirishima couldn’t get past the doorway.

Midoriya had apparently decided to create a huge pile of blankets and pillows on the floor at the foot of Bakugou’s bed. Various vertical objects—Kirishima was able to specifically note a bedstand and a stand for free weights—were stationed around the makeshift bed, with pillows and other soft things (were those Bakugou’s pants?) propped up against them. Midoriya had somehow managed to make what seemed like a pit with a bed inside out of different parts of Bakugou’s room. The owner of said room didn’t look too happy with the, uh, reorganization of his stuff, but he didn’t take it out verbally on the other boy.

Of course, that was because he took it out of him physically.

Kirishima stared with mouth agape, half-leaning against the doorway, as Bakugou stalked over to Midoriya, picked him up by his blazer, dragged him over to the circle of pillows, and dropped him in it. And by ‘dropped’, that was a kind way of saying that he threw the other boy onto the pile. Midoriya lay on the ground in the same position he fell, gazing up at Bakugou with the most obvious look of ‘what now?’ on his face that Kirishima had ever seen, waiting patiently for whatever came next. Bakugou stalked into the circle of pillows with an absurd amount of grace—Kirishima didn’t even know whether he was breathing at this point—and put his feet on both sides of Midoriya’s legs.

Yeah, Kirishima was definitely not breathing. That was the only excuse he could think of for how lightheaded he felt. Lightheaded and so, so confused…

But Bakugou didn’t move. He didn’t say anything, other than to stay there, looking down at Midoriya, silent. Kirishima counted to ten, and Bakugou was still not moving. A few more seconds passed, and Bakugou started growling. Kirishima waited for him to say something, to yell at Midoriya for moving his stuff, to ask him what he was doing, to tell him to move over. Friggin’ something. But he didn’t. Kirishima counted five whole seconds of growling. Five. Before he realized that the growling wasn’t directed at Midoriya… it was being directed at him.

“Uh… Bakugou? What’s going on?”

The explosive teen finally moved his face toward the side, still not staring back at Kirishima but very obviously talking to him. “Close the door, and get over here.”

Kirishima had the definite feeling that he had made a mistake, but he couldn’t for the life of him figure out what it was. **Coming over with Midoriya without asking for permission? Not taking Midoriya home with him? Bakugou, what the hell…**

Kirishima trudged closer to the pile of blankets, making sure to close the door behind him with his hip since his hands were full. Bakugou had placed his cup on the nightstand near the pit, so Kirishima figured it was safe for him to put the two mugs down there as well. He looked back up at Bakugou, suddenly nervous. **He shouldn’t be nervous. He wasn’t a beta; this wasn’t a wolf pack. This was just some weird Midoriya-Bakugou custom that they never talked about in actual normal human words.**
Kirishima started questioning his life choices right about the time Bakugou grabbed the front of his blazer and dragged him closer, picking him up and shoving him down on the pile of blankets. **Bakugou was much stronger than Kirishima had previously realized; like seriously, Kirishima would not describe himself as lightweight.** Unlike Midoriya, however, Kirishima definitely moved out of the way of Bakugou’s legs, hesitant to be caught beneath the explosive teen who was suddenly smirking down at the both of them.

*At least Bakugou’s scowl was gone?*

“Oi, Deku… shitty hair is freaking out. Calm him down.”

Wait, what? Kirishima had enough presence of mind to watch in horror (i.e., way more physical desire than he was used to feeling outside of his right hand and his laptop) as the other boy crawled towards him. Kirishima was torn between asking everyone to friggin’ stop or asking them to explain what was going on, but then suddenly Midoriya was in his lap and it… well…

It wasn’t much different from that time on the bus after the USJ, really. Izuku was still clothed, and he was half on top of Kirishima’s lap, nuzzling his way into the crook of Kirishima’s shoulder/neck region, which Kirishima had discovered last time was, yup, yeah, definitely sensitive. Kirishima also had this spot behind his ear that weirdly, conveniently, made him go boneless every time Midoriya ran his nose against it. Which he’d also discovered on the bus. *That had been a weird bus trip, okay? And Midoriya had been crying at the time.* That was probably the main difference between these scenarios. Kirishima didn’t feel like he was consoling Midoriya. Instead, Midoriya was trying to console Kirishima… in that weird, physical, ‘your lips are way too close to my ear for this to not have been something we pre-discussed’ sort of way. That is to say, it was really friggin’ enjoyable.

Knees and back relaxed against the pillows, lap still full of nuzzling Midoriya, Kirishima was about thirty seconds from closing his eyes and just leaning back and letting Midoriya do whatever the hell he wanted. Kirishima turned his head to catch sight of Bakugou still standing above them, and the other teen was smirking. It suddenly dawned on Kirishima that Bakugou had likely been blowing everything out of proportion, down in the kitchen, just to fuck with him. It had probably been payback for just showing up at his house, but still.

**That bastard.**

Kirishima tried to suck in a breath, but it was shaky, and he was lightheaded, and he really did not know what the hell was going on, but it definitely felt good.

Bakugou lowered himself to his knees and moved so that he was sitting with his back against the tallest pillow, which was resting against his bed. He watched Midoriya on top of Kirishima for a full-on minute, not moving from his position, before taking his version of pity on the other teen.

“Deku, get over here. Shitty hair is good now.”

And then Kirishima’s lap was sadly empty of Midoriya. Kirishima reflexively reached out to grab the nearest piece of clothing (*Bakugou’s jacket?*) and use it to cover his crotch. He didn’t know what was going on, but Bakugou had said earlier in the lunchroom that it was just about cuddling and not about anything related to sex, right? So he needed his boner to disappear right about now, before things got awkward. Seriously not the time for this.

Izuku ended up crawling over toward Bakugou and cuddling against him, while Bakugou leaned forward to grab his laptop, which was on the ground in the corner of the blanket pile. Kirishima tried to keep an eye on everything at once: Bakugou leaning over, Midoriya curling up, the shine of the laptop. Kirishima stayed on his side of the blanket pile, unsure whether to move. *Was he supposed to*
Bakugou had settled back against the bed, Midoriya snuggling against his arm. A few seconds passed as Bakugou logged onto his account before he tossed another glare at Kirishima, this one less angry yet more commanding. “Are you fucking coming over or what?” Kirishima gulped, uncertain whether or not to move. Bakugou leaned his head back. “Kch. Come over here.”

Yeah, that was definitely a command.

Kirishima stayed in place, Bakugou’s jacket continuing to cover his lap, while he stared at Midoriya. Did Kirishima want the other boy to curl against him like that, as well? If he moved, he was positive that would soon be happening.

“Kirishima.” The name was uttered on a growl, something dark and low and threatening. At the same time, it wasn’t a threat at all, but a promise.

Right, a promise to drag Kirishima over if he didn’t obey.

“Kirishima…” Bakugou’s voice had lowered another decibel, his red eyes now focused solely on Kirishima, laptop forgotten.

Kirishima forgot why he was resisting in the first place. Awkwardness? He’d already felt awkward, and then it had started to feel really good. Politeness? Neither of the other boys in the room gave a damn about propriety. Being normal? What was that anyway in a society like theirs? Quirks were the norm. There were friggin’ crab people walking around in the world. What was a little pile of teenagers hugging going to matter? Bakugou’s parents weren’t here anyway…

Kirishima lifted himself on his right hand, left hand firmly being used to keep Bakugou’s jacket in place, and inched closer to Midoriya. Scooting half a meter at a time, Kirishima reached Midoriya’s side in no time at all. He gulped, looking down at the freckled boy, curly green bangs tousled across his forehead, peering up at him with a wide smile. Kirishima licked his lips and pretended to focus on Bakugou’s laptop as he tilted his head toward it. “So what’s that for?”

Bakugou scoffed. “Video games. What else?”

Kirishima paused. “Wait… video games?”

The glare Bakugou sent him over Midoriya’s head was a warning. “What, you don’t like video games now?”

Kirishima could feel a blush starting at his ears. “Uh, no, I love video games.” He tried to laugh it off. “You know that.”

Kirishima gulped.

Midoriya lay curled beside Bakugou’s arm, still humming in happiness.

“I’ve got a Retro account. What do you know the keys for?” Bakugou was already typing away on his laptop, presumably logging into his account. Ignoring the fact that they were currently all curled up together and having an insane amount of physical contact that was not typical.

Kirishima switched from looking between Bakugou’s fingers to the laptop screen to Bakugou’s face. The explosive teen’s ‘resting angry face’ (similar to a resting bitch face, but more likely to actually cause an explosion) was glaring at the screen, but Kirishima could clearly see Bakugou’s legs tangled up with Midoriya’s. Kirishima breathed out another shaky breath, wondering where he fit in
all this.

“Uh… what about Bug Drop?”

Bakugou snorted. Kirishima watched in fascination as something approximately resembling a smile tugged at Bakugou’s lips. “I will pound your ass at Bug Drop.”

“I’d be okay with that.” Kirishima swallowed again, the sound seeming loud to his ears.

Bakugou peered over at him, red eyes seeming to glow in the light of the laptop. Midoriya tilted his head to stare up at Kirishima as well. Kirishima idly wondered if he’d accidentally admitted more than he meant to. What had he just said again? He couldn’t seem to remember what they were talking about with Midoriya’s warmth against his side and Bakugou’s eyes looking at him like that. Were they discussing video games?

Bakugou smirked, slow and lazy. “You’re on.”

Kirishima really hoped they were discussing video games.

Several hours later, Bakugou’s mom came home, and Kirishima decided to extricate himself from the pile of limbs. Midoriya had fallen asleep a while ago, his arms curled around Bakugou’s bicep and his legs draping across Kirishima’s calves. His head was resting on Bakugou’s shoulder, but the explosive teen hadn’t moved to dislodge him once in the two hours they’d been playing video games.

And that was all that had happened. All three of them had laid in a pile, touching arms and touching legs and having faces on shoulders, while Bakugou and Kirishima had played one-handed video games on Bakugou’s laptop.

Video games, just like Kirishima had wanted. Relaxing on something resembling a couch, just like he’d hoped. Hanging out with friends, everything normal except the touching and being on the ground.

Kirishima had been afraid there was some weird sex-cult thing happening between Bakugou and Midoriya, but it wasn’t like that at all. Bakugou had been honest, earlier in the lunchroom. Midoriya really did just want to cuddle. Ever since they all three started touching amongst the blankets and pillows, the freckled teen had relaxed, his eyelids drooping, smile wide and satiated. Kirishima didn’t know what it was about touching, but it made Midoriya happy; and making Midoriya happy made Kirishima oddly happy. Even Bakugou had stopped scowling. He wasn’t smiling, exactly, but the firm line that usually defined his mouth seemed gentler, more relaxed.

All of them were more relaxed. ‘Cuddle pile syndrome’ is what Kirishima would refer to it as in his head. He wondered when they would do this again.

He wondered if it was okay to want for this to happen again.

Trudging out the front door with a short bow to Mrs. Bakugou, Kirishima wondered how Bakugou’s mom was going to react to the mess that Midoriya had made of Bakugou’s room. If the howling
laughter he vaguely heard come from the second floor was any indication, she wouldn’t have a problem with it at all.

Chapter End Notes

This is my longest chapter yet! Once again, not-beta’d. Thanksgiving is a hard break to get betas. This chapter is dedicated to people who gave me ideas for this chapter: mathmf (the BakuDeku overwhelming Kiri with cuddles!) and EbonyPlague (bubble tea with Kirishima!).

Let me know what you did/didn’t like! Comments help me brainstorm (re: above, lol).

Next chapter contains: setting up magic wards, summary of the next week of training, and then the Sports Festival begins! It will be more action-based than character-based like the past two chapters, unless you have any suggestions otherwise. These kids really need to start training if they’re going to be effective heroes.
Of Wards and Visions and Challenges, Oh My!

Chapter Summary

Todoroki needs therapy (Izuku's new power doesn't count), the wards go up, and Aizawa is really unhappy with the lady Midoriya. Oh yeah, and Tensei gets a free psychic reading, courtesy of a boy who can't sleep.

Also, Bakugou officially declares himself alpha, and everyone else goes nuts to challenge him and figure out wtf that means.

Dekubowl tags for this chapter: TodoDeku (and TodoKiriDeku?), IiDeku, slight-you'll-miss-it TokoDeku, much more obvious ShinsouDeku, and then BakuKiriDeku.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Saturday Night

Shouto Todoroki had never really considered what type of hero he aspired to be. Wanting to become a hero was something he often took for granted, a course that was both chosen for him and chosen by him at a young age. Enji Todoroki wanted a successor, someone he could raise to be even stronger than himself, who could replace All Might as the Number One Hero. His old man wanted to mold him, to design him, to set up the game of Shouto’s life so that the only path he could follow would end in success.

Shouto hated it.

He wanted to be his own person, to forge his own way, to become the best through his mother’s quirk alone. He didn’t want to touch his fire. He didn’t want to burn everything that came near him. He wanted to heal, but neither of his abilities were good for healing. He used to lie in bed, forcing himself not to cry, wishing for some other quirk than the one he had. He didn’t hate his mother’s power, but he didn’t like it either. He didn’t like what it stood for: the mirror opposite of Enji Todoroki’s flames, the reason why she was chosen for this life designed to ruin her, the catalyst that led to an unknown woman lying in a mental hospital who was denied seeing her own children because she was too broken for them to look up to.

Even when Shouto used his mother’s quirk, the shadow of his father loomed over him. He only had that power because of his father’s mechanicians. There was no escape from his influence. And without any avenues for escape, Shouto’s only possible path of happiness was rebellion.

What did it mean to use his left side, to let the flames loose? Did a single flame mean his father won? If Shouto used his flames where his old man couldn’t see him, did it still mean his father was right—that he could only become the Number One Hero with both of his quirks? If Shouto only used his fire to deflect and defend, and never to attack, was he still giving in? Midoriya had been in trouble...

Shouto’s childhood quirk doctor had said that Shouto’s quirk worked differently from his father’s. It wasn’t just because he had the ability to both freeze and burn things. The doctor had said their quirks were fundamentally different, something about how oxygen interacted with Shouto’s body and how
his father’s body was resilient to all variety of heat attacks. If Shouto really did have his father’s
quirk, the boiling water that his mother threw at his face wouldn’t have burned him.

Shouto had wondered what that meant for him. But he’d gone home after that appointment, hadn’t he? And his father had dragged him into the Room, shouting that their abilities were the same, spittle flying from his mouth. They were the same the same the same, and Shouto would never be able to escape him. The flames circled his father’s face, and he knew he couldn’t afford to believe anything the doctor had said, not while his father could still peer into his eyes and read his thoughts. His father always knew what he was thinking, and Shouto couldn’t get away from it. The training was waiting for him. The Room. His father’s fists.

His father might acknowledge that Shouto was his son, but overriding any sort of parental affection was the knowledge that Shouto was his precious little experiment and nothing more.

Did that mean Shouto was nothing? That he would never be anything, not to anyone but his father, not to anyone but himself. He had to become the top hero. If he wasn’t the best, then he wasn’t a person. His siblings were just things, failed trials, experiments to be ignored. They could never become heroes, never become the best. Not like Shouto could. But until he was a hero, he was nothing.

It had been two days since the Escape Room exercise, but he still found himself caught in an internal debate. He had needed to use his fire in order to escape the third room, to heat the final wall and unleash the trigger. To save Midoriya. He’d needed to use his fire to save Midoriya. But he had a duty to surpass All Might, and a drive to never use his fire to do so. How could his ambition be satisfied with the outcome of that room?

Todoroki tried to tell himself that it had been a bargain and nothing more. Todoroki’s fire for Midoriya’s sanity. A fair trade.

Todoroki stared at his left hand, twisting it about in the air—left, right, left. His breathing was slow, silent. He couldn’t make a sound. If he made a sound, his father would find him. Todoroki thought back to the Escape Room, the walls of flame, the glass. He thought of his mother’s face when she turned toward him and called him unsightly, her lost gaze, that crazed stare, how her hand was shaking. He remembered that villain Shigaraki’s hand on his arm, the intense feeling of pain, his own face paling, not knowing what to do. And then Midoriya had shouted at him to use his fire...

Todoroki tried to focus on the wood grains of the ceiling, his thoughts voicing themselves aloud. “Midoriya, do you know what a duty is?”

He wondered why he was talking to himself. Midoriya wasn’t here. He was probably off somewhere letting people illegally use their quirks on him again. Exploding open locks and checking ceiling tiles and putting people in chokeholds. Nuzzling Bakugou and stepping inappropriately into people’s spaces. Who knew what that boy did in his free time. Something abnormal.

Todoroki could still remember the feeling of Midoriya in his arms as he tried to cool the smaller teen with faint caresses of ice and frigid air, his fingers trailing across the other boy’s hands, his nose to Midoriya’s ear. They’d been in the middle of a class exercise, but the only way he could think of bringing Midoriya’s temperature down was by holding him close and touching him. It had seemed like some sort of sin to touch him harshly, so every touch had been gentle.

Something about the combination of a shaking boy and walls of flame had provoked something in Todoroki, bringing back memories he would rather have forgotten. The first time his father locked him in the Room until he used his flames. The way his sister and brothers would look, playing outside with cheerful gales of laughter while Todoroki was dragged by the hand for more training,
feet skidding against wooden floorboards. Pulling at the doorknob with all his strength, but it wouldn’t budge. Screaming into the water during his bath because that was the only time no one could hear him. More suffering. More trying to stand up and falling down. More fists to the face because he couldn’t keep his hands up long enough. The way his old man’s fire felt against his right side, flame to ice, heat to cold.

Hot things always hurt his cold side more than cold things hurt his hot side. It didn’t make sense. Shouto must still be weak. His mother’s power must be a weakness. How must it have felt for her to touch his father? The furnace atop an icepack. How could she have felt anything other than pain?

Shouto wondered if that was how he felt to other people. Did touching him burn them? Cool them? Make them cry?

Todoroki touched his fingers to his lips, thinking of his breath beside Midoriya’s head, the way the other boy shivered in his arms, mumbling, burrowing into his right side, trying to escape the heat. Todoroki put a hand on his chest, imagining it was Kirishima’s hand. How long had the other boy been holding him and running his fingers through Shouto’s hair? The walls and the fire and Midoriya’s shaking form had triggered Todoroki, and before he knew it, he had lost several minutes to flame. Minutes without memory, without thought. He’d woken to find Kirishima trying to stitch him back together, like he was broken, something within him needing to be repaired. As if some boy with a rock quirk could sew together the pieces of Todoroki’s sanity.

Foolish.

But Kirishima hadn’t seemed to mind touching him...

Of course, Kirishima didn’t seem to mind a nuzzling Midoriya on his lap on the bus after USJ, either, and he was constantly throwing his arm around his classmates’ shoulders… so maybe that was more him being a physical person rather than it being pleasant to touch Todoroki.

But then there was that time in the locker room, with Midoriya. The other boy had grabbed Todoroki’s hand and put it on his chest, near his heart. Midoriya hadn’t pulled away, then. And that was Shouto’s left hand, wasn’t it? Midoriya had chosen to put Todoroki’s flame over his heart, even though Todoroki knew that Midoriya had some fear of fire.

Todoroki looked at his arms to find they were covered in goosebumps. He blinked away something that blurred oddly like tears. He concentrated on the wood grains on the ceiling, trying to focus his mind, forcing himself to ignore the soreness of his muscles. His old man hadn’t liked Shouto’s behavior the night after the Escape Room exercise, and they’d been training hard every night since. Shouto was sore. So sore, and so, so tired. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to get up and run away. He wanted to train harder. He wanted to never see his old man again. He wanted to win the Sports Festival without using his flames and prove his father wrong. He wanted to feel like a person.

‘He’s not even here! What does it matter what he thinks? I know your father’s Endeavor and all, but that doesn’t mean anything fire-related is his. It’s yours, not his! And you can use it to get us out of here!’

Todoroki didn’t know why Kirishima’s words were haunting him. He could still feel hardened hands on his chest, a warm rock trying to hold him in place. He could feel green hair beneath his nose and against his lips, smelling like roasted green tea and hope. He could feel his father’s fist in his gut, taste the bile as it dribbled to the floor; he could see the locked door looming in front of him, not allowing him to leave (he couldn’t escape until he used his fire, the handle wouldn’t budge, and he was freezing). He could see the walls of flame, the barricade of glass, Kirishima screaming at him, his red eyes confused and upset, and Todoroki couldn’t find a way for both of them to win.
Logic versus emotion, necessity versus ambition.

There was no winning. There would never be a way to win this. Shouto was always going to feel like he lost.

Why couldn’t he get over this? Why did that exercise bring back these memories? He’d repressed them for a reason. He’d repressed all of it for a reason. That morning on the couch, back when his mother still loved him. His head in her lap, fingers running through his hair, a kiss against his temple, the video with All Might saying that your parents didn’t matter, only what you made of yourself, that ray of hope—

‘It’s okay, Shouto. You don’t have to be a prisoner of your blood.’

—and the way it was dashed. The boiling water, the searing pain, the car that drove his mother away to be committed somewhere he’d never be allowed to see her. ‘She’s dangerous, Shouto. Forget about her. She was too weak to raise you.’ It had been so long since he had seen her. He didn’t have a right to see her. Seeing him would only hurt her. It had only ever hurt her. Shouto didn’t deserve to be loved by her.

Could she ever love him, if he used his flames?

Giving an inch seemed like giving a mile. A single flame, and then the whole house would be burning. One finger lit on fire, and his father would win.

Could anyone love him, if he didn’t use his flames? The public only loved winners, and each Hero Course exercise seemed intent on teaching Shouto that he was nothing if he didn’t use his fire. Nothing. His old man was going to win, and it made Shouto want to scream. It made him want to rage at his body and cut out his flames and make it so his father would never be able to smile again.

But then he wouldn’t have been able to save Midoriya.

Shouto Todoroki was fifteen years old. He had just started high school less than two months ago. And he had no idea what he was going to do. What kind of hero did he want to be? The kind that saved others, or the kind that stuck to their own principles and let others suffer? He wouldn’t be his old man. He wouldn’t. He was going to become his old man, and he couldn’t help it.

He didn’t know whether he hated himself more, or his father.

Both.

Neither.

He just wanted to sleep.

Saturday night was a full moon. That meant streams of energy coming from above that could be called upon for power. It also meant more potent spells could be cast, which was going to be especially useful for the wards that Izuku and his mom had planned to make.

The wards themselves were somewhat complicated, but the whole endeavor was going to be taxing mainly because of the sheer breadth of ground they would have to cover in a single night. The U.A.
The campus was roughly six miles in circumference, spanning the entirety of the main classroom building, the Sports Festival stadium, the USJ, and of course all the hero exercise buildings. Six miles. Six miles of protective wards that needed to be erected in a single night, or else there was the potential of corruption to the wards.

Simple protective wards, like the ones in the Midoriya apartment, took about thirty minutes to set up. To construct six miles’ worth of wards, they were going to need the whole night. Of course, that’s why his mother had scheduled for them to do this on Saturday night. There were no faculty meetings or student groups getting together on the campus on Sundays. The last of meetings took place around 5pm on Saturday, which had allowed Izuku and his mother enough time to eat dinner and gather together supplies before they traveled to the campus.

On their way to U.A., Izuku regaled his mother with stories from the previous week. Inko Midoriya had been busy picking up extra shifts at her job to afford more groceries for her constantly-hungry son. As a result, Izuku hadn’t seen much of her since the previous weekend.

It had been such a long week. He’d started it out half-female, gotten to hang out with Uraraka, been paired with Iida for a class project and hung out with his family, and then been able to spend time with Kirishima and Kacchan the previous night. He felt warm, the bonds of pack still thrumming through him. It made his fingers tingle. He had a feeling he would be able to cast more powerful wards, tonight, using the energy humming beneath his skin. Pack made him more powerful, at the same time it stabilized him.

The wards they were building had a two-fold purpose. First, they would keep out demons, warlocks, and any quirk-users from teleporting into the school. Second, they would hide Izuku’s magic so neither demons nor warlocks would be able to sense him using his abilities on school grounds.

Once they built these wards, if Izuku wanted to go all-out during the Sports Festival, he could. For the first time in his life, he could.

Izuku and his mother had never erected wards this powerful before. They had never needed to. But Izuku had a hope, which his mother was willing to help him see fulfilled, that if the wards were powerful enough, then he could finally take off the Blockers.

Years ago, back when Izuku and his mom first sought sanctuary with the tengu after the warlock attack on the wolf pack, the tengu had offered Izuku a gift. Tengu claws were known to have deeply magical powers, typically tied with illusion and metamorphosis. As a result, their claws could have powerful spells woven into them without breaking under the stress.

Izuku had been having trouble controlling his magic ever since the attack, his emotions making his abilities go haywire, all the while his bond with his familiar was changing and growing into something new. Whenever he lost control and wasn’t under a protection ward, demons would come. It was getting to the point where it wasn’t safe for him to have powers at all, but Izuku pleaded with his mother to let him keep his powers. He needed them in order to protect them from attacks. Of course, his abilities were also what drew attackers to them—a Catch 22 situation.

However, spells to bind another’s magic were all or nothing. The magic could either be completely bound, so Izuku wouldn’t be able to pause time or create explosions or create protective wards, or they would remain completely unbound—risking him losing control over his abilities more often, as the power was too much for him to control.

A compromise had been theorized by the tengu’s elders. If Inko and Izuku could manage to etch a binding spell into a tengu’s claws, then one of the tengu could embed their claws into Izuku’s shoulder and detach them, leaving the claws inside. Binding spells cast on objects were different than
those cast on people, the effects able to be mitigated. Izuku had been using a necklace with the tip of an elk horn acting as a pendant, a binding spell written on its surface. However, external objects like rings or necklaces were easily removed, and Izuku’s pendant had been lost or harmed a variety of times since he started using it. The horn also wasn’t magical enough to hold the spell for long.

He needed something that could hold powerful magic inside of him. Something that would stay. Something that he couldn’t lose.

They had decided on three claws, each designed and blessed with binding runes. If Izuku focused really hard, he could still feel them in his shoulder, two in the back, one in the front. He had years to grow used to his current power level, to learn how to dampen his aura so that a passing warlock or witch wouldn’t be able to sense him. Witches were especially sensitive to other witches’ auras, and that was where most of his problems came from.

If Izuku could set up an especially powerful set of wards with his mom, tonight, then it would give him the first opportunity he had in years to try taking out one of the claws and seeing if he could control the little bit of extra power it gave him. His aura would definitely flare with the increased magic, but if the wards were strong enough, nothing would be able to sense the flare through them.

At least, that was the hope.

The wards would involve a two-step process. However, since the wards were going to stretch over three square miles’ worth of land, Izuku and his mom planned to lay the wards simultaneously rather than completing the first ward and then the second.

All the power that they used had to be intrinsic magic. Extrinsic magic—like Izuku’s ability to pause time or explode things—had the potential to alert anyone sensitive to magic to what they were doing because the magic affected the properties of things outside of his body. Intrinsic magic, where objects were activated to imbue an area with a particular type of magic or where a witch awakened something inside of him (like precognition with Popsicle), was much harder to detect because the magic was in the object or person themselves and didn’t affect the world outside of them. The surface or body acted as a containment mechanism to hide the magical signal, as it were.

Tonight, Izuku and his mom would be acting to awaken the magic in the objects and in themselves in order to give the objects power. That way, they didn’t have to set up a protection circle each time they moved to cast the next section of wards around the school.

In order to combine both spells into one—the ward to prevent teleporting or using portals of any kind to enter campus, and then the ward to prevent magic from being detected inside the campus no matter how strong—they had decided to use a metal as a merging mechanism. Silver and iron were both particularly useful for protection and warding because neither could be corrupted by malevolent energy. Even if a warlock were to find the metal, which Izuku had suggested they bury deep in the earth similar to a stake or a nail, then the warlock would not be able to corrupt the wards. Secondarily, metal was useful as a conductor, so anytime two spells needed to be combined together, metal was a useful bridge between the two spells.

Silver, however, was difficult to find in the large quantities that Izuku and his mother needed. Therefore, they had decided on iron, which was also useful for chasing away malevolent spirits and repressing demons.

Into each of the iron ‘nails’ (as Izuku referred to them in his journal), his mother had engraved a rune for protection, a symbol for the ‘veil’ that hid magic (it was actually the symbol for Avalon, which Izuku always used on his protection stones), and a symbol for ‘crossing over’ (the closest corollary they could find for ‘teleporting’ or ‘portal creation’). The three symbols had been engraved
separately in a vertical pattern, ending with a fourth symbol that was the combined symbol of all three. By combining the three symbols, it gave the last symbol the most power, kind of like concluding a statement with an exclamation point.

Before they buried the protective nails in the ground, Izuku and his mom had to first cleanse the area—always moving counter-clockwise in order to banish any dark energy from the area, burning protective herbs like sage and rosemary, and pouring a mixture of black salt, vetiver oil, and shredded black pine onto the ground. *(It smelled really good, so they had no doubt where they had already set up wards. If it smelled good, they’d been there.)*

Once the area was cleansed, they would drag the nails through fresh blood from both of them, so that the etched symbols were clogged with fresh power, before blessing them in the light of the full moon. The nails, humming with energy, were then buried in the ground, deep enough that they would never be disturbed. Principal Nedzu had helped them sketch out locations for the best places to bury the nails in order to avoid disturbances.

Before moving on from that section of the wards around U.A. to the next, Izuku would squeeze an extra layer of fresh blood on top of the mound of dirt, visualizing what he wanted to happen. *No one can teleport in. No one can sense me. No one can teleport in. No one can sense me.*

His mother stared at him worriedly. She had disagreed with this extra layer of protection. She knew that, the more blood offered, the more powerful the spell would be. She also knew that her son’s blood was stronger than her own because he was more powerful than her. It didn’t mean she would have to like it, the way his face grew paler and paler as they walked further around the campus, Popsicle hissing around his neck. Blood sacrifices were usually taken from animals, when reinforcing a ward like this. But Izuku refused to kill an animal for any purpose other than eating.

By the time they had finished casting the wards, burying all the nails and covering the circle around the U.A. campus in blood, Izuku’s skin was pale and cool to the touch. Inko knew that her son wouldn’t have used more blood than he could live without—he had learned long ago what his limits felt like and how much blood he could afford to lose, and while Inko hadn’t been happy at the time, she supposed it came into use with spells like these—but she still found herself distressed. She grabbed the leftover bag of supplies and headed with Izuku toward the front gates of U.A., a hesitant hand hovering behind his back in case he fell over, faint. She doubted he would need it, but she couldn’t help herself.

She pulled a juice box out of her backpack, a juice blend bought specifically for blood rituals like these because it would allow him to regain calories and speed up blood production. Oh, the useful things that witches had to keep on hand. If she were someone else’s mother, she would likely be disturbed. Instead, she just handed over the juice box. Izuku sipped gratefully.

Principal Nedzu and Aizawa were waiting inside the faculty lounge. Both had known about the protection wards that Izuku and his mom were putting up, and they had given Inko a visitor’s pass so that they could regroup after the spell was finished. Inko had been hesitant at first *(neither of them were supernatural; they had no right to know what happened; she and her son could get into so much trouble for revealing what they had)*, but tribe leaders and village elders often wanted to confer about protective wards after their creation, so it wasn’t that abnormal in the scheme of things.

Still, the sight of Aizawa’s heavy-lidded stare, the bags beneath his eyes, his hair pulled up into a ponytail as he sipped at his own juice box, made Inko’s heart thud heavily in her chest. She kept finding herself torn between wariness and fascination whenever she encountered the man. Inko had that problem with the last pack leader of Izuku’s, as well. Inko switched her gaze to the small rat-bear sitting beside her son’s homeroom teacher on the couch, who was sipping what looked to be a mug
of green tea.

“Hello, Mrs. Midoriya. I assume from young Midoriya’s smile and pale visage that the protection
spells were a success? It was a blood ritual, was it not?”

Inko had forgotten how much she hated the principal’s ability to see through things. She had
mentioned that the wards would take a toll on her and her son, but she hadn’t specified the blood
usage. She also thought she had cleaned Izuku’s hands and her own hands thoroughly of blood, so
the principal was probably just extrapolating based off Izuku’s appearance. Oh well, that secret’s out.

“Yes, the wards should be fully active now.”

Izuku nodded beside her, smiling lazily, his vivid eyes slightly hazy from blood loss. “Mmmmm
they’re glowing, all warm and bright.”

Her son often got like this after losing a lot of blood and casting powerful magic. His eyes would
glow, more dramatically green than normal. Inko had never had that problem herself and didn’t
know where it came from. Maybe it was something typical for male witches.

Aizawa was staring at her. His eyes shifted over to Izuku before piercing her with a concerned glare.
“Is he alright?”

Inko pulled Izuku closer to her, causing him to nuzzle into her arm and smile up at her dopily. She
patted his hair in a soothing gesture. “He will be. Just a little blood loss.”

“A little?” From Aizawa’s stare, it was obvious that he noticed Izuku must have lost more than a
‘little’ bit of blood in order for him to be that pale. Inko repressed the desire to elaborate further. She
didn’t owe him anything, pack leader or not.

Izuku took the lapse in conversation as an opening for cuddles, traipsing further into the faculty
lounge and kneeling at Aizawa’s feet to nuzzle his legs, slurping happily at his juice box. Inko
ground her teeth together so she wouldn’t glance at the ceiling in exasperation. She really had no
control over her son when he was like this. Not that she would admit to having a firm control over
him on a normal day, or a day where he cast a lot of magic, but the blood loss made him
exponentially more loopy and disobedient. Or… not disobedient… he was simply even further
unaware that social rules existed? It wasn’t exactly one of Izuku’s better qualities. She blamed the
werewolves.

Inko wondered if the juice box would work fast enough, or if she should pull out all the stops. She
had brought some more solid food as backup, but it was, well, something you didn’t use in front of
people who weren’t part of the supernatural community. At least it looked like seaweed?

It wasn’t seaweed. It was actually an algae that grew in the mermaid caverns off Sagami Bay, the
same algae that mermaids ate in order to stay eternally young. Its effect on humans was much
weaker, only working to enhance hemoglobin creation, and it was hard to come by, except for the
trade route through Mt. Byobu. Inko didn’t frequent that trade route often because there were goblins
near there. She figured that was a good enough reason to avoid a place. Point was: she didn’t like
using up their algae reserves, but her son was pale, and she didn’t really fancy the idea of carrying a
teenage boy all the way home.

Inko searched the room for a microwave, finding one in the back corner next to the sink. Algae it
was.

Minutes later, Izuku was slurping up an impromptu algae soup with one hand, the other arm wrapped
around the leg of a constipated-looking Aizawa, as Principal Nedzu lectured Inko on the perils of blood loss in growing teenage bodies. As if Inko didn’t already know. Izuku had done the research for both of them, and she trusted him to know his limits. She’d had a long life of trusting her son to know his limits. Spirits knew they wouldn’t have survived this long otherwise. There weren’t many witches who reached their forties.

Early forties. Forty-one. She was still young.

Inko hesitated a glance over at Aizawa, who now had his hand wrapped around the back of her son’s neck while attempting to act like he was sleeping against the side of the couch. Inko knew better. She could see the furrow in his brow, the downturn of his lips. He was awake and still worried for Izuku’s health.

Join the club.

The principal switched the conversation topic to the effective results of the wards—what sorts of things the wards should keep out (anyone trying to teleport in or create a portal), what they could protect (demons from sensing Izuku’s magic or anyone else’s magic). Izuku finished his soup a couple minutes later, wiping at his mouth with the side of his arm. Inko stood up to grab a paper towel and slid it across the table to Izuku. He wiped the remaining liquid off his arm.

Oh well, good enough.

“Hey, mom? Can we do it now?” Izuku’s face was less pale already, his eyes brighter, as he started to bounce in his position on the floor. Aizawa’s eyes slitted open to stare at him before sliding his gaze to Inko and raising an eyebrow.

Inko gulped and tried her best not to flush. “Izuku, honey, don’t you think it’s best to do that somewhere else?” In other words, somewhere on campus away from non-supernaturals.

Izuku pouted at the thought of leaving the faculty lounge and his pack-leader in particular. “They won’t be able to feel it anyway!”

Inko sighed. That wasn’t why she was worried.

“And Mr. Aizawa will probably want to be there,” Izuku continued, oblivious to the effect he had on his homeroom teacher, who had switched to staring like a paranoiac at Izuku. Well, that was probably smart of him. If Izuku wanted his pack leader to be there for something, it was likely dangerous or somewhat illegal, something he wanted observed for his own well-being or observed to see if he was behaving correctly.

Really, her son needed to stop thinking ‘pack-leader’ meant ‘someone who should be there for everything that affects him magically’. They were very different things. Just because Izuku’s homeroom teacher knew about demons and was aware of Izuku’s powers didn’t give him the right to observe everything related to his abilities. Inko wasn’t sure she wanted him to witness this in particular. It wasn’t going to be pretty, and she had a feeling that both of his teachers were going to judge her for it.

And there was going to be a lot of blood.

“Are you sure, Izuku? You only just finished your soup.” Inko wondered what their conversation sounded like to the other two people in the room. Inko sighed when Izuku only nodded his head eagerly, intimating that his vital fluids were high enough.

Well, judgement it was, then.
Inko went to open her backpack. They had brought supplies exactly for this purpose, but she hadn’t planned on Izuku’s teachers being there. She would have at least tried to pretend everything came from a First Aid kit if she had. Instead, she pulled out a leather-bound roll of supplies, metal clanking inside. There were three knives, each used for a variety of rituals and purposes. One had been used earlier for the protection ritual, the one made of silver. Another was for banishing magic. The third, which she was about to use now, was surgical steel. It had a rather typical purpose for surgical steel—to dig into flesh.

Inko looked up to see that her son had made his way over to her position near the sink and had taken off his shirt. He peered over his shoulder at his pack leader and smiled. “Don’t worry. It’s going to be okay.”

Inko sighed. *Spirits bless her son. He never explained things, did he? Of course, she wasn’t much better.*

Aizawa didn’t look appeased. In fact, at the sight of a roll of knives, he looked seconds away from storming over to the both of them and ripping Izuku away from her. This was why Inko hadn’t wanted to do this where anyone else could see. At least Izuku’s principal was still calmly drinking his tea, even if his eyes held a certain amount of danger to them as well. Inko wondered if she was going to be on some sort of parental abuse watchlist, after this.

(*Aizawa, meanwhile, wanted to know what on earth they were planning to do with those knives, and why Midoriya had scars all over his back. And were those scales on his arm? His instincts rose up, the need to protect his student nearly overwhelming reason. Nedzu put a calming paw on his arm. It didn’t help quell the fear-anger-confusion-rage, but it stopped him from standing up and doing something about it. He gave the principal a side-eyed glare, only for Nedzu to increase the pressure of his paw. Why on earth was willing to watch this?*)

Before anyone could stop her, Inko prayed to the spirits who watched over and protected families, took the surgical steel in her hand (already clean from earlier), and dug the tip into the left-most claw mark in Izuku’s shoulder. Izuku bit his lip but didn’t make any noise beyond a groan in the back of his throat. Inko was cutting into her son’s shoulder, and he wasn’t even screaming. She felt like a horrible mother…but she was a witch, and she just wanted to protect her son. This was just another part of her soul she had to sacrifice in order to protect him.

Inko dug around until she felt something move against the tip of the knife, blinking away a tear before it could obscure her vision. She needed to focus. She moved the blade out and focused on summoning whatever was inside the wound with her quirk, which should be the tengu claw leftover from years before. It came flying into her hand, bloody and grey, and she could feel her power weakening as she held it. She dropped the knife on the counter beside the sink in order to clean off the claw.

The water washed away the blood, revealing a small grey fingernail-looking object, covered in miniscule black symbols. She felt a shiver flow down her back, the binding device trying to remove her powers, before she dropped it on the countertop. Inko felt the rush of her own magic return to her as she washed her hands and turned around to see how Izuku was fairing.

Inko heard a hiss come from the other side of the room. “What are you doing to your son?”

Inko’s assessment had been accurate. Aizawa was definitely not happy with her. *Well, he wouldn’t be the first.* She hated that Izuku’s pack leaders never seemed to approve of her; and it was always over something she was doing to protect him. She wished people would stop judging before they tried to understand. There were reasons behind the choices she made; the decisions that Izuku had helped her make. None of this was against his will. All of this was for him.
“Mom, I can feel it.” Izuku was smiling up at her, unbothered by the hole in his shoulder that was already beginning to close up, Popsicle’s healing powers activating the tissue to heal itself. Inko hadn’t dug that deep into his shoulder, so the wound should scar over within a couple minutes. It would look just like before.

And Izuku was right. Inko could feel it, too. Her son’s aura had flared, briefly, when she pulled out the claw. The feeling was akin to that first moment in the morning when you stared straight at the sun, so bright it was blinding, eyes flinching from the light. As the seconds ticked away, she could sense the aura diminishing as Izuku tried to pull it back in closer to himself and suppress it inside his body. A minute passed with Izuku’s eyes closed and breathing even. Inko used a clean piece of cloth from inside the leather toolkit to clean his shoulder.

The wound was already a scab.

Izuku rolled his shoulder, feeling to see whether the wound had healed. He stretched his hand in front of him, flexing it, clenching it, flexing it. He looked up at his mom. She didn’t have any tears in her eyes, and he was thankful. Otherwise, he would feel guilty for asking what came next. “Can we do the second one as well?”

Inko breathed out slowly through her mouth, trying not to judge, struggling not to show how much the thought scared her. She had decided to let him make the decision himself; he was old enough now to know his own limits. Izuku had told her how he wished he had more power to use against those villains and demons, nearly a week ago. If he thought he could handle his power, could suppress and control it, then who was she to go against him? Still, she couldn’t help but ask, her voice tightly composed. “Are you sure?”

There could be consequences to this. He’d had his powers for over seven years. Something could have changed over that time. Something he wasn’t prepared for. Inko hadn’t gotten her levitation power until she was about his age. It wouldn’t be too out-of-the-ordinary for him to have developed a passive power, in addition to his more active power, or for him to be able to use his current power to a different degree. Removing two of the three Binders before the Sports Festival might not be the best idea. What if he couldn’t handle it?

“Yeah, that one wasn’t hard at all. Maybe it will be fine. If not, we can always put it back in, right?” Izuku continued to smile at her, supportive, assertive. He grabbed the handle of the knife and slowly spun it so that she could take it from him.

“There are more in there?” Aizawa’s voice sounded choked.

Izuku turned back toward his pack leader. “I told you, everything is going to be fine. I didn’t think you’d approve if I did this somewhere you couldn’t see, where you couldn’t know I was okay. But I’m okay.” He smiled again at his teacher and turned back to her with a confident nod of his head. “I’m ready, mom.”

Inko spared a quick glance to see Principal Nedzu’s head tilted, his mug of tea abandoned on the table. Aizawa seemed to be holding himself in check using the principal’s paw as a grounding mechanism. Inko was sure he would have stopped her otherwise. It was all in his voice, in his eyes. She respected him for it, even as she wished she wasn’t the one on the opposite side of his wrath.

Inko firmed her lips and put the blade to the middle hole on her son’s shoulder. She felt Izuku’s shoulder blade tense, saw the clench of his hand at the end of his arm. He was trying to be good for her, to keep quiet so she wouldn’t feel guilty. She still felt guilty.

The second claw came out with less noise and fanfare than the first. Her son was trying to keep
himself as still and quiet as possible, but Inko couldn’t hold the pretense herself. She turned back to
the sink, bloody claw in hand. Several tears trailed down her face as she cleaned the claw off with
water and shoved it on the counter, hands shaking, quiet as you please. She washed her hands, dried
them, gripped the counter with one hand while putting a knuckle to her lips in an effort to collect
herself. She breathed once, twice, three times. Calm. Collected.

She felt the power behind her, still not dampened. Izuku must be having trouble this time; it felt like a
bonfire roaring at her back. She was almost afraid to turn around and see it. There was a reason that
male witches were rare. They burned powerfully and brightly, like raging fires, and were
extinguished early on.

“Is that all?” The voice still sounded stressed, tensed, primed and ready to attack.

Inko took a firming breath and turned around, schooling her face into impassivity, as she suppressed
a flinch. Aizawa was glaring at her, his lips pressed firmly together while his eyes blazed red. She
wondered if he was activating his quirk on her.

Why would he? To stop her from pulling something
else out of her son? The thought almost made her laugh. Although that probably wouldn’t have gone
over well—laughing after digging through her son’s shoulder with a knife.

“There’s one more,” she answered. She wasn’t sure why she said anything.

Izuku shook his head beside her, his eyes still closed, breathing not yet even. She turned toward him,
concerned. His eyes opened and peered up at her, confused, before clenching suddenly shut. He had
his head ducked, but his face wasn’t pale. Whatever was happening, it wasn’t about pain or blood
loss. What was wrong? What did he need? What could she do to help?

Popsicle’s black snake form could be seen rising from Izuku’s opposite shoulder, peering down at
him in concern, bright red eyes uneasy.

“What were those things, and why were three of them inside him?”

It wasn’t Aizawa’s business. It wasn’t his duty to protect her son. It was hers. Her burden. Her
undertaking. Courses of action she had sworn to, long ago.

Izuku was only breathing intermittently, now, the stuttered breaths hesitant. Popsicle slithered down
his arm, curled around his hip, and slinked down toward the floor. Once on the ground, he shifted
into wolf form and nuzzled at Izuku’s clenched hand.

“What does his wolf form do? How can it help?”

Inko watched Popsicle closely; his behavior typically indicated Izuku’s emotional state. He seemed
to be licking her son’s hand. Comforting him? Offering him power? Trying to ground him? Popsicle
didn’t seem too worried, but he was definitely doing his best to help her son.

“Damn it, Midoriya. Answer me!” Inko swiveled her head around to look at Aizawa, mouth agape
and cheeks flushing in embarrassment. He was standing up now, still held in place by the principal’s
paw, almost like a caged dog. His eyes were glowing red.

Aizawa closed his eyes, his face starting to crumple, as he grabbed at his pants leg near the
principal’s paw. He opened his eyes to stare at her, expression more pleading than she thought he
was capable of. Izuku’s previous pack leader had never been suited to begging. “How am I supposed
to help him if I don’t know what’s wrong?”

It was a good question, but it had a rather simple answer that Inko was surprised he hadn’t realized
already. “Touch him. If you’re pack, it should help.”
She tried not to feel hurt by the knowledge that pack bonds trumped bloodline-family bonds, when it came to this sort of thing. What her son needed right now wasn’t more magic from Inko. He needed a focus, something to ground himself to. Popsicle should be helpful with grounding Izuku, but the wolf looked confused.

Popsicle started whining. Izuku’s head tilted to the side, eyes still closed. Inko could feel some of the power being absorbed, his aura subsiding. Izuku clenched his hands and then forced them to open.

Aizawa rounded the table, steps hesitant but continuing forward.

Inko stayed several feet away, afraid to touch her son, not wanting her aura to disturb him. She didn’t know what would happen if she brought her magic near his when he was vulnerable like this, struggling to control his aura. It would probably only make it worse for him, harder to concentrate.

Aizawa closed in on his student, uncertain what to do. *What did ‘touch’ mean? Holding his neck?*

Izuku could feel a hand trail across his shoulder and spread itself across the back of his neck, as his head was pressed into cloth. _It felt like pack. Someone’s shoulder?_ Izuku breath deep, trying to focus his mind, the energy humming above his skin, warm and tingly. Izuku pressed his forehead harder into cloth, breathing, breathing, safe in the grip of pack, _safe-safe-safe_, his mind searching around for anything out of the ordinary… and then he let go.

Many miles away, Shouto Todoroki lay on his futon, unable to sleep. His vision was blurred with memories, things he wanted to forget. He had his right hand pressed to his chest, mimicking the ghost of Kirishima’s hand. The knuckles of his left hand rested against the scar on his face, grazing over the ridge, the smooth skin.

“Todoroki?”

Shouto knew that voice. He had been imagining it all night, telling him to use his fire at the USJ. Todoroki turned his head toward the side to see his classmate standing near the foot of his futon. The other teen was bare-chested, his face somewhat pale, his green bangs as disheveled as always. He looked as confused as Todoroki felt. “Midoriya?”

The other boy walked over and kneeled next to Todoroki, reaching out to touch the other side of Shouto’s face, opposite the hand Todoroki already had resting on his cheek. Todoroki blinked away the blurriness in his eyes.

“You’re crying…”

Oh. That was right. His eyes weren’t blurry. He was crying.

Shouto stared at Midoriya’s form. He’d never had the chance to simply stare at the other teen’s bare chest before. His skin was smooth and scattered with freckles that lightly dusted his chest. There was a circular scar in his right shoulder on the front, and it’s moon-like shape entranced him. He gazed down the other teen’s chest to his toned stomach, the outline of his abs, the hair trailing from his bellybutton to his pants.

Fuck, he was beautiful.

Todoroki swallowed dry around a racing heart. He must have an absurd imagination. An absurdly detailed imagination. _Had he realized these features about Midoriya before but not acknowledged them? Was this illusion simply an extrapolation from memory?_ The hand against his cheek wasn’t solid. The other boy wasn’t really there. _Was Todoroki losing his grip on reality? Had he been imagining the other boy so hard that he’d conjured him in his mind?_
Shouto Todoroki, bound for a medical ward. Shouto could see the headlines now: ‘Lost his mind when other students asked him to use his fire.’ He wondered if his father would be disgraced. He wondered if he could score a room next to his mom.

“Why are you crying?”

Shouto’s delusion was asking him questions, now. It didn’t matter. The other boy wasn’t actually here. Shouto could say whatever he wanted. He didn’t have to hold it in or be afraid; he was just talking to himself. “Because I don’t want to become like him.”

The imaginary form of Midoriya moved to lie down next to his futon, face less than a foot away from Todoroki’s own. He rested his freckled cheek on Todoroki’s bedsheets, dark green bangs falling to the side. He looked so real. “Don’t want to be like who?”

Todoroki’s eyes traced Midoriya’s nose, down to his mouth, up his round freckled cheeks. He had something that looked oddly like blood on his right ear. Why would Shouto imagine that?

Todoroki switched to looking at Midoriya’s eyes, but they were green—a brighter green than Todoroki had ever seen them before. Of course, the other teen was merely an illusion. Maybe illusions glowed.

“My father. The hero Endeavor. Both.”

Breaths passed in silence, neither of them speaking, both mapping out the other’s features. It was late at night, probably midnight. The darkness of the room enhanced the silence between them, made it seem impenetrable. Todoroki swallowed. He had been talking to himself earlier. Was this any different?

It all came out a whisper, dust mites fanning around his breath in the stillness of the room.

“Midoriya… if I use my flames, am I going to become like him?”

The imaginary Izuku gazed at him calmly. “Do you want to be?”

Todoroki shook his head silently, the pillow rustling beneath him, his expression open and unguarded.

(If Shouto knew the truth, he wouldn’t have stayed so unguarded. He would have turned away. He would have put up his walls. But who needs walls when you’re alone?)

His delusion smiled. “As long as you don’t try to do what he would do, then you won’t become like him. Everything we do is a choice. Just choose to be different. Choose to do things your way, in ways he couldn’t.”

The advice sounded logical. Of course, it came from his own imagination—and Todoroki was a logical person—so that shouldn’t be so surprising.

“Hey, Todoroki… can I ask you a question?”

Shouto nodded his head. He wasn’t sure why illusions asked for permission.

“Why are you here?”

Shouto furrowed his brows. “We’re in my bedroom at my house. Where else would I be?”

Midoriya’s eyes seemed to widen as he turned around and took in his surroundings: tatami floors, wooden walls, and Japanese screens where the carpet and drywall used to be. There was no couch, no sink, no principal or mother or Mr. Aizawa. Midoriya had been so distracted by his classmate lying on a futon and crying that he hadn’t thought to check his surroundings.
The second that Izuku realized that he wasn’t at U.A. anymore and that he was, indeed, floating many miles away as an incorporeal form in front of one of his classmates that knew nothing about magic, he freaked out. Next thing he knew, he was back in the faculty lounge at U.A., opening his eyes and taking a startled step backward.

Aizawa’s hand held a firm grip on the back of Izuku’s neck, as the teenager peered wide eyes up from Aizawa’s shirt to his stubble to the bags of his eyes. This was real. This was real.

So what had that thing with Todoroki been?

“Mom?” Izuku turned his head the best he could in Aizawa’s firm grip. “I think we have a problem.”

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Sunday Afternoon

Izuku Midoriya ended up sleeping most of Sunday away. He didn’t get into bed until roughly 2 a.m., and waking up halfway through Sunday seemed indeterminately difficult. The sudden growth of his magic within the span of thirty minutes had probably not been the best idea, but his mom had the supplies with her, and Izuku wasn’t certain when else he would have the chance to take the claws out of his back. He still had one left, embedded in the front of his shoulder. Izuku knew he wasn’t ready to take it out yet. The removal of the second claw had been hard enough to control.

The first one hadn’t seemed so bad. Izuku had been confident that he could handle the second, but it had been so much harder to control; he kept forgetting to breathe while he tried to suppress his aura to manageable levels. He had felt so dizzy, the world turning upside down, inside out, forward, to the side, and everything in between. Mr. Aizawa had apparently come over and helped ground him, with Popsicle lending a nose in wolf form, but the added stabilization had made something happen. Izuku still wasn’t sure what. Teleportation? That was impossible, given the new set of wards. Plus, his mom had said he had been in the faculty lounge the whole time, and he’d not felt solid when he was in Todoroki’s room. Astral projection? One of Izuku’s ancestors had that, but it had been a long way back. He couldn’t think of anything else it could be. Astral projection was an intrinsic power, much like his mom’s levitation. It couldn’t be sensed by warlocks or demons.

If that was true, if Izuku truly had seriously astral projected into Todoroki’s room… then he might have serious problems come Monday. *Did Todoroki notice? Did he think it was a dream? Was it a dream? Had Izuku just traveled into his friend’s mind? But why would he have gone to see Todoroki?* It didn’t make sense. *Surely, Izuku would have visited Kacchan or Kirishima?*

Izuku Midoriya didn’t want to get out of bed, because that would only make the rest of the world seem real. Even now, his head felt like it was swimming. Some of that was because of his new power, the energy thrumming through his body and making him woozy when he focused too hard. Maybe he should have only removed the first claw? He could always put the second one back in if it became too much of a problem.

Izuku closed his eyes, determined to go back to sleep. Popsicle had changed back to raven form on the way home and was now grooming his hair. It actually felt kind of good. His mind envisioned it was Tokoyami doing the grooming, the other boy’s shadow familiar coming up behind Izuku to warm him. The daydream put him to sleep.
Monday Morning

The next time Izuku woke up, it was early Monday morning, and he was starving. He had a vague memory of his dreams, a noseless black-haired man with a long tongue, a feeling of danger, a knight stopping in the middle of the street and peering down an alleyway. None of it made sense.

Izuku had a good three hours before he needed to head off to school, but he was too awake now to go back to sleep. He figured that a good meal and some training was in order. He hadn’t been keeping up with his katas as much as he should have; last week, he was too busy going to school and hanging out with his classmates. A couple forms before bed and when he woke up in the morning wasn’t enough. He should be spending several hours a day practicing his moves.

That morning set the course for the rest of the week. Izuku would wake up at about 5am, eat some breakfast, and go through his katas one-by-one. He would go to class in the morning, where Kacchan kept practicing small explosions in his hands and sending Izuku more glares than he was used to, and talk with his friends. No one in class wanted to hang out after school because they were all focused on training.

Some of them were doing physical training, everything from running long distances to building muscles to sparring. Others practiced specifically with their powers: Kaminari tried to see how strong he could make his electrical blast without frying his brain, Sero struggled to hit targets of varying distances with his elbow tape, and Kirishima spent an absurd amount of time hardening his skin and trying to run through solid walls. Their classes were filled with sickly-looking students—Uraraka constantly nauseous from using her power too much, Aoyama curled over his aching stomach, Kirishima and Sato lying boneless in their seats from being drained of their stamina.

Aizawa looked over them all at the end of the day, his eyes proud.

With everyone else training their hardest like this, how could Izuku not have joined in?

He had a schedule that he had run by Mr. Aizawa to make sure it sounded safe (his mother had disapproved). He would stretch and strengthen his muscles every morning before doing katas, then eat, then go to school. After school, he would take advantage of the after-school training hours to practice using his abilities under the safety of the strong wards. Iida had brought up a few interesting ideas during their class project that Izuku wanted to try out—namely the idea of using his abilities like Kacchan to move in the air.

Izuku practiced exploding the air in small spheres, large spheres, and everything in between. Short distance, long distance, right against his skin. He’d never focused so hard on using precision explosions like this, typically reserving precision for quiet moments with no distractions. But he had a feeling the Sports Festival would be full of distraction, and he would need to use his explosions as carefully as possible in order to avoid injury to himself or others. ‘

His power boost over the weekend didn’t seem to affect the strength of his blasts too much, except Izuku noticed that he could cause bigger explosions in areas that he couldn’t directly see—like behind a wall or beneath a floor. He wasn’t quite sure how that was going to be useful. There was too much potential of hurting someone that he didn’t know was there.

He also tried out Iida’s idea, seeing how long and how far he could cause himself to ‘fly’ by
exploding the air beneath him. It wasn’t a pleasant feeling. He preferred to fly using Popsicle’s large
form, not concussive air blasts that propelled him in as specific a direction as possible. He wondered
how long it had taken Kacchan to master moving like that in the air. It was more difficult than it
looked. Of course, Izuku had to focus harder on using his abilities for that purpose than Kacchan did,
which likely had something to do with it.

Every day was filled with training. Every breakfast, lunch, and dinner filled with nutritious foods.
Izuku had to hand it to his mom: he had missed her last week, but those extra shifts had allowed him
to eat properly for the amount of training he needed to do. He wondered how hard she could keep
working like this before she burned herself out.

In the meantime, while Izuku was tiring himself out physically during the day, he couldn’t seem to
catch a mental break. His powers required focus in order for him to use them, but each day his brain
felt more and more tired, which made his powers harder and harder to use. He tried to compensate by
practicing less with his powers and focusing more on his martial arts, but that didn’t seem to help.

He simply wasn’t getting enough sleep.

Izuku wanted to blame the nightmares he’d been having on the stress of the festival. They’d come
every night since the wards around U.A. went up, initially starting as vague figures before solidifying
into identifiable characters. Tensei was the prominent one, armor gleaming in the streets, and some
man with a bandana and black scraggly hair and a long tongue. He kept licking things. Tensei kept
falling. Tensei kept getting hurt.

Izuku kept hoping they were stress dreams. He liked Tenya’s older brother. He didn’t want him hurt.

Popsicle was adamant that he talk to his friend about the dreams, but Izuku was hesitating. He didn’t
want to be wrong. Popsicle suggested using the meditation stone that one of the tengu tribes had
given him, and so he tried it out. The stone helped him recall the dreams in more vivid detail—
Tensei’s face on the hospital bed, Iida crying, the long-tongued man’s red eyes… the strange feeling
of safety that Izuku got whenever he looked at the villain’s eyes. It was all so very confusing.

By the time Thursday night rolled around, Izuku knew that, if he was going to talk to Tenya about
the dreams, it was now or never. He had spent all day sending Tenya furtive looks, nibbling at his
lips, wondering how to bring it up. Would it necessarily happen? Were the dreams recalled with the
meditation stone unquestionably correct? What if they weren’t? His mother had warned him against
confusing his nightmares with visions; there wasn’t technically a way to tell the difference. But the
nightmares had been so consistent, so specific… could Izuku really take the chance that they
weren’t real?

Popsicle had been staying in his raven form, as though that would help Izuku deal with this better. It
wasn’t helping. It was only making it worse. If Izuku focused hard enough, he could almost see the
nightmares during the day. Strange daydreams filled with people he cared about being covered in
blood. Sometimes, Tenya and Todoroki were there, too. Izuku felt like the dreams were just
muddling together, several events happening at once instead of in sequence. A series of incidents,
pieces of a puzzle that had been left in the rain until they were too soggy for the pieces to fit together.

None of it made any sense. Should he tell Tenya? Should he warn his brother? Should he talk to Mr.
Aizawa? He didn’t know. Izuku didn’t know, and so he was putting it off, and it was driving him
crazy. The lack of sleep was getting to him, making his training more difficult. He needed to order
Popsicle out of raven form, but he was afraid to lose out on more information, something that would
make the dreams make sense. Popsicle would probably refuse, anyway.

Who was the man with the bandana? Why did he hurt Tensei? Why was Tensei not able to move in
the hospital? Why was Tenya crying so hard? And why was Todoroki there?

Izuku was standing outside of the gates to the Iida residence, phone in his hand, the back of his neck tingling with paranoia. He had the feeling once again that someone was following him, but no one was there. Popsicle cawed in his ear, and Izuku stared down at his phone. He didn’t have Tenya’s number. He didn’t know why he even had his phone out.

There was an intercom on the gate where he could buzz himself in. Izuku’s hands twitched at his sides, stuffing the phone in his pocket, taking deep breaths. He could do this.

…

He couldn’t do this.

Tenya had invited him inside once he intercommed him, but Izuku still had no idea what he was doing. Izuku didn’t have the power of premonition. That wasn’t the ‘quirk’ he had registered. Sure, it was technically Popsicle’s doing, but how was he supposed to explain that to Tenya’s brother? Should he even talk to Tensei? Should he just tell Tenya about it? Tenya already knew that Izuku got ‘feelings’, from the USJ attack; he’d mentioned them the other day…

But Tenya had already dragged him into the dining room to greet his parents.

Popsicle cawed from his perch on Izuku’s shoulder while Izuku stared at Tenya and nibbled his lips. Tenya kept switching from confusedly staring at Izuku to staring at his familiar. From the head of the dinner table, Tenya’s parents and Tensei kept staring at Tenya, unsure what his friend was doing here when their son had told them he would be training all night. All in all, it was a stare-fest.

Izuku gulped and took a step closer, the tips of his socks touching Tenya’s. He looked down at the floor, uncertain how to start. He was too tired to deal with this, too exhausted to figure out the proper way to give voice to his nightmares. His eyes felt like lead weights, and he swayed once, twice, before planting his feet more firmly beneath him, almost stepping on Tenya’s toes. He kept his head down, unsure whether he could simultaneously talk and look in Tenya’s dark blue eyes.

“They were so blue and so pretty and he was covered in blood.” “I feel like I need to tell you something, but I… I don’t know how to do it? Or where. Or if I should.”

Tenya leaned his head down closer to Izuku’s to hear him. He had no idea why his friend was here. He’d received no notification beforehand, and Izuku hadn’t brought up that he might be coming over during school hours. So what was he doing here? Was he in trouble? He looked like he was about to pass out. Tenya reached a hand out to grab Izuku’s shoulder, thumb unknowingly stroking against the scar that covered the last Binder. Tenya figured physical contact would help the freckled teen, but instead Midoriya had begun shivering at his touch, his cheeks lightly flushed. “Tell me.”

Izuku raised a hand to grasp at Tenya’s shirt, holding onto it for stability. His voice continued on in the same hushed tone, as though he was afraid to be overheard. But he wasn’t dragging Tenya out of the room, so whatever he had to say must not be private. “Something’s going to happen to your brother. I don’t know when, but it’s soon. And I know who, or at least what he looks like.”

Tenya turned, as if in slow motion, to see his brother staring back at both of them confusedly. He glanced down, trying to recall what Izuku had told him about his precognitive ability (next to nothing, except that it was linked to his bird). He turned back to Izuku. How could he know who was involved? Wasn’t it just a feeling? The other boy raised his eyes to meet Tenya’s, and Tenya found himself gripping tighter at Midoriya’s shoulder. “What’s going to happen?”

Izuku’s eyes started tearing up before he could stop them, words falling out of his mouth in a tangle.
of fractured sentences. “I don’t… I don’t know? I keep trying to figure it out, but the images don’t make sense? There’s this guy in an alleyway, and Tensei, he-he turns to go inside? And then he gets cut down, and he can’t move, and then he’s in a hospital bed and you’re crying and he’s telling you to take the name Ingenium? And it doesn’t make sense, and I don’t understand, and I wasn’t sure whether to tell you… but whoever it is, they’re going to hurt him… and then they’re going to hurt you, and I couldn’t—I can’t—"

Izuku was trying not to get upset, but every time he thought about it, he started shaking. Popsicle cawed next to his ear and pecked at his hair, and Izuku shut his eyes to see Todoroki’s flames, Tenya’s unmoving form bleeding out from the shoulder, Popsicle crumpled on the cement next to a pile of trash…

Tenya’s parents and Tensei were all standing around the table now, having abandoned their seats. They couldn’t hear much, but Midoriya was crying and Tenya was pale and shaking next to him. Tenya didn’t get pale, and he didn’t get upset.

“Tenya, what is your friend talking about?” That sounded like his father, but it could have been Tensei.

Tenya looked over at his brother, turned slowly back toward Izuku, and shifted his eyes downward. He felt torn between putting distance between himself and Izuku, dragging the other boy closer and holding onto him until he stopped shaking, and running away from the situation. None of this felt comfortable. Tenya didn’t know what was happening; he didn’t know what was up with Izuku; he didn’t know what to say or do. “I’m not sure. Izuku has… visions, sometimes, from his familiar.”

Popsicle took that opportunity to caw again. The show-off.

Tenya looked up at his brother and struggled to keep his voice even, attempting to process through his emotions as quickly as possible. Holding onto Izuku seemed to be making it more difficult, so Tenya let go and took a step back. Tensei wasn’t hurt yet; he hadn’t asked Tenya to take his name. Tenya didn’t even want to imagine that conversation; it was like something out of a nightmare. “He said you’re going to be attacked in an alleyway. It sounds like a villain. You’re going to be hurt bad enough that you try to have me take up the Ingenium name. He says he knows what the villain looks like.”

They both knew what that meant. Tensei wouldn’t give Tenya his name unless he was physically unable to do hero work ever again. How bad would he have to be hurt to give up being a pro-hero?

Tensei walked around the table to get closer to them, his eyes focused on the Midoriya kid who was wiping the tears off his face with his arm and taking deep, stabilizing breaths. The kid looked exhausted. No wonder the boy was an emotional rollercoaster, if he was tired on top of seeing stuff like this. “What does he look like? Are you sure it’s a man?”

Izuku nodded, his eyes dry and his cheeks feeling flushed. He tried to recall all the details he could, as he wrapped his arms around himself, suddenly cold. “Black hair, long, scruffy. He has this… long red scarf full of holes, a white mask around his eyes, like bandages. And a really long tongue. The bandages are on his arms, too.”

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Tensei had gotten close enough to wipe away the last of the tears on Midoriya’s cheeks before placing his hand on the kid’s shoulder. He leaned over, looked into Midoriya’s eyes, and focused on smiling as bright as he could. “Thank you. That sounds like a lot to go on.”

“You can’t face him.” Izuku’s tone was adamant as he shook his head. “You can’t face him alone.”
Tensei nodded his head in appeasement. “Don’t worry. I have a whole team helping me. I never go into something alone.”

Izuku continued to shake his head as he grasped at Tensei’s sleeve, causing Tensei’s hand to fall from his shoulder. “But you will. You are.”

Tensei tried to ignore the shivers going down the back of his neck. “I won’t be,” he promised. He paused and tried to pry Izuku’s hand off his shirt. “Do you know who he is? The villain. Do you have a name?”

“No,” Izuku peered up at Tensei, the bags beneath his eyes making him look lost as his hand fell limply by his side. He didn’t have the right to ask this, but…

“It wasn’t a request. It was a demand. Tensei was being demanded around by a teenager from his youngest brother’s class at school. What a strange Thursday. Every Thursday with this kid ended up strange.

“I’m always careful,” Tensei smiled.

It didn’t make Izuku feel better. It didn’t make Tenya feel better, either.

Izuku left not long after that, abandoning Tenya to the inquisitive stares of his parents and an endless round of questioning from his brother. Tenya didn’t have the answers. Everyone in Class 1-A knew that Izuku had some ability to sense things that were going to happen, but Tenya didn’t know until today that he could visibly see things, too. Izuku must have been able to see things, in order to know what people looked like; all his descriptions had been visual. Tenya tried to explain that it was Popsicle’s ability when he was in bird-form, but that fact only seemed to confuse his family further.

Tenya supposed that familiars with quirks or abilities separate from their masters weren’t common. In fact, he’d never heard of one before. He’d thought his parents might have. Apparently not.

Tensei departed that night with a firm hug to Tenya. It had been years since they’d hugged, but after a strange warning like the one earlier, it seemed like the thing to do. Tenya grasped at the back of his brother’s shirt and struggled not to feel scared or worried. His brother wouldn’t want him to worry.

He didn’t want to take his brother’s name.

Tensei pulled back to put his palm against Tenya’s cheek, giving him another bright smile. “Don’t worry. I’ll be careful. No solo-ing in alleyways for me, alright?”

Tenya nodded, trying to feel appeased, wanting to feel like his brother would be safe. He’d always believed in Tensei. He’d looked up to him, seen him as infallible, immortal, unable to be harmed. Tensei was his older brother… so then why did he seem fragile, all of a sudden? And why did every muscle in Tenya’s body scream at him not to let Tensei leave?

It must be Izuku’s influence, that creepy after-feeling that came whenever his raven cawed on top of his shoulder, like it was foretelling someone’s doom. Tenya still had flashbacks sometimes about the USJ, Izuku’s raven flying in circles above them, crowing about the disaster about to befall them all. Tenya couldn’t help the feeling that this time was similar.
Friday Afternoon

On Friday after fourth period, Izuku was stopped by All Might in the hallway and invited to have lunch with him in the teacher’s lounge. This would be Izuku’s third lunch in the faculty lounge. The first one had been with Aizawa on the day of the USJ attack, when Aizawa wanted to know more about why Izuku wasn’t feeling well and how it connected to Popsicle’s ability to give him visions. The second lunch had happened earlier this week when Aizawa wanted to discuss the tengu’s Binders with Izuku away from his mother. Aizawa hadn’t seemed happy after the second talk, but Izuku had gotten him to understand the necessity of the claws, at least. Getting the tengu to put those claws in his shoulder had ended up saving Izuku’s life by helping to keep his magic hidden.

But Izuku wasn’t sure what All Might wanted from him. Three lunches with two teachers in the span of two months seemed a bit excessive. None of the other students seemed to be eating with teachers. Maybe it was because Izuku was a witch?

Either way, Izuku attempted to smile and brush aside his friends’ raised eyebrows as he accepted the invitation.

(Todoroki stood at the corner of the hallway, watching as Izuku followed All Might away from the cafeteria. He tried to surreptitiously follow Uraraka through the lunch line, listening as she giggled with Kirishima about how the teachers kept kidnapping Midoriya for lunch. Todoroki wondered why the teachers persistently showed an interest in Midoriya, why he was the one singled out. Were they giving him extra training? Advice? Midoriya didn’t seem to get any extra attention during class, except the repeated requests for him to stop touching or nuzzling other students while the teacher was talking. But Midoriya did seem more emotionally fragile than their classmates. Maybe that was it? Todoroki ate in silence beside Yaoyorozu, debating the circumstances in his head. Was Midoriya more powerful than he thought?)

Izuku trailed behind his teacher on the walk toward the faculty lounge, fingers tapping on his bento. He was glad he had brought his lunch from home today, so he didn’t have to waste time going through the lunch line.

He stared up at All Might’s large form, bulky shoulders, hair defying gravity, dazzling grin. Izuku had always looked up to All Might. Sure, Eraserhead was more like the hero Izuku wanted to become considering the life he would be forced to lead, but All Might would always be the epitome of the hero he wished he could be. Shining. Smiling. Standing tall. Tenya was closer to that than Izuku was.

They had arrived at the lounge and were now sitting across from each other, All Might on the couch and Izuku curled up on the floor in his usual spot. Izuku wondered if any of the other students had a ‘usual spot’ on the floor of the faculty lounge. It was hard to imagine Tenya sitting anywhere but on a bed or a chair, and Kacchan definitely wouldn’t let anyone sit in a position of authority over him.

“Young Midoriya, I understand that meeting like this is rather unconventional. However, I wanted to discuss the protections you helped create over the weekend.”

Izuku nodded his head as he shoved some noodles in his mouth. He figured that might have something to do with it. The principal had told Izuku that he would be notifying the teachers of a new security measure that prevented anyone from teleporting or creating portals onto the U.A. campus.

“Your principal said that the protections would keep out the warp-gate villain. Can you, uh, confirm this?” All Might had settled back into his emaciated form once it was clear that no other teachers or students would be braving the faculty lounge during lunch. Izuku had seen this form once before,
when All Might had first learned about Izuku’s secret and revealed one of his own. The skin-and-bones figure was equally disturbing the second time.

Izuku had the urge to force feed All Might his bento. What caused him to be so skinny? He had said it was a wound, but what kind of wound? Supposedly, someone with a healing quirk would have helped him before now if they could. What kind of healing would All Might need in order to bulk up more? Izuku thought back to the two vials of blood at home. He wasn’t supposed to use them on normal humans... but if the blood could help... and if there was no one behind All Might who could hold the mantle of the Symbol of Peace like he could...

Izuku shoved that thought to the back-burner. He kept shoving that thought to the back-burner. He also shoved more noodles into his mouth.

“The wards should keep anyone from teleporting or creating a portal to get into the school. The only ways in should be flying or walking onto the campus.” Izuku considered what he said. “Or burrowing, I suppose?” Best to cover all the bases when discussing weaknesses in protective wards. He was well-used to this part of the discussion. Izuku and his mom had been creating similar wards since he was about five years old, both for themselves and for other supernatural creatures, and then having to explain the pros and cons of the wards to village elders and pack leaders. Well, the wards weren’t quite similar. The anti-teleporting ward was new.

All Might sighed and hung his head, relieved. Izuku could even make out a weak smile as it settled over the emaciated face. “I am glad. I consider the safety of the students here one of my top priorities... but it is difficult to fight against something you don’t know is there.”

Izuku wondered if he was still talking about the warp villain and the USJ attack.

All Might chuckled, blood spraying out of his mouth; he tried to wipe the blood off the table with a handkerchief from his pocket.

Izuku’s returning smile was strained. He was worried about his teacher. Maybe putting that thought on the back-burner was a bad idea.

“These wards were initially meant for you to keep demons out of the campus, correct? Nedzu said something about them sensing when you used your powers...”

Izuku focused on picking his words very specifically, careful to avoid the curse from activating. “That shouldn’t be a problem now, unless they follow me here from outside campus.”

All Might nodded and relaxed against the back of the couch, his large form engulfing over half of its surface even with his skinny frame. He hung his head and stared at his hands. “I feel responsible for you, Young Midoriya. On the day of the attack, you tried to warn your teachers, to protect your classmates. And I failed you.”

Izuku shook his head and opened his mouth to say something, but All Might leaned forward and put a hand up to stop him.

Those are my feelings on the matter. I used to have a sidekick with a precognitive quirk, and I will always feel guilt for not stopping things that I know about in advance. And now you have helped create protections to save the students further, against villains and demons alike. We are, all of us who know, grateful to you. However, we also worry.” All Might paused, wiping another drop of blood off the table, before continuing. “I have been watching you training this week. You seem to be splitting your focus on learning to physically maneuver better with your powers and using your power in more specific situations. You appear to be excelling.”
Izuku blushed at the praise, hunching forward over his meal. Mr. Aizawa hadn’t said it in so much words, but his end of the day smiles at the class had made Izuku believe he approved as well. “I don’t often have the chance to practice like this. Where it’s safe.”

All Might smiled. “I wondered if that was the case. If I might ask… Principal Nedzu also suggested that you had something in you that weakened your abilities, and you removed it after creating the wards…”

“Two of them,” Izuku clarified. “I can’t control the third yet.” Izuku was becoming quite sufficient in double-speak. He wondered if All Might understood. Conversations like these made Izuku miss Principal Nedzu’s fast mind, always filling in the holes that Izuku left unspoken.

“Yes, I know how that is,” All Might answered.

Izuku wondered what he meant.

All Might’s physical abilities were astounding. Perhaps they had been difficult to control at first? Not for the first time, Izuku wondered how controlling a physical ability like All Might’s versus a magical ability like Izuku’s was different. But there was something strange about All Might’s power, anyway. Izuku could feel it pulsating beneath All Might’s skin. Izuku had been noticing it all week during All Might’s classes, ever since Izuku took off his Binders.

Were they connected? This pulsating feeling and his power-up. Was Izuku more sensitive to certain quirks and somehow able to feel them inside other people? That wouldn’t make sense. None of Izuku’s other classmates felt any different than before.

“All Might… is your power magical?” Izuku was surprised he could get the words out. He never tried to use the word ‘magic’ in connection with someone else. He couldn’t say that he himself was magical without activating the curse. Maybe he could speak about magic as long as it involved other people?

All Might coughed up more blood and sent Midoriya a confounded stare. “Why would you ask that?”

Izuku shrugged. “You feel different than everyone else. I can’t usually feel quirks, but I can sense yours.”

All Might shook his head and told Izuku he honestly had no idea why Izuku could feel his power. Izuku nodded dubiously. Even if his quirk was magic-related, All Might may not be aware. Witches seemed to be a new thing for him, despite his knowledge of demons. But how could All Might get something magic-related? If he had been born with it, surely someone would have sensed him before now, like Izuku could. If he hadn’t been born with it and had gotten it past the age of majority, maybe no one would have noticed. But how could you get something like that later in life? Izuku shook his head. Forget ‘later in life’, how could you get something like that in general?

The power beneath All Might’s skin felt odd. Izuku wasn’t sure how to describe it. Focusing on the power, even from Izuku’s spot on the other side of the coffee table, felt strange. Izuku’s fingers started tingling, and he could sense more than see several presences around All Might. But it was only when Izuku focused...

He shook his head again to rid himself of the feeling. It wasn’t his business, anyway. The pro-hero likely didn’t want Izuku prying into his business. From what Izuku had learned, All Might tended to dodge questions about his quirk and his past.

Still, the feeling bothered Izuku all through his walk back from lunch. The class’s next two periods would be spent on free-range training for the last time this week, and Izuku had a plan prepared for
 Outside the Sports Stadium

Izuku reached the Monday morning of the Sports Festival still tired from constant nightmares, although the bags under his eyes had mostly receded since Thursday’s revelation to the Iida family. Popsicle had refused to sleep in wolf form while Izuku continued having visions, and his raven form only served to put the dreams on fragmented repeat. The perpetual physical activity and mental exercises from the training of the past week necessitated much more sleep than Izuku felt he had actually received. Therefore, Izuku arrived at the stadium feeling twitchy and in dire need of cuddles, preferably pack cuddles.

Not everyone appreciated this.

“Shinsou!” Izuku had seen the purple hair on the edge of his vision and had rushed to jump the other boy, causing the other teen to stiffen and pull back from the contact.

“Why are you hugging me again.” The previously tense form slackened in Izuku’s hold as the other teen became aware of who, exactly, was holding him.

Izuku nuzzled at the back of Shinsou’s neck before loosening his grip, only to encompass the other boy’s arm. “I’ve been having bad dreams, and you’re warm?” Shinsou didn’t answer, his legs continuing to drag them both forward toward the back entrance to the Sports Arena. He was scowling and his eyes were drooping. He looked as tired as Izuku felt, the bags beneath his eyes almost as bad as Izuku’s on Thursday. “Shinsou, are you okay?”

“Will you get off me?” Shinsou made no move to shove him off, so Izuku considered that the other teen must not hate the touch too much.

Still, Izuku could bargain. “If you tell me what’s wrong, I’ll let go.”

Shinsou sighed and turned lazy eyes on Midoriya’s smiling form. He wouldn’t see the green-haired teen for weeks on end, and then the boy would just jump on him out of nowhere. It made no sense. If it made Midoriya release him, though, Shinsou felt no hesitation in answering him. “The outcome of the Sports Festival will determine whether or not I can become a hero. Each year, that possibility grows smaller. This is my best chance to prove myself, despite not being given the same training for these sort of scenarios as the students in the heroics course. So yeah, not feeling okay is kind of what happens.”

Izuku nodded and let go of the other boy, in fulfillment of their earlier agreement. He still grabbed Shinsou’s hand, needing more physical contact to regain emotional and mental equilibrium. He began swinging it back and forth as he smiled up at the other boy. “Then prove yourself. And if there’s anything I can do to help, just ask.”

Shinsou stared back incredulously, fluffy purple hair flopping in all directions.

Izuku felt an overwhelming urge to pet the other boy’s hair and raised his opposite hand to do so, only for that hand to be grabbed and pressed behind his back before it could make contact. A growl started next to Izuku’s ear, causing him to shiver. Kacchan?
“Deku, what the fuck do you think you’re doing. This is the waiting room for fucking Gen Ed losers.”

And so it was. Izuku and Shinsou had walked far enough that Shinsou had already reached his destination. Izuku just hadn’t realized because he’d been so happy holding Shinsou’s hand.

Izuku turned to pout at his friend, Shinsou still caught in his grip beside him, unable to enter the room. “Kacchan, don’t call Shinsou that. He’s really strong.”

“Eh?” The blond haired boy shoved his hand into Shinsou’s chest and pressed him up against the wall, scowling up at his taller form with a bit too much excitement, a grin beginning to spread across his face. Both of Shinsou’s hands fell to his sides, suddenly released, and he wasn’t sure whether to feel grateful or abandoned by the loss of contact. “Is that right?”

The explosive teen’s smirk was predatory, fanning hot breath over Shinsou’s neck. Shinsou spent a few more seconds wondering what in the hell sort of dynamic Midoriya was continually trying to pull him into, before the blonde teen was letting the fistful of Shinsou’s shirt go and stepping backward, point proven by Shinsou’s silence.

“Kch. Guess we’ll see on the field.” He backed away from Shinsou and grabbed Midoriya’s hand as he went. “Come on, Deku; time to have whatever fucking kumbaya moment you wanted with Kirishima before the festival starts.”

Izuku stared at Kacchan’s hand in his as Shinsou shut the door behind him. Kacchan had grabbed the hand that Izuku had been touching Shinsou with, as if he wanted to replace the other boy’s scent on Izuku. The freckled teen suppressed a smile at the protective gesture.

Moments later, Bakugou opened the door to the Class 1-A waiting room, where their peers were mostly waiting, either sitting in chairs or pacing around the room.

“Hey, Kacchan? Can I touch you?”

Sero and Kaminari swiveled their hands in unison to stare at the two teens entering the room. Sero had a feeling he knew what Midoriya meant by ‘touch’ in connection with ‘Bakugou’. So, it seemed, did Bakugou.

Bakugou continued to drag Izuku by hand into the waiting room. He glared behind him at the smaller teen. “Seriously, Deku? Now?”

Izuku nodded, stumbling further forward and resting his forehead on Bakugou’s back in between his shoulder blades. “I’m so tired… I’ve been having bad dreams.”

Bakugou growled. “Then touch Kirishima.” He shoved Izuku forward so that he toppled onto Kirishima’s lap, the red-head looking down at his new lapful with a growing blush—saving his quizzical look for Bakugou, who smirked in response.

Kirishima raised a hand to pet Izuku’s hair as he would a particularly fluffy dog. “Izuku, uh… hi.” The hair was soft between his fingers, and Kirishima really didn’t have the time right now to be distracted by Izuku’s eyes.

Izuku settled himself better on the other teen’s lap before smiling up at him, his green eyes glinting with happiness. “Hi.”

Iida could be heard clearing his throat across the room. “Yes, well, everyone, I hope your
preparations are complete. It is almost time for us to—"

“Midoriya… you’re here.” Todoroki had disengaged from his position leaning against the shoe lockers, walking over to stand next to the Izuku-Kirishima sculpture on Aisle 2.

Izuku peered up past Kirishima’s face to see Todoroki’s heterochromatic eyes focused on him. Izuku had been casting Todoroki furtive glances all week, uncertain whether he remembered Izuku’s astral projection into his bedroom or dream or whatever it had been. Todoroki hadn’t been acting any differently and hadn’t said anything about Saturday night, so Izuku figured he was all in the clear. Was that what Todoroki wanted now?

“Considering events at the USJ and class exercises, I think it would be objectively safe to say that I am stronger than you. My quirk is more powerful, and I have had more training.”

Izuku nodded his head along until that last part. Izuku felt like most of his life had been spent training in one way or another, and he definitely had more practical experience with demons and werewolves and… well, lots of creatures. Izuku squinted back at the other teen. “Define training.”

Todoroki continued on with only a second of confused hesitation, his face once more impassive. “But despite that, our teachers seem to have a closer eye on you, including All Might… so I’m going to beat you today.”

Kirishima’s hands tightened around Izuku’s waist as Izuku gazed in confusion at the boy above him. Behind them, Kaminari could be heard whistling. “Whoa, dude, the strongest guy in class is challenging you. Way to go!”

Several feet away, Katsuki Bakugou bristled in anger. “Who the fuck do you think you’re challenging?” Bakugou stepped up to Kirishima’s chair, as though stepping in between a fight, Izuku in one corner and Todoroki in the other. “If you want to fight Izuku for his position, then go ahead. But I’m the one that’s gonna end up at the top of this shitty festival, got it?”

Todoroki refused to spare the explosive teen an appraising glance. “This doesn’t concern you.”

Bakugou started growling, his hand moving to grab Todoroki’s upper left arm, bringing Todoroki closer to him with a swift pull. “You’re challenging my beta, and you’re not even in the pack. That concerns me. Kch. If you want to be at the top, you challenge me, not him.” The last part was snarled near Todoroki’s neck, causing the taller teen to stare down at Bakugou’s red eyes incredulously.

Izuku nodded as if Bakugou’s crazy growling made complete sense. In the background, Sero could be seen bobbing his head hesitantly in agreement while Kirishima just sighed and tilted his head back to gaze up at Todoroki with a ‘see what I deal with?’ look on his face.

“...what?” Todoroki had no idea what to make of the developing situation. He had meant to challenge Midoriya for All Might’s attention and the teachers’ regard. Instead, Bakugou was challenging Todoroki to a, what, pre-established pecking order? Was everyone in on this, and he simply hadn’t been paying attention?

Todoroki looked up at his classmates to see that some of them seemed to completely understand what was going on (Bakugou, Kirishima, Izuku, Iida, and Sero) while others didn’t seem too confused (Uraraka, Kaminari, and Tokoyami) and the rest of the class had raised eyebrows and were staring at everyone else like they’d been included in some sort of weird activity without their consent. Asui
didn’t seem too bothered by it, though, and Todoroki couldn’t see Hagakure’s face to see how she was responding to this.

Iida cleared his throat once again, trying to gain everyone’s attention. “Yes, uh, well, anyone who wants to become involved in, uh, that… feel free to use the festival to establish your, uh, position?”

“Uh, question? What do these positions mean for us?” Of course Kaminari seemed to be buying into the whole thing, his hand waving around in the air.

Uraraka leaned forward on the table, her hands folded beneath her. “Ohhhh, are we auditioning for the pack? That’s so exciting!”

“Gero?”

Ashido bent over toward Uraraka. “What’s a pack?”

“Wait, what is going on and why do some of you seem to know about it?” That was Ojiro, his thick tail flicking behind him in a disturbed pattern.

Todoroki grabbed Bakugou’s wrist and pried it off his arm, his brows furrowed in bewilderment. “I didn’t… I was challenging Midoriya, not you Bakugou.”

Bakugou smiled in victory and leaned his face closer to Todoroki’s neck, canines set to bite. “Then you accept that I’m the alpha.”

Todoroki flushed, upset at words being put in his mouth. “What? No, I don’t… what is going on…?”

Kirishima sighed and returned to petting Izuku’s hair, as if that simple gesture helped him make sense of the world. “Just go along with it, dude. Pretend Bakugou’s at the top of the pecking order and you have to beat him to establish dominance. It’s easier that way.”

Todoroki swallowed, the blush on his cheeks deepening as the rest of his body sent all available blood to certain regions. “Dominance?”

Sero laughed from his position at one of the tables beside Kaminari. “Why do you think I keep challenging Bakugou in class?”

Todoroki raised his right hand (cooling, relaxing) to his face and wiped at his brows, his eyes, his cheek and lips. What on earth… He peered up at his classmates. “Who all is involved with this?” A tally of hands sprang up. “Or… wants to be involved?” Extra hands sprang up, some more tentative than others.

All in all, it was about half the class. Uraraka and Asui were the only girls involved, and all but four of the guys had their hands raised. Well, four plus Todoroki. Anyone who didn’t hang out with Izuku Midoriya in some fashion had their hands down.

Izuku beamed with happiness.

“Are there any benefits to being involved?” Yaoyorozu had her hand raised when asking the question. Jirou nodded next to her, wanting to know. Shoji seconded the question.

Izuku turned toward her while continuing to sit on Kirishima’s lap. The movement made a small sound escape Kirishima that he really hoped his classmates wouldn’t call him on. Izuku smiled hesitantly as he tried to summarize what the pack meant to him, and what he wanted it to mean to
others. “Pack means protection. It means you won’t ever be alone. We support each other, help each other, look out for each other. There’s always someone there when you need them.”

Bakugou scoffed beside him. He shot a glare at Yaoyorozu. “It also means an established pecking order in the field. The strongest orders the others around. No more fucking confusion like that shit at USJ.”

Yaoyorozu nodded in consideration. She peered over at Todoroki and smiled politely at Bakugou. “I would be interested in joining, as long as Todoroki challenges you for first place.”

Bakugou grinned back at her, all teeth. “Bring it.”

Iida stepped forward from his position near the lockers. “He won’t be the only one challenging you.”

Bakugou scoffed and grabbed Izuku’s neck to bring the smaller teen closer to him. “I’m gonna crush your damn glasses into the ground, you—”

The bell rung. The Sports Festival was ready to begin.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you liked the chapter! The next one might take longer to write because I have a job interview next week that I need to create a presentation for (wish me luck).

My current plan for the next chapter is to try and do all the Sports Festival, but it might just end up the first two rounds and conversations and stuff.

I'm debating a couple of things:
1) My bf thinks I should make Inasa Yoarashi part of Class 1-B (he's the guy that hates Todoroki during the provisional license exam, and has epic wind powers). Would you be interested in this or no? It would give Todoroki someone powerful to fight against in case he uses his father's quirk (and idk another Dekubowl participant), but some of you might not know who he is.
2) Should Deku's familiar (Popsicle) be allowed to join him in the festival? I say yes, my bf says no, so I'm turning to my readers for the final vote.
3) Last but not least... do you like Izuku's new power, or no? I'm debating whether he'll ever be able to control it, or if it just happens accidentally whenever he gets really powered up. Or, you know, in really awkward or troublesome situations. Because that's fun. I don't want to make him too over-powered...

Let me know what you think!
The Sports Festival is Underway!

Chapter Summary

Get ready for the beginning of the Sports Festival! The first round of the Sports Festival includes: way too much participation by Popsicle, Izuku always being a hero, Eraserhead giving Midnight a hard time, and some pretty spot-on commentary by Present Mic. The second round has a cavalry battle where Izuku teams up with some old and new allies, Bakugou keeps being single-minded, and Todoroki picks a surprising teammate. The third round is announced... but how will it all conclude?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sports Festival, First Round

Present Mic’s voice could be heard ringing out over the stadium as Izuku and his classmates neared the door to enter the arena. “And now, it’s the time we’ve all been waiting for. The up-and-coming heroes are about to take the stage, leave everything on the field, and fight for the chance to obtain worldwide fame! First up is a group you've probably heard about already. They’re no strangers to the spotlight, since they withstood a villain attack in their second week of school! These dazzling heroes-to-be are lining up for you now. May I present, the hero course students of Class 1-A!”

Cheers went wild around the stadium as Izuku tried to shield his eyes from the bright glare of the sun. He blinked the spots in his vision away, only for those spots to be replaced with even more dark blurs. The stands were filled with them… and it took Izuku a second to realize that they weren’t blurs at all but people.

Pro-heroes. Recruiters. Hero enthusiasts. Everyone who was anyone was here to watch the freshman class that stood up to villains.

No pressure or anything.

Izuku felt his chest flutter with nerves. For all the demons he’d fought, spells he’d cast, and creatures he’d met… he’d never had to fight in a stadium like this before, surrounded by thousands of people. At most, his previous tournaments had thirty people watching, and those were all tengu. They didn’t cheer loudly like this audience, the cacophony of their combined voice ringing in his ears and making it difficult to focus.

Izuku closed his eyes and concentrated on the feel of Popsicle around his collarbone in snake form. Aizawa had said that Izuku’s bond with his familiar would put him at too large of a disadvantage during the festival if he was forced to be separated from him, so Izuku was allowed to fight with him. Of course, if Popsicle got hurt, then Izuku would feel his pain… so fighting beside his familiar could be both an advantage and a disadvantage. And each form of Popsicle’s had its own further disadvantages, which Izuku had tallied up the night before.

In addition to determining the disadvantage of each of Popsicle’s forms on the field, it was also up to Izuku to figure out how much he wanted the public at large to know about Popsicle.
That his familiar could shapeshift? *Probably safe, that was going to come up a lot in his future as a hero. He couldn't be seen running about with a 'familiar quirk' whose animal took different forms without some previous exposure regarding those forms, and Izuku didn't think he could get by on an entire pro-hero career without Popsicle showing up more than once.*

However... showing to the world that Popsicle’s different forms boosted Izuku's abilities and caused outright contradictions to his 'registered quirk'? *Probably not smart to release that knowledge. He didn't mind his classmates knowing a bit about the raven's precognition or the snake's healing, but too much specific knowledge about Popsicle's abilities and their connection to Izuku might make people ask questions. Questions he couldn't answer.*

Izuku wasn’t sure precisely how much he wanted everyone in the stadium to know about Popsicle, but he couldn’t deny the comfort of his familiar being wrapped around his chest. Despite how exhausted Izuku had felt earlier, between cuddling with Kirishima and drawing on Popsicle's power, Izuku now felt awake and ready to face the trials ahead. His exhaustion lingered at the back of his mind, but he was able to press it away more and more the longer Popsicle was in his snake form, his familiar's healing ability doing its work.

Tenya took a couple of fast strides to end up by Izuku’s side. “Izuku, are you alright? You look pale...”

Izuku turned toward him, still blindsided by the stadium full of people. “Huh? Uh, y-yeah… just not used to crowds this large.” He tried to smile, but it came out some wobbly, pathetic thing. He didn’t even know he could get nervous about crowds. Apparently, it was a thing. Izuku felt Popsicle rubbing his head along Izuku's neck as though to comfort him.

Tenya slowed his pace and nodded, eyes trailing over the crowd as though assessing each section for potential danger. “I agree, there are more people than I imagined. But this is just another part of the pro-hero industry we need to get used to. Hero-villain fights tend to attract the attention of the public. Everything from photo-ops to interviews may become the norm for us one day.”

Abandoning his conversation with Kaminari, Kirishima walked over to put a hand on Iida’s shoulder while leaning around to check how Izuku was doing. “Hey, are you discussing how big the crowd is, or the pressure Present Mic just put on us… because that was *some* introduction. As if the press doesn't give us enough to live up to.”

Bakugou sneered as he began storming past them, bringing himself to the visual forefront of Class 1-A. He turned his head in passing to address their group. “What, you gonna let some intro make you fucking doubt yourself? The rest of these extras might be begging for attention, but we’re here for more than that.”

As he passed by Kirishima, Bakugou took a fistful of the other teen's shirt and yanked him forward. Kirishima shouted an indignant, 'Whoa man, not cool!', as he allowed himself to be dragged a couple feet forward of the rest of the group before removing his shirt from Bakugou's grasp.

Bakugou continued on as if he wasn’t manhandling the second closest thing he had to a friend, going so far as to narrow his red eyes and focus them on Kirishima's own. "I'm gonna fucking show you all that I deserve to be in charge, and you better not fall behind the rest of these losers from other classes.” He spared a brief glance over at Iida, as though to say 'that includes you', before facing toward the crowd and maintaining a vow of silence that was more similar to an aura of simmering anger than anything else.

In the background, Izuku heard Present Mic introducing the other hero studies course as well as the general studies course, the support classes, and the business classes. He’d almost forgotten how
many classes of students were in the first year—eleven in all, only two of which actually trained students to get their hero licenses. It seemed a bit strange for a school with such a large budget and such extensive training grounds to only have six hero classes in total throughout the school, but Izuku supposed it allowed the teachers to change up their schedules on a whim. At any given time, each class could be on one of U.A.’s training grounds without a single overlap. That was pretty impressive.

Once all the classes had reached the middle of the field, Midnight appeared on a platform in front of them with a microphone. “And now it is time for the introductory speech!”

Murmurs could be heard amongst the students about her hero costume being too, uh, revealing, but Izuku didn’t understand what was so wrong with it. She had to reveal skin in order to use her power, didn’t she? The costume made sense.

“Silence, everyone!” Midnight strutted her way across the small stage that had been set up in the center of the field. “We will begin with the student pledge, which will be given to us by Izuku Midoriya, who placed first in the Hero Course Entrance Exam!”

It took Izuku a few seconds of blankly staring at the stage to realize she wanted him to come forward and give a speech of some sort. He tried not to panic as he turned toward Tenya, his eyes wide and his face pale. “Wait, what am I supposed to say?”

Tenya stared back quizzically. “Didn’t they inform you that you would be giving the speech?”

Izuku shook his head as whispering sprang up around them, wondering where this ‘Midoriya’ was. Tenya rushed out a quick explanation, slightly flustered by the administration not warning students before asking them to give a presentation. His hands started automatically chopping at the air, almost hitting Tokoyami beside them. “Ah, well… the student pledge is generally a heartfelt speech where you talk about doing your best and looking forward to challenging your peers.”

“…what?” Izuku continued to stare at Tenya blankly. He had no idea what that meant.

Tenya sighed and rested his hand on Izuku’s shoulder, his voice softening. “Just speak from your heart, Izuku… you have a good one.”

Izuku tried not to gaze too long as Tenya’s cheekbones seemed to turn pink, unvoiced emotions coloring his skin. As if in mirrored response, Izuku’s heart began racing as well, and his face displayed an answering flush.

Midnight called Izuku to the stage once again, and Kirishima gave him a slight push between his shoulderblades to move him forward. Izuku tried his best to walk calmly up the stairs and not give Tenya more worried glances… but… what was he doing giving a speech when he still wasn’t sure he wanted people to be paying attention to him?

The microphone loomed in front of him.

Izuku had never given a speech before. He wondered if there were any rules to it. Was he supposed to address the audience? His classmates? Was it like writing a paper, with an introduction, body, and conclusion? Midnight had said it was a ‘pledge’, and pledges were a lot like promises, weren’t they?

Izuku licked his lips and leaned forward, doing his best to focus on Popsicle’s scales against his neck and not the crowd of people waiting for him to speak. “I, uh… I’ve never given a speech before. Sorry.” Izuku chuckled for a second, silence ringing around him, before he coughed to clear his
throat, his hand shaking by his side. Izuku breathed past the jackrabbiting of his heart, thinking of
Iida's words. *Speak from the heart. About the Sports Festival. Right.*

Izuku's voice was shaky when he started again, his eyes focusing down the line of the microphone
into one of the stadium walls. “I don’t, uh, I don’t really understand how the Sports Festival works?
You want us to compete with each other, to knock each other down, and that doesn’t really seem like
something a hero should do. My friend… his family said it’s because that’s just how the pro-hero
industry works now-a-days, but I don’t accept that. I don’t accept that we have to be enemies. I want
everyone I fight with today… to be my friend.”

Izuku took an uncertain breath, thinking of Shinsou’s hand in his, Bakugou pushing him onto
Kirishima’s lap, the raised hands of his classmates saying they wanted to be pack and talking about
how it would be fun to fight for positions.

He raised his eyes higher. “So I guess… I look forward to fighting beside everyone today, so we can
all showcase our talents and what we’re worth. I hope to meet you again after this festival and that
we can still be friends, because I’m sure we’re all amazing—no matter what class we come from.”
Izuku clenched his hands by his side and gave one last smile. “So, uh, thank you? And good luck to
everyone.”

When Izuku finally finished making his way back down the stage and reaching Tenya’s side, he
could have sworn the other boy had tears in his eyes. Kaminari stood beside him, wiping his eyes,
talking about how manly Izuku’s speech was while Kacchan scowled, probably because of all the
emotions going on around him. Izuku smiled, happy that the speech was over and happy to be back
with his pack. All three of them were around him… and their group might be bigger by the end of
the festival today.

Izuku looked forward to it.

Present Mic’s voice boomed overhead, his voice slightly choked. “Whoa, that was a, uh… holy crap,
can Izuku Midoriya give a speech! Now that we’re all still processing that display of
teamsmanship… it’s time for the first round to get started! Midnight, please tell us what these
students have in store.”

There a was a long pause, in which no one moved.

“Uh… Midnight?”

The pro-heroine seemed to shake herself out of whatever was dazing her. “Right! The first fateful
game of the festival! The board above will show us what our young students will be facing today…
alone… competing…”

“Uh, Midnight?”

“And look! It’s… an obstacle course, for all the classes to participate in. The track is about two and a
half miles around the stadium, so the audience will be watching you through the screens posted here.
There are three main obstacles. As long as you don’t leave the obstacle course, then anything goes!”

Midnight cleared her throat and gave a swift glance toward the commentator’s box, pulling out a
written list from her pocket. “Well, anything except obliterating the track so no one else can use it.
You also can’t explode or change the walls around the track to create a new course, or skip through
any of the three main obstacles by, uh—” Midnight paused, rolling her eyes at the commentator’s
stand. “Aizawa, this is really much more specific than we need to—”
“Read it,” announced a deadpan voice from the commentator’s box. Class 1-A’s homeroom teacher wasn’t taking a chance with Midoriya’s ability to weasel around the rules.

“Ooookay. You also can’t skip through any of the main obstacles by flying on top of a familiar. And no taking unnecessary risks that will cause you to become grievously harmed, just because you can be healed later. There. Those are the only rules.” Midnight glanced back up at the box, her eyebrow cocked and voice sassy-as-you-please. “Can we get on with the first round, now?”

There was another silence, this time from the commentators.

“Alright, take your place contestants!” Midnight announced, once again in presentation-mode, swinging her hips about the stage while she raised her hand to the sky.

All eleven classes of students turned toward the big gate that had three alarms designating the countdown, each of which were lit up. The large doorway began to open.

Class 1-A dug their heels into the ground, ready to take off. The first light turned dark.

Popsicle slithered out from Izuku’s collar, getting prepared to transform at a moment’s notice. The second light turned dark.

Izuku smiled at his pack. “I guess I’ll see you at the other side.”

“You better fucking make it there, Deku,” returned Bakugou, while Kirishima gave them both a thumbs-up. Iida bent his legs, preparing to sprint.

The third light turned dark at the same time that Midnight could be heard exclaiming ‘Begin!’, and everyone rushed forward at once.

It was madness, a throng of students shoved into a narrow hallway all trying to jockey their way forward. Everyone was fighting each other. There was no teamwork, no order, no sense of a plan. Everyone was just pushing as hard as they could to get out of that hallway and to get ahead.

“Aaaaand we’re off to a racing start. How about some colorful commentary from my gloomy insomniac friend?”

“Why did you talk me into this?”

“Hahaha… always trying to prove me right. Now, what should we be paying attention to in these early stages of the obstacle course?”

“...the door.”

Izuku hung back as his teacher’s voices echoed overhead. He hated enclosed spaces, specifically cramped hallways full of people. He hadn’t been lying to Mr. Aizawa that day in the teacher’s lounge—when the intruder alert blared during lunch, Izuku truly had run down the opposite hallway because he was claustrophobic and wanted to avoid the press of students. He had also been worried that a demon had come to find him, but that was only maybe thirty percent of Izuku’s avoidance of school protocol. The other seventy percent had to do with not wanting to be surrounded by one hundred of his classmates’ distressed, squirming, shouting bodies.

Looking at the crowd of students rushing through the gate doors, Izuku wondered how he should approach this. He and Popsicle had debated how much he should use his familiar during the Sports Festival. Popsicle didn’t want to be left behind and had demanded, at the very least, that Izuku carry him so that he could subtly help Izuku control his powers. Izuku had only had one week to get used
to the influx of magic from removing two of the magic-binding claws, so having Popsicle there helped him focus and control his abilities. Fighting separate from Popsicle would probably be a bad idea, and Izuku hadn’t had the chance (or the desire, really) to try it out, yet. He hoped he wouldn’t have to, any time soon.

In general, having his familiar near him made his magic stronger and made him more able to focus his abilities. However, whatever form his familiar took would also affect him in different ways; and each of Popsicle’s forms had their upsides and their downsides.

Popsicle’s wolf form would give Izuku better reflexes and physical skills—he would be slightly faster, slightly quicker on turns, and definitely more able to run a long-distance track like this. However, the wolf form could also get trampled by the other students in an obstacle course, or he could get hurt by someone’s quirk. If Popsicle got hurt, Izuku would feel his pain and would be distracted. He’d also have to dig the wolf out of any trouble he got into. There was one time Popsicle had fallen into a bear trap and gotten hurt, which in turn hurt Izuku, and it took a long time for Izuku to pull his familiar out. Ever since then, they’d been more careful about Popsicle running alongside Izuku in his wolf form. Especially during a long-distance trek like this.

Popsicle’s snake form would help Izuku heal faster and allow him to sense movements and intentions through vibrations in the ground. However, Popsicle’s snake form also worsened Izuku’s hearing, which could get him into trouble if he wasn’t paying enough attention to his surroundings. Izuku had originally planned for Popsicle to stay in this form the whole tournament because it would be more helpful if Izuku got physically hurt; plus, Popsicle could stay wrapped around his neck and was less likely to be noticed or remarked on by any pro-heroes watching. However, if the first round was an obstacle course, Izuku worried that he would need all of his sense of hearing in order to know when danger was lurking ahead or behind him.

Last but not least, Popsicle’s raven form was mostly useful for giving Izuku premonitions and sharpening his eyesight. According to his mom, raven familiars generally made their witches wiser or more intelligent, but he’d never really noticed that happening. Popsicle’s raven form was a blessing and a curse, though, because at any point while he was in raven form, there was the possibility that Izuku could get a premonition. Premonitions distracted Izuku, dazed him, and made it hard for him to stay on his feet… which was potentially very dangerous in an obstacle course like the one ahead. Popsicle’s precognitive power could also just make Izuku feel really nauseous if something bad was about to happen, which was disorienting and once again possibly dangerous during an obstacle course.

Izuku thought through his options as the rest of his classmates charged ahead. Not even Iida spared Izuku a glance to wonder why he was standing still.

Truth was… Izuku refused to go through a crowded tunnel like that. There were too many people in too small of a space; it made him uncomfortable and shaky and kind of like throwing up. He didn’t want to have a minor panic attack during the Sports Festival, and definitely not during the first round without his pack nearby to help him. Popsicle could try to get Izuku out of his headspace, in case he started freaking out, but it was never fun stitching up fang marks, especially in the middle of the field. Plus, he didn’t have any needles or thread on him.

The most logical course of action would be to use Popsicle’s ability to fly to his advantage. If Popsicle grew large enough, then Izuku could either ride on top of him or let Popsicle carry him in his claws. They could then get past the crowd in the tunnels and onto the main obstacles. Ms. Midnight had only said that students couldn’t ride on top of a familiar to get past a main obstacle… but Izuku could still be carried…
Popsicle hated flying in his large form through tunnels, though, so Izuku would have to wait until he’d run through the tunnel to fly.

Izuku jogged over toward the gate and peered through the tunnel to see if it was mostly cleared out of students. Popsicle flew in raven form beside him, sharpening Izuku’s eyesight further. There didn’t seem to be a crowd in the tunnel any longer, although there were several forms clustered at the end. It looked safe enough, even as a cold wind swept down the hallway and chilled Izuku through his long-sleeved uniform. He took the hallway at a jog, hoping the people at the end would clear out by the time he got to the other side. He also hoped Todoroki hadn’t iced the whole place over, like he inevitably would. That would be a pain.

Present Mic’s voice could be heard booming throughout the tunnel. “Ohhh, enemies have shown up out of nowhere! I bet we are in for a treat here. This is a test of strength and cunning… it’s a Roboooo Infernooooo!”

Another waft of cold air came from the exit, where Izuku’s sharpened eyes could make out a thick layer of ice covering the floor. Of-friggin’-course.

“That’s Shouto Todoroki, pulling an early lead with a terrifying display of power! Simply amazing. That is one student we should definitely watch out for. What are your thoughts?”

“Todoroki is adept at both offensive and defensive tactics. He combined them in order to race ahead of his peers and cause trouble for those behind him. He could have frozen the robots earlier, causing less risk of the robots falling on other students. Simply put, he wanted the falling robots to stop other students’ progress.”

“Ohhhh… that is one cold heart! After the rousing speech for teamwork earlier, that sort of behavior definitely seems harsh!”

“But tactically sound. Every student wants to win. Sometimes that requires putting your competitors at a disadvantage.”

“Still, it makes you wonder where Midoriya is in all this—”

As Izuku got closer to the exit, he realized that the clustered students at the end of the tunnel weren’t moving at all. They’d all been stuck in place by ice. Probably Todoroki’s. Izuku reached the opening, peering around at the large swaths of ice attaching students to the ground. All told, there were about sixty kids, some having been frozen near the exit and others stuck to the ground outside, their lower limbs frozen in mid-run. Had they been trying to escape? Had they seen the ice coming?

All the other students had run ahead, fighting and getting past what seemed to be robots. Izuku discerned that the robots looked just like the Entrance Exam, everything from three-pointers to zero-pointers.

Most of Izuku’s class seemed to be specks in the distance, with only some of the other classes trying to dodge their way around the smallest robots left. Izuku turned in a circle and searched the frozen students’ faces, although he didn’t know what he was looking for. Something to assuage the guilt, perhaps? Some of their faces were filled with fear, others anger, and even more held a sort of self-loathing and helplessness. The helplessness was what tore at Izuku, made his legs hesitate and his feet root into the ground.

This felt wrong. He couldn’t leave them like this.

Popsicle squawked next to Izuku’s ear, ready to enlarge himself and carry Izuku over the rest of his
The need to help thumped through Izuku’s veins, alongside the memory of his mother telling him *to move on, to just move on*. He couldn’t ignore their faces. He could never ignore them. If Izuku had been able to ignore that sort of look on someone’s face, then he and his mom wouldn’t have had to move around so much. It always got him into some kind of trouble, usually demonic. *But the demons couldn’t sense him here; the wards were too strong.*

For the first time in his life, Izuku could save people without having to worry about being discovered. He was free to be whatever sort of hero he wanted to be, standing tall like All Might, or dodging through the darkness like Eraserhead… so how could he leave his fellow students frozen like this? He knew how painful it felt to be encased in that ice. He’d learned that well enough during his first week of school, and then with Todoroki during the USJ… how the villains had shouted while unable to move an inch…

“And the second obstacle has come up! If any of our viewers thought the robots were a cinch to beat, then behold! THE FAAAAALL!! If you don’t watch your step, you’ll fall to the bottom and be out of the game. If you can’t walk it, then how about trying to crawl?!”

Izuku looked around for high ground and caught sight of what looked to be a toppled zero-pointer robot from the entrance exam. It had large chunks of ice scattered around it. *That was also probably Todoroki.* He took a running jump on top of its arm, another jump up to its shoulder, then its head. He was high enough to see the ground around the exit and into the tunnel. He could see all the students who had been frozen from here.

“And Todoroki seems to be clearing it with ease, keeping ahead of the race. Katsuki Bakugo begins making significant headway to catch up, though. Look at him fly! Now that’s a creative use of an explosion quirk, right there!”

Izuku closed his eyes and focused on Popsicle’s talons clasping his shoulder. Popsicle cawed at him and pecked his hair. Izuku focused his breath and his mind. *If Izuku wanted to catch up with his pack, he didn’t have much time to be wasting here… but he couldn’t just leave them…*

Izuku raised his hands, preparing to explode the ice. He focused on the ground, on the pavement beneath the ice, the solid surface where there was no cooled water. *Earth-ground-cement.* He focused on the cement itself, rather than the ice. If he focused on all the ice, he might hurt the students, so he had to make sure to focus solely on the cement. *Earth-ground-cement.* Izuku also had to imagine the whole area of cement in front of him exploding at once, or he’d have to do this twice and take even more time.

Izuku took a deep breath. He held the image in his head, what he wanted to happen, what he wanted to avoid happening, who he was trying to save. His forehead tingled as blue lights appeared behind his eyelids and the taste of copper filled his mouth. He released his long-held breath and flung out his hands.

The effect was instantaneous.

A large explosion could be heard throughout the entire Sports Stadium, like someone’s bones breaking amplified by a hundred. This was followed by a period of silence, Present Mic’s commentating having reached a sudden halt. Whispers broke out in the stadium as the guys in charge of the screens tried to find the source of the noise. Layers of smoke and evaporating ice rose over the entrance to the obstacle course, obscuring what had happened from the camera lenses.

Izuku looked around to see if he had succeeded… and one by one, the captured students shook off
the ice that had cracked beneath their feet and around their legs. Say what you will for the power behind Todoroki’s ice, it could still be broken apart with sufficient damage to a single edge… even if that edge was the ground underneath it.

Izuku smiled out across all the teenagers he had released from their winter prisons. With a laugh, he turned toward Popsicle, who had glided off his shoulder and begun increasing in size several feet away. When Popsicle was large enough to carry him, Izuku took a running leap off of the zero-pointer robot’s head. Popsicle caught him in his claws, carrying him over the robot carcasses and iced remains, rising above the dust and ice fumes.

In front of where Izuku had been standing, all of Todoroki’s ice that touched the ground had been shattered.

Izuku soared high above it all, his thoughts thrumming. They’re safe. They aren’t going to get hypothermia or frostbite. They’re going to be okay. I didn’t abandon them.

Popsicle flew higher to quickly cover more ground while at the same time staying within the bounds of the obstacle course. That was one of the rules, after all—no exiting the obstacle course. Mr. Aizawa would be proud of him.

“And finally, the last obstacle appears! It’s the Mine Field, right out of Rambo 3! Better be careful where you step, or you’ll trigger one of the mines! There are fewer at the front and more closer to the end… a perfect way to slow the front contestants down! Will Todoroki give up his first place to someone able to catch up behind him on the field?

Izuku had reached the second obstacle, which appeared to be a range of rock columns attached by rope. Some of the other classes were still making their way across slowly, but Izuku couldn’t see any of Class 1-A. Was he going to come in last? He couldn’t be the omega. He refused.

Izuku held on tight to Popsicle’s claws as his familiar continued flying him over the rock columns, the distance between him and his future pack decreasing.

“For all our listeners wondering where that terrifying sound came from, we’ve identified the source as Izuku Midoriya, our freshmen speaker. He seems to have destroyed all the ice at the beginning of the obstacle course, and released several of his fellow students! You can still see them thanking him from here. And now he’s… uh…”

“Oh for the love of—”

“Midoriya heads to catch up with his classmates, being carried by his familiar! …well, we didn’t say he couldn’t do that, did we?”

“It was implied.”

Izuku heard the amplified displeasure in his pack leader’s voice over the speakers and asked Popsicle to drop him down. He was almost at the minefield, anyway. If he could just run straight across, he would definitely be able to make it to the next round. And maybe Mr. Aizawa wouldn’t be too mad at him for kind of, sort of, flying over the second obstacle. Since that had apparently been (not) against the rules.

Stumbling to the ground as Popsicle released him, Izuku vaulted himself up and started running. Izuku turned toward his familiar as he neared the field. “Better turn into a snake now. I might be about to hurt myself.”

Popsicle cawed and gave him A Look.
Izuku flushed under Popsicle’s judgement as he pumped his legs further. He didn’t really have many choices. He could fly, and further upset his pack leader (even though that hadn’t been against the rules; he’d made sure to follow them to the T). Or he could rush through the minefield on his own two feet as quickly as possible, and possibly endanger his health the slightest bit. And some of the other students. If he didn’t pick his path carefully.

“Meanwhile, back in the last obstacle, the lead has been upset! The mass media can rejoice! This is what they live for, after all. Bakugou has overtaken the lead, and several of the other students are putting on last minute spurts! Whooooo will come in first?!?”

Izuku turned his head, Popsicle slithering down his shoulder in snake form, as he focused on the middle left of the field. He didn’t want to hurt the throng of students vying for center and center-right. Izuku took the minefield at a run, exploding a small area of mines in discrete intervals ahead of him before he reached the area. To outsiders, it just looked like a series of constant explosions made in a straight line ahead of Midoriya, who had his palms raised outward while he ran forward with no hesitation.

Caught in the mindset of rush-rush-rush, Izuku barely had the presence of mind to notice he was closing rank on Kirishima, Sero, and Uraraka. He could almost see the blur of Tenya’s engines rushing into the the gate at the end of the obstacle course. The gateway that would allow them to enter the stadium. Through another long hallway.

Perfect, Izuku mused ironically. At least everyone seemed to be staggering through at different times, instead of all at once?

Izuku put on a last burst of speed, clearing the last part of the minefield with enough concussive force to temporarily deafen everyone else on the field. He sprinted toward the stadium, Popsicle’s snake form jostling around his collar bone, healing the slight burn wound on one of Izuku’s elbows. He was thankful that Popsicle had flown him most of the way, allowing him to reserve his energy for the last stretch. He was also thankful that Popsicle's lack of hearing helped slightly deafen Izuku's ears to the explosions around him.

Izuku followed Ojiro’s tail down the exit hallway, almost overtaking the other boy before they both rounded out into an open field. Slowing down to a light jog and then a fast walk, Izuku cast his glance around to see what students had beaten him to the stadium. He eventually bent over, trying to catch his breath. Popsicle served as a grounding influence across his chest.

Izuku peered up from beneath his bangs, still hunched over. Todoroki and Bakugou were here, and Izuku bet that they were the first two in the stadium. As for the others, he saw Tenya wiping his brow and panting next to Tokoyami. Kirishima and Sero were giving each other manly back-pats. Izuku had followed Ojiro in, so Ojiro was already here...

“Aww, Deku, I almost beat you!”

Izuku turned to see Uraraka behind him, trailing behind Yaoyorozu, Sato, and Shouji. They must have been the ones he passed in the open field between the minefield and the long hallway. He’d caught sight of long hair, but hadn’t had time to focus on much else besides the burn on his elbow and the aching in his chest. He really needed to run long-distance more often.

Izuku smiled and laughed, scratching his head. “Yeah, I kind of got stuck there at the beginning, so I had to make up for lost time.”

“Well, I’m glad we both made it!” she cheered.
Izuku nodded back exuberantly as he straightened his back and breathed. “Me, too.”

Izuku cracked one shoulder, then the other. He didn’t really fancy being carried long-distance by giant raven claws in the future. In order to maintain any semblance of balance while he was being flown around, Izuku had to stiffen his back and shoulder blades, and it definitely hadn’t made his shoulder blades happy. He’d prefer to only fly that way on an occasional basis, hopefully not chasing villains around the city via raven claws.

Tenya had begun making his way over to Izuku, his face looking troubled.

Izuku met him halfway and rested four of his fingers against Tenya’s elbow, his thumb dangling loose. “Hey, are you okay?”

Tenya shook his head, gazing somewhere on the ground near Izuku’s shoes. His blue eyes were hidden behind glasses and his windswept hair. “I should have made better timing during an obstacle course. My quirk is speed-based, after all.”

Izuku tried to smile back supportively. “Honestly, I think flying was the best way to go. Too many pitfalls, otherwise.”

Tenya raised an eyebrow at Izuku as his face lost some of its somber look and his arm began an involuntary chopping motion. “Which is likely precisely why they included the rule about flying on top of your familiar…”

Izuku waved his hands in apology, his voice raising an octave in protest. “Hey, they just said we couldn’t fly on top of a familiar! They didn’t say anything about a familiar carrying us! They should be more specific if they’re going to picky about it…”

“Indeed.” Tenya’s stern frown morphed into an affectionate smile, his blue eyes lightening even further as his arm stilled next to him. “You always have to do something, don’t you?”

Izuku stared back quizzically, the tousled bangs on his forehead nearly obscuring his gaze. “What do you mean?”

Iida’s deep blue eyes were fond. “Nothing.”

Sports Festival, Second Round

Midnight was once again speaking from the platform at the center of the Sports Festival stadium. “The first 42 students to pass through the gates have earned the right to advance! Their scores are seen on the boards above you. Now, we will begin the post-preliminary round, where 42 students will be narrowed down to 16. I wonder what sort of game the next round will be?”

The board behind her scrolled through several options like a slot machine, before eventually settling on the words 'cavalry battle'.

“That’s right! The next round will be a cavalry battle! You will be playing in teams of three or four, but only the top four teams will make it to the final round. The rules for this round will be the same as the preliminaries: no leaving the designated area for fighting, and no destroying the course to prevent other groups from playing.”
Izuku watched the large screen as it displayed images of one student being carried by three other
students. The three bottom parts of the cavalry would form a triangle, with the back two students
acting to support the topmost student with their shoulder while holding linked hands with the third
person at the front. The person on top would place their feet on top of the students’ joined hands and
effectively sit on top of the shoulders of the two students at the back.

Ms. Midnight went on to explain that the point of the game was for each team to work together to get
the headband from the topmost player of the other cavalry teams. The headband had to be attached
somewhere above the collarbone and would be worth a certain amount of points, as tallied up from
the sum of all its players. Each player’s worth was dependent on how they ranked in the preliminary
round. The person worth the most points was the student who came in first place, which was
apparently Todoroki, and he would have exponentially more points than anyone else... so effectively,
all the teams would be gunning for him.

In Izuku’s case, he figured he should be worth about 150 points. That wasn’t the highest (10,000,000
for Todoroki), nor the second highest (205 for Kacchan), but it was pretty high up there. Izuku’s best
bet was probably to team up with other high-ranking members and not let his headband get stolen.
Depending on who Todoroki put on his team, he might focus on going after him; but he didn't really
like the idea of fighting toe-to-toe with Kacchan for Todoroki’s headband.

This whole round felt like a lose-lose situation, though. He was going to have to end up directly
fighting his friends over something serious. Fights during class were fun enough because everyone
was awarded points, but this? This looked like it was an all-or-nothing pass of a game. And since
Kacchan wasn’t likely to put Izuku on his team due to them having too similar offensive capabilities,
Izuku was probably going to be fighting against his pack on something it would piss his packmates
off to lose.

Ms. Midnight explained that they would only be given fifteen minutes to fight in the cavalry battle,
and then the four teams with the highest scores would advance to the next round. Until then, each
team could continue fighting and stealing others teams’ headbands, even if they lost their own. The
only rule extra rule was: they couldn’t actively try to break up another cavalry team by separating
one or more of them and causing the topmost student to fall, as typically happened in cavalry games.

Midnight made sure to emphasize how she looked forward to the brutality they would manage to
inflict on each other with their quirks. Because apparently she was a sadist.

“Alright, you now have fifteen minutes to find and form your teams! Choose wisely!”

Before his packmate could move away, Izuku reached his hand out and grabbed Iida’s elbow.
Tenya’s glasses glinted in the sunlight, and Izuku opened his mouth to ask him to work together
before he could get away, only to feel someone else tapping on his shoulder.

Izuku turned around to see his hand-holding buddy from earlier. “Shinsou!”

The other boy didn’t look too disheveled from the preliminary round, his purple hair as fluffy as ever,
but the determination on his face was definitely different than normal. It almost made his eyes look
brighter. Usually, Shinsou just looked tired and kind of done with the world, but now Izuku felt an
aura of excitement and command from him that had nothing to do with Shinsou's quirk.

Lowering his hand, Shinsou narrowed his eyes at Izuku. “Hey, you said earlier that you’d help if I
needed it, right?”

Izuku nodded. He wanted the other teen to become a hero so they could have classes together, and
he figured that Shinsou had to prove himself during the tournament in order to be considered for the
Hero Studies course. There was an open spot in Class 1-A, so if the principal would be willing to move a student with a potentially very useful quirk from General Education into a Hero Studies course, then Izuku would love for Shinsou to take the open spot in his class. Then it wouldn't be so hard to track him down during lunch.

He couldn't put his finger on why, but he'd been drawn to the other boy since he fell on top of him. At first, he thought it was just because of Shinsou's hair and eyes being really pretty (contrary to popular belief, some hair colors were actually very rare, even in a quirk society). Then he'd talked with him during lunch, learned about his quirk, bonded over figuring out the layout of the school, and Izuku just knew. He knew he wanted to be Shinsou's friend. He knew he was going to be important, somehow. And if there was anything he could do to bring Shinsou into the orbit of his pack, he would do it. Well, except maybe forfeit his spot in the tournament or something (Kacchan would kill him... also, it was a fight for pack positions, so he refused to come in last).

Shinsou turned his head to gaze out at the forty other students attempting to barter their way onto a good team. “The way I see it, I can either order people to be part of my team, or I can join yours. I heard you exploded the ice of the guy who won last round, so you're probably my best bet to take his headband. But if I join your team, you have to promise to win so that we make it into the final round.” His piercing gaze settled back on Izuku, who could feel the other teen's determination as though it were his own. It bubbled in his stomach and made his fingers twitch. “I'm going to make it into the finals. I have to.”

Izuku tried to smile, his concern for and willingness to help his new friend warring with his indecision about fighting his packmates. Izuku knew he was going to have to directly fight some of his pack members; it was a cavalry battle, after all. And Todoroki wasn't technically pack yet, even though his announcement earlier had indicated that Todoroki and Izuku were vying for pack standing. So he was going to attack Todoroki anyway. Still... he didn't have to like the upcoming cavalry game and his inevitable role in it. This didn't feel like a tournament, and it didn't feel like a fight for pack hierarchy. Both of those would be one on one. This was four on four. It was a battle between sides of the pack, almost like warring philosophies of who should be in charge, and it didn't sit right with him. And his role was gearing up to be a traitor, joining up with non-pack members to bring packmates down.

It made his mouth taste bitter. He needed to stop thinking about a simple cavalry battle in a school festival, this way. Who cared who was watching? It didn't make this game any different than class. They weren't even going to be graded on their performance, right?

But Shinsou said he wanted to win. Win, as in beat Todoroki, not just advance to the next round. He wanted to go in direct competition with Kacchan. Izuku peered over and saw Kirishima next to Kacchan. His stomach flipped. If he fought with Shinsou against Todoroki, then he would also be fighting Kacchan and Kirishima. It was getting harder and harder to remember the feeling of the cuddle pile a week ago in Kacchan's room. He hadn't gotten to see either of them at all, this week. And now Shinsou was asking Izuku to fight both of them, together.

Izuku bit his lip and gripped harder at Tenya's elbow as his other friend tried to pull away from him. Izuku refused to let go. He wouldn't fight any more pack than he had to, he refused. But he wanted Shinsou in his class... he couldn't name why, he just—he wanted—

From beneath his bangs, he could see the hesitation on the other boy's face. Wasn't he confidant a second ago? So why did he look afraid that he would say no?

Izuku sighed, accepting his fate with a slight grin toward Shinsou. “Can I be on top?”

Something vaguely approximating a smile appeared on Shinsou’s lips, and to Izuku it felt like a
victory already. “Only if you promise to win.”

Izuku nodded, his face serious and contemplating, still torn about the fight that was drawing close. “You need me to, so I will.”

Tenya cleared his throat next to them, still trying to extricate himself from Izuku’s grip.

Izuku turned toward him, fingers still caught in a judo grip around his friend’s sleeve. He wouldn’t let go. “You’re joining us, too, right Tenya?”

You have to.

Tenya wanted to refuse. He wanted to say that he needed to prove himself apart from Izuku. He’d fought against Todoroki with Izuku ever since their first week of classes, and Tenya was never going to improve if he always relied on Izuku’s oddball strategies and penchant to win at the last minute. He felt the weight of his family settle over him, generations of pro-heroes that expected him to live up to their example. He had to prove himself. He had to live up to his brother’s shining example. And he was about to tell this to Izuku, right after he got out of the freckled boy’s strangely inescapable grip… until Izuku said his name.

The way the syllables sounded on Izuku’s tongue forced all of Tenya’s limbs to lock up as his jaw dropped open. Tenya couldn't remember when he'd last actually heard Izuku say his name; in fact, he might not have said it since that first time.

Tenya also didn’t remember agreeing to be part of Izuku's cavalry group, but Izuku nodded his head in excitement as though Tenya just had.

“Alright! Now we only need one more person…” Izuku looked around the field, trying to see which people hadn’t teamed up yet. His mouth started running on automatic as he considered their options. “Tenya can make us run fast, and Shinsou can make people give back our headband if it's stolen. I can stop anyone from getting near, so we just need someone who can reach far enough to take the headbands, and maybe also offer defense at our rear?”

Tenya gave his friend an appraising glance, as his shoulders sagged in exasperation. He supposed he was teaming up with Izuku after all. “I wasn’t aware you were well-versed in strategy.”

Izuku was distracted from his contemplation by that statement. He turned to shrug at Iida. “Kirishima’s been teaching me video games, and rear defense is just as important as frontal offense.”

Tenya nodded back dazedly.

He must not play a lot of video games.

Izuku caught sight of another of his friends from far away and took off running without informing Tenya or Shinsou. They both stared after him in confusion as Izuku disappeared behind two other groups. A minute later, he came back dragging Tokoyami. He was babbling at the other boy, touching Tokoyami’s arm every few seconds while explaining their strategy. Dark Shadow peered up from behind the two of them, one of his clawed hands barely touching Midoriya’s shoulder.

Tokoyami greeted Shinsou with a 'Greetings. I look forward to our partnership,' while Iida nodded his head excitedly in acceptance, his face stern and calculating as he considered where everyone should stand. With minutes left to go, the four students decided that Izuku should ride on top so that he could use both of his hands for his power. Tokoyami would be on the back-left and Shinsou on the back-right. Iida would stand in front, to make the most use out of his legs’ engine quirk.
Eventually, all 42 students were standing in thirteen groups, ready for the round to begin.

Bakugou had ended up teaming with Kirishima (for hardened resistance to his quirk), Uraraka (to help Bakugou fly via explosions around the field with his teammates holding on for dear life), and Sero (to obtain headbands from long-distances).

Todoroki had decided to prioritize elemental defense. Kaminari and Todoroki could let loose with lightning and ice, respectively, while Yaoyorozu could create material to protect each teammate from the others’ quirks. Last but not least, Todoroki had hunted down Koda. He wanted to have a plan for Izuku’s familiar in case the raven decided to go flying about and stealing headbands, and theoretically Koda should be able to command any animal to obey him, ‘familiar’ or not.

The rest of the class had combined together into two groups of four. One contained Asui atop Satou, Ojiro, and Ashido. The other contained Hagakure atop Jirou, Shoji, and Aoyama. Izuku couldn’t quite get a read on what the Class 1-B groups’ combined quirks and strategies were, but there was one all-girls team, two all-guy teams, and one with three guys and a girl… and the latter had a girl with what seemed to be vines for hair, which could cause trouble.

“And the round is about to begin! Teams, get yourselves ready!”

Izuku crawled up on his friends’ clasped hands, bracing himself on Iida’s shoulders as he stabilized himself to observe the competition. They would only have fifteen minutes to get everyone else’s headbands.

Izuku leaned down to speak into Iida’s ear. “Hey, do you know what Koda’s quirk is? I never found out, but he’s on Todoroki’s team. Is he made of rock or something?”

Tenya shook his head, causing his hair to tickle Izuku’s cheek. “No, that is just his appearance. His quirk allows him to control animals with voice commands.”

Izuku’s hands tensed against Tenya’s shoulders, and Popsicle hissed from behind Tenya’s head. Iida had a very bad feeling about this. “Do you think he could affect your familiar?”

Izuku’s hands kneaded at Tenya’s shoulders as he worried his lip between his teeth. “Popsicle is in snake form, so he doesn’t have good hearing… he also doesn’t have any ears to block. I guess we just hope for the best and don’t use him to send around the arena?”

Tenya nodded his head as Izuku eased back.

He focused on his bond with his familiar. Popsicle was worried.

Izuku leaned his head to the side to nuzzle his eyebrows against Popsicle’s head, lowering his voice to a whisper. “Don’t worry. Just be careful and don’t switch into wolf form. Then, you’d be able to hear him anywhere.”

Popsicle’s head bobbed up and down as he hissed his agreement to Izuku.

Shinsou peered up at Midoriya from his lower right. “...you can talk to your snake?”

Izuku nodded back while Popsicle popped his head out of his shirt collar, as if to show off how pretty his black scales were. The narcissist. “Yeah. Remember when I was offering to heal you?”

Shinsou shook his head, barely remembering that lunchroom talk. It had been over a month ago, and then Izuku had rarely sat with him since. If he was honest, that had actually made him feel more
abandoned than if Midoriya had never eaten lunch with him in the first place. However… he did vaguely remember something about a snake… and healing? “Wait, you were serious about having a snake?”

Izuku peered down at the other boy, reaching a hand down to run through his fluffy hair. *It was so soft…* “Why would I lie about that?”

Popsicle snickered, or tried to laugh at least. Snakes weren’t really meant to laugh at things, though, so it just felt like he was twitching against Izuku’s neck. It kind of tickled, actually.

Shinsou’s mouth opened and closed multiple times before he said anything else. It ended up being a grumble. “I thought you were kidding…”

A few seconds passed as they waited for Midnight to announce the beginning of the round.

Izuku hadn’t stopped running his fingers through Shinsou’s hair.

Shinsou withstood the touch for a couple more seconds before he could feel himself bristling. “Also, stop touching my hair.”

Izuku’s fingers continued trailing through the purple strands as he turned back toward Shinsou. The other teen wasn’t even staring at him. “But it’s so soft…”

Iida’s grip on the other boys’ hands tightened as he shook his head and tried to peer over his shoulder to see what was going on. “Izuku, what have we told you about consent?”

Izuku pouted, his fingers stilling but not pulling away.

Dark Shadow cackled from behind the group, thinking Izuku was the funniest thing he’d seen all day.

Tokoyami sighed. “The beginning tone of our match is far from ideal…”

Midnight’s voice could be heard from the side of the arena, announcing the impending game. “Now, raise up your warcries and sound the signal! It’s time for the post-preliminary match… to begin!”

At the signalling bell, all but two groups rushed madly at the 10,000,000-point headband. A team of Class 1-B students barreled toward Todoroki’s team with surprising speed, their forefront member changing the ground around Team Todoroki’s feet into a strange quicksand. Todoroki froze a wall of ice in front of him, separating his team from the quicksand student, which in turn froze the ground in front of them as well. Yaoyorozu took advantage of the newly-formed solid ground to create two ice axes out of her thigh. She handed them to Koda, who pulled the group out of the weird sludge with his absurd strength. Meanwhile, the girl with vine hair blasted a hole in Todoroki’s wall, the quicksand guy softened all the hard ice, and the quicksand-team continued to chase Todoroki.

Bakugou’s team could also be seen challenging their warcry toward Todoroki, flying above everyone else on the battlefield and coming at the premiere team with explosions and tape. The tape was what almost got them the headband, but Todoroki grabbed it before it caught him and froze the tape all the way up to Sero’s elbow. Sero cursed in pain while Uraraka allowed them to fall gradually to the ground to stabilize the group. She then lightened everyone, and Bakugou’s explosions caused them to take off again, soaring over another approaching group.

In the background, Izuku wondered what he should tell his cavalry team to do. From what Iida had said, their headband should have the fourth highest score of all the teams. They could head for Todoroki’s headband like everyone else (which would put Popsicle in worrisome range of Koda’s
quirk), or they could focus their attention on the weaker Class 1-A team-ups (like Asui’s team and Hagakure’s) and the other Class 1-B teams.

One of the Class 1-B teams was also not heading for Todoroki, instead making their way toward Hagakure’s team. The blonde ringleader had a mean smirk on his face and a headband around his neck proclaiming their score to be 305.

Izuku aimed an explosion in front of that group, causing them to stop in place as they wondered where the attack came from. Without needing any prompting from Izuku, Iida rushed Team Midoriya in range of the interlopers while Dark Shadow’s long claw reached out to grab the other team’s headband. The blonde boy turned to touch Dark Shadow, only for nothing to happen as his hand passed through air.

Dark Shadow was too fast.

Izuku lifted his hand in a cheer as Iida rushed them away from the oncoming retaliation.

“Look at what we have here! It’s not even two minutes into the game, and the melee is already getting out of hand! Everywhere you look, two teams are vying for each other’s headbands! The top four placed teams, three of which are from Class 1-A, have scores that look miiiiighty exciting to those with lower scores! It’s a viable strategy: not focusing on the unachievable top but instead scrrrrrambling for second through fourth place!”

Izuku’s team was starting out in fourth place, so they were one of the main targets. Some of the weaker or less versatile teams gave up on Todoroki’s walls of ice early on and tried to target Bakugou, only to then run from his explosions. The quicksand guy would trap anyone that came after his team, so that just left Izuku’s headband as prime for the taking.

Therefore, Team Midoriya ended up spending most of the fifteen-minute match trying to avoid other groups on the sidelines. Izuku would use small explosions in front or to the side of their enemies in order to keep them at bay while Iida would whisk their group away into an empty spot on the field. Sometimes, Izuku would create an explosion in the air beside one opposing group or another in order to make them target each other. Then, Iida would swoop in, and Dark Shadow would steal the combined headbands. It was a viable strategy, especially for hiding their trump card: Shinsou’s brainwashing quirk. The fewer people that knew about it, the better, so he mostly served as a physical backup for the other three students.

Frustratingly enough for his teammates, Izuku couldn’t help himself from trying to defend Kacchan’s team. He knew Kacchan didn’t need the help, but he refused to let someone sneak up on his packmates when he could at least warn them of the oncoming threat. Therefore, whenever one of the opposing teams tried to sneak up on Kirishima and Kacchan, Izuku would create an explosion at their back to prevent it. Effectively, this warned Kacchan about the attack, allowing him to swivel around and create a big explosion to blast them away. *(And he knew Kacchan was going to be mad, he knew, but he couldn’t just let danger approach his pack without trying to do something about it.)*

Iida told him he was being ridiculous.

Shinsou threatened him if he wouldn’t stop.

Izuku kept doing it anyway, unable to stop himself from protecting pack.

On several occasions when a group managed to sneak up on Team Midoriya to steal one of their headbands (they were jumbled around Izuku’s neck in no particular order), Dark Shadow would fend them off while Iida got the heck out of dodge. It was a game of cat and mouse. Draw the other
groups in, fend them off, and run away. Explode the other groups from afar, dart in, steal their headband, and run away. Over and over, on and on, for twelve whole minutes.

Before Izuku knew it, the large mounted timer designated that there were only three minutes left in the game. He had four headbands around his neck and his initial headband still on his head, so that made five headbands in all. He scoured the field, trying to tally up who would win in his head. Todoroki’s team had still not been beaten, the combination of ice and electricity too much for most groups; but they only had their initial headband, not pausing to focus on stealing any from other players. Team Bakugou kept stubbornly attacking Team Todoroki, but had managed to keep their own headband in addition to two of their attackers.

Asui’s team had just lost their headband to the quicksand-team of Class 1-B and was having trouble getting it back. The quicksand-team seemed to have given up on Todoroki in the last third of the game, focusing their attention on the weaker Class 1-A teams and stronger Class 1-B teams, like the group of all girls headed up by some chick with long fingers.

Three other smaller teams made of Class 1-B students continued to persistently attack Todoroki, hoping to change the tides at the end of the round with sheer numbers, almost working collectively to bring him down. All of them had lost their headbands to a combination of Team Bakugou, Team Midoriya, and the quicksand guy's team. Another team was attacking Bakugou's group from the rear, which Sero was dealing with by attaching them together with his tape. Uraraka had floated another attacking group several meters away and had only just released them, causing them to stumble to the ground. Neither of those teams seemed to have their headbands anymore.

Izuku switched his gaze back to the quicksand-team, who was dealing with an attack by Team Asui and two other Class 1-B teams. Iida had just helped Team Midoriya avoid those two teams while Izuku used a couple explosions to divert them toward the quicksand team. Of that group, only quicksand-team had their headband, along with several around the ringleader's neck. That just left...

Something in the side of his right eye warned him of the incoming danger, and Izuku dodged Jirou’s ear jack that was aimed for his headband.

There was never a moment's peace in this game, was there?

Dark Shadow fended of Jirou while Iida got Team Midoriya the heck out of dodge. Hagakure could be heard cursing them while Shouji's many-mouthed hands gave other directions to his teammates. They didn't have their headband, either.

Izuku peered around once Iida got them back into a clear region with no other group. If he was correct, that meant only four teams were left in the running, unless someone stole all the headbands off a single team. All of those teams could make it into the final as long as they kept the headbands they had already stolen.

The post-preliminary round timer read two and a half minutes left.

Todoroki was still in first place with his own headband around his neck, Bakugou’s team was probably high up there in points, as was the quicksand-team from Class 1-B. Izuku’s own team had a lot of points (Iida kept a running tally, and it was somewhere around 1300 last he checked), but he wasn't sure how that would hold up to the headbands he saw on the quicksand-team. There had seemed to be about three?

The blonde guy’s ‘305’ team started to turn away from the quicksand-team and rush toward Team Midoriya, so Izuku created a blast in the middle of their path. Iida took off to a spot further away from that group while still avoiding Team Hagakure.
With less than three minutes in the game, Iida was suggesting that their team should attempt a mad Todoroki dash with a hidden trick he had up his sleeve. No one wanted to face Todoroki alone in the finals (except Izuku, but he was insane), so it would be best to work together as a group right now to bring him down with the hope that one of the other teams could get a headband in the meantime.

Izuku, meanwhile, was insistent that they focus on the strong Class 1-B team, because he didn’t want to face quicksand in the finals.

Iida outlined his plan. He had a special move that would essentially allow him to jet across the arena for a few seconds, faster than even Team Todoroki could dodge. During that time, Tokoyami and Izuku should focus their efforts on stealing Todoroki’s headband while Iida used the last of his speed to get them far away. Afterwards, he wouldn’t be able to run until his engines kicked back on, so they would need to be careful with timing.

Izuku’s assertion that the quicksand guy was definitely more dangerous was eventually outweighed by the combined force of Iida, Tokoyami, and Shinsou not wanting to fight Todoroki one-on-one. Therefore, they hatched a plan for an end-of-the-game, last ditch effort to steal Team Todoroki’s headband. However, as typically happens whenever Todoroki becomes involved, things quickly went to shit.

(Izuku was seriously starting to consider that there was some cosmic law where Todoroki was the human embodiment of entropy, because chaos just seemed to spring up whenever he joined the action.)

The whole debacle ended up like this: Iida started running Team Midoriya in an arc toward Team Todoroki, hiding for most of their combined sprint behind old ice walls that Todoroki had erected early in the game. Todoroki was busy fending off Team Bakugou, who were executing a combined attack that took advantage of Uraraka’s anti-gravity to make Bakugou lighter. While Bakugou was acting like a ping-pong ball of furious explosions between Todoroki’s head and Sero’s elbow tape, Iida activated his Recipro Burst toward both teams. In the split seconds where Team Midoriya flew past Todoroki, Izuku and Tokoyami’s Dark Familiar combined their efforts to reach out and grab the headband from around Todoroki’s head.

Their mad dash paid off. They ended up halfway across the arena with the headband, all three non-speedsters panting from the adrenaline rush of holding onto the human equivalent of a rocket. Iida’s engines were stalled, so they couldn’t move any time soon. Izuku made sure to face toward any other teams headed their way. Izuku glanced up at the clock.

Two minutes.

"Annnd what was that? Team Midoriya just came out of nowhere and stole Team Todoroki's 10,000,000-point headband! What a day for the media! With only two minutes left in the game, who knows who could win from here! Can Team Midoriya hold onto number one spot, or will one of the approaching teams steal it from them?!"

One of the smaller teams had noticed them and started running toward them, only for Izuku to aim an explosion a couple meters in front of them, which diverted that team over in the direction of Team Bakugou. Another team tried to come up on their flank, but Dark Shadow’s humongous claw hand drove them away. Team Bakugou turned to rush after Izuku, and Todoroki froze them in place in order to steal one of Bakugou’s headbands. Bakugou retaliated with an explosion while Sero tried to steal the headband back. They wrestled over the combined headbands for about twenty seconds before realizing that Team Midoriya was stalled in place.

Shit shit shit.
"It looks like Todoroki wants that headband back. And here comes Team Bakugou! They never give up on going after first place, do they? Gotta love their spirit..."

Izuku aimed an explosion in front of both groups to cause them to recoil and stay away from his side of the field.

It didn’t quite succeed. Both Kirishima and Koda shouldered forward past the explosion. Koda’s body, it seemed, doesn’t only look like rock. It’s damn hard, too. Crapbaskets.

With Izuku distracted by the cohesive fury that was a robbed Team Todoroki and a single-minded-focus Team Bakugou, another foe approached with a long-range attack that Dark Shadow couldn’t protect against. It was the damn quicksand guy, again.

Iida’s engines were stalled, and Tokoyami’s couldn’t reach Dark Shadow far enough in order to push the oncoming Team Tetsutetsu away. Iida called out to Izuku, hoping that their ringleader could drive the other team away, but it was too late. Team Midoriya was already sinking into the ground, the dirt beneath them suddenly turned to liquid in a strip from the quicksand guy to a large circle beneath them.

“Oh man! And Team Tetsutetsu strikes again! They've got Team Midoriya stuck in their grasp, but can they come away with the number one prize?"

Izuku turned away from the Bakugou-Todoroki furor and tried to aim an explosion in front of Team Tetsutetsu, but the guy on top turned his skin to a shiny metal that absorbed or reflected Izuku’s attack or something. Izuku tried to aim another blast at the ground near the quicksand guy’s feet, but the girl at the back of the other team used her vine-like hair to intercept the blast and protect her group. Afterward, she sent some of her hair-vines toward Izuku’s team, likely attempting to take advantage of the fact that they were currently up shit creek without a paddle.

Shit shit shit. Izuku turned to his teammates. “Uhhh... guys? Ideas?”

“My engines are still stalled,” Iida responded, quick and to the point.

Bad news.

Izuku felt Tokoyami’s handgrip change beneath Izuku’s feet, as the avian boy nodded at the lone female on the opposing team. “Her vines are numerous and difficult for Dark Shadow to evade.”

More bad news.

Shinsou’s cheek brushed Izuku’s hip as the mind controller asked, “Any theories on whether the front leader’s quirk can be used to liquidate human bodies?”

Iida responded first, his voice strained. “I do not think that the present moment is the time and place to risk such a potentially disastrous experiment in front of an audience of pro-heroes.”

The girl’s vines were almost near Izuku’s neck as he tried to aim small explosions in the air in front of him to evade the omnidirectional green hair.

“Oi, you—with the weird teeth.” Shinsou got the attention of the teen with the quicksand quirk. “Do you always let everyone else fight while you sit back and touch the ground? Kind of a stupid quirk. Can’t use it and move, can you?”

The vine girl’s hair whipped around for another strike.
Shinsou continued attempting to get a rise out of the other team. “What kind of hero always sits back and lets other heroes catch the villain? You sure won’t be winning any awards… never mind becoming the number one hero…”

Izuku tried to fend off each of the vines with small explosions, but two of them got in range. Tokoyami’s Dark Shadow stopped one, but Izuku’s other side was left open. The vine hair snagged one of Izuku’s headbands from around his collar.

Izuku stared in horror as he saw the headband with 10,000,000 points be pulled away from him.

"What a tournament! Team Tetsutetsu has just stolen first place from Team Midoriya! But arrrre they going to get away with it?"

Shinsou glared up at the vine, hoping his ploy would work before they lost too many headbands. “Or am I wrong? A quirk like yours… it can probably turn anything to a liquid, can’t it? Not just the ground. You ever used it on a human before? Ever had your classmates look at you in fear and call you a vill—”

“Shut up! You don’t know what you’re talking about!”

One minute.

Shinsou smiled, slow and lazy, as the quicksand boy’s eyes glazed over. “Stop activating your quirk on our team.”

The other boy obliged.

(Team Bakugou began approaching with a bellow and a line of explosions out of Kacchan’s palms.)

“Wait, Honenuki, what are you doing?!” shouted the guy on top of the calvary.

Shinsou raised an eyebrow at the girl with vines for hair. “Oh? Is something that matter?"

She glared back at him. “What did you do to Hononuki?!"

Shinsou’s smile remained pasted on his face as she fell under his quirk’s influence as well. “Use your hair to give us back our headband.”

She obeyed, returning the 10,000,000-point headband she had stolen. Her feet stayed in place, though, not taking a single step toward their group.

(Todoroki froze Team Bakugou's flying assault in mid-air with a humongous swath of ice that rose out of the ground. Bakugou screamed and rocketed explosions at the ice, trying to escape, still trying to get the 10,000,000-point headband from Izuku before the round ended. Team Asui came up behind both of them and tried to take the headband that Todoroki had just stolen.)

"Whoa... What. Is. Happening? Team Tetsutetsu have just handed first place back to Team Midoriya? What are they thinking? Is this a secret ploy to get the rest of their headbands?"

Before Shinsou could give another order to hand over all their headbands, the guy on top shoved at the two beneath him, yelling at them to snap out of it. The moment that each of them were jostled, they lost the haze in their eyes and had full control over their bodies once more.

Shinsou turned to the boy in front of him, readying his legs for another mad dash across the field while gripping tight onto the car that called himself a student. “Iida, did I buy you enough time?”
Iida’s returning smile held an edge of determination. “Plenty.”

Iida took off at a run, dragging the combined Tokoyami-Shinsou brigade with him at speeds that had the other teens hanging onto his hands for dear life. Izuku made a loud whooping sound as he gleefully held on to the shoulders below him, glad to get away from the quicksand group and the still-squabbling Bakugou-Todoroki-Asui brigade.

When they had reached a temporary stop away from any of the other teams, Izuku leaned down to laugh into Iida’s ear. “We have got to do this more often.”

“Focus,” Tenya responded, but Izuku could hear the smile in his voice.

Tenya was seriously faster than werewolves. Izuku wasn’t surprised; he’d seen the other boy in action before, but being on top of the other teen made him reevaluate his estimation of Tenya’s quirk. Definitely pro-hero quality.

"And Team Midoriya officially makes off with the number one spot. Only fifteen more seconds... Can any of the other teams get close? Is Team Midoriya actually going to come in first place?"

Izuku aimed a series of explosions in front of an obstinate cavalry group from Class 1-B that had swerved and begun heading his way. The group evaded to the left and ran toward the quicksand-team instead.

By the time the post-preliminary bell rang a ten seconds later, signaling the end of the round, Team Midoriya was on the opposite side of the field away from both the quicksand-team, Team Bakugou, and Team Todoroki. And somehow, they had managed to snag first place.

(Izuku hadn't meant to do that. Kacchan was going to be pissed.)

“Tiiiime's up!” Present Mic’s voice rang throughout the stadium.

Izuku braced himself on Tenya’s shoulders as he lowered his feet to the ground, legs still shaking a bit from Iida’s insane engine speeds.

Tenya turned toward him and embraced his arm. "Well, I wasn't wrong. You always do things last minute, don't you?"

Izuku glared at him, not really upset but not wanting to be blamed for something he was only a small part of. "I'm pretty sure that one was your fault. I wanted to go after the quicksand guy."

"Possibly," Tenya nodded along, "but you were the one to get Todoroki's headband. Congratulations." Tenya smiled at him, looking both proud and happy and relaxed all at the same time.

Izuku smiled back reflexively. It was hard not to, when his packmate made a face like that. It made him feel all warm inside.

Bakugou's voice could be heard yelling profanities from across the field.

Izuku stopped smiling.

Present Mic’s voice continued on. “Now, shall we see who our top four teams are? In first place, in a complete upset in the last three minutes of the game, is Team Midoriya!”
Izuku felt Shinsou lean in behind him, the other boy's low voice whispering near his ear. "You said you would win. Thank you... for keeping your promise."

And then Shinsou began walking away, off to find some empty part of the field to always be alone.

Izuku felt his face begin to warm as a flush spread over his cheeks. At the same time, his hand began reaching out toward the other boy. Shinsou walking away didn't feel right. His hand was half-raised with only air to hold onto, when he realized he should probably put his arm down.

“In second place, Team Bakugou!”

Bakugou could be heard screaming that he was going to put Deku in his place in the next round, all the while foaming at the mouth and being held back by Kirishima, who was casting worried glances Midoriya's way. Uraraka and Sero were both kneeling over slightly, breathing heavily and trying to get their bearings. They seemed to have developed a good bit of camaraderie during the last battle, both of them smiling each other and helping the other get up.

Tokoyami stood behind Izuku and lifted his hand to touch Izuku's shoulder.

He turned around. He couldn't remember Tokoyami ever initiating physical contact with him; it was always Dark Shadow who put a claw on his shoulder or peered over his neck.

Tokoyami nodded his head, taking his usual vow of silence in lieu of celebration. Still, Izuku knew that the other teen was glad to win and proud of their team. Tokoyami's warm hand helped relax him, and Izuku allowed himself to appreciate a moment of peace away from Kacchan's fury.

“In third place, Team Tetsutetsu!”

Izuku saw the vine-haired girl clap her hands and cheer, the metallic-quirk teen shaking his fist in triumph next to her. The other two teammates (one of whom had the quicksand-like quirk, and the other who hadn’t seemed to use his quirk the entire time but wore a cool-looking headband) had their eyes set on Izuku and Iida with occasional side-glances over at Bakugou, likely sizing up the competition.

Izuku had no idea whether the students were going to be assigned point-values for this round, or if next round would be starting all over from scratch for all sixteen contestants.

“And in fourth place is Team Todoroki! What a change in those last three minutes of the game! The first four teams will move on to the next event, so step forward and be proud! The event will be after a brief lunch break, lasting an hour, for both the participants and the crowd! See you then!” Present Mic’s voice faded away, but could be vaguely heard asking Eraserhead to eat lunch with him.

Todoroki disinterestedly started walking away from his group, while Yaoyorozu praised Koda’s firm physical form (he waved his hands in bashfulness) and Kaminari walked around dazedly. Except for Todoroki, they didn't seem too upset at coming in fourth place.

Izuku watched as various members of Class 1-A started walking off the field with dejected heads. Everyone wanted to win; they all wanted to show what they could do. He sighed. Those who made it in the final round would likely get the most bids by pro-heroes, if what Tenya and Aizawa had said was true. Izuku felt vaguely like he’d failed them. He could have made sure another team won, somehow; he could have thrown all of his other headbands to Asui's team or Hagakure's team. He could have—

But that wasn’t right, either. That wouldn’t have been fair to Class 1-B, for him to give away points to another group from Class 1-A.
And Shinsou had needed to win... he needed it more than Kacchan needed it, more than Todoroki... he had something to prove, something he needed to get out of this tournament other than simple attention from pro-heroes... Izuku couldn’t just let him down after promising—

Izuku sighed again and ran a hand over his face, closing his eyes and breathing deep.

Spirits, he was just so tired. He felt it now that the second event was over. There hadn’t been much of a break between the first and second event, so his adrenaline had just carried over. And Popsicle was a soothing presence against his collarbone, helping heal the effects of his exhaustion. But when Izuku allowed himself to close his eyes and focus on breathing... he felt it. He felt it deep in his bones.

When was the last time he slept the night through?

Izuku felt more than heard Popsicle hissing near his ear, suggesting he find one of the break rooms to take a quick nap before the next round, to recharge his brain. He needed to eat, but as long as he gave himself a couple minutes to down some form of food, then he should be fine. The Sports Festival usually had recreational activities before the final round, right? What he needed more was sleep, and there should be time enough for that, plus food, plus some stretching, maybe a few push-ups, and maybe some... some...

“Izuku? Are you joining us for lunch?”

He turned to look at Tenya, tilting his head backward so that he could stare into his friend’s eyes. The taller teen had paused before departing the field with a grinning Uraraka, who had apparently joined them at some point.

Was Tenya worried about his brother? Had he forgotten all about it?

His eyes closed as Tenya’s cool hand pressed against his forehead. Tenya took a couple steps closer until their legs were nearly touching, his voice a whisper in the cacophony of noise that was the stadium during lunch rush. Or maybe that was just Popsicle’s snake form making his hearing worse. “Izuku, are you alright?”

Izuku gave a weak smile, his eyes still closed. “Just tired. I might nap during lunch.”

“From your abilities?”

Izuku shook his head, his bangs flopping about on his forehead and sticking in place due to the sweat that covered his brows. “Haven’t been sleeping... I just need a couple minutes. Popsicle can help if he stays a snake.”

If Izuku had half a mind to watch what he was saying, he would have realized that he’d never told Tenya about Popsicle’s healing abilities. Hopefully, the other teen would just assume it was a ‘familiar’ thing.

“Then I will walk you to one of the preparation rooms and bring you back something from the cafeteria.”

Izuku heard Uraraka’s voice raising in agreement. Now that he’d closed his eyes, it was actually kind of hard to open them.

Iida’s hand on his back served as a guiding presence for Izuku’s disoriented trek toward one of the prep rooms. He kept his eyes shut, trusting his friend to shepherd him to the correct location. *He shouldn’t be this tired, should he? True, he’d only gotten a couple hours of uninterrupted sleep, but*
he’d gotten by on less before. Maybe it was all the physical exercise?

Izuku could hear voices filtering in and out of his awareness, chattering about different moves each person had used during the second round. He could almost pick out Kirishima’s higher-pitched diatribe from among the white noise of the other students’ voices.

A warm breath ghosted over his ear, attached to Tenya’s voice, telling him that they were almost there. Izuku followed along, a sheep and his shepherd. But the wolves liked to chase the sheep, their teeth snarling after the quick nimble feet of prey. Was Izuku prey, now? Was he a wolf? Wasn’t he human?

His thoughts didn’t even make sense anymore, some confusing jumble of images and senses, the vibrations of the ground and the walls, everything a sound that he could feel more than hear. Popsicle’s snake form could be confusing even when he wasn’t exhausted, but the downsides of his snake form were making everything happening around him even more disorienting.

Izuku must have been mumbling (or he must have looked strange stumbling around with his eyes closed and Iida’s hand on his back), because he could feel another hand grip his upper arm, the echo of Sero’s voice asking Izuku if he was okay, Tenya telling him about Izuku not sleeping, and the both of them corralling him into a doorway a minute later. Tenya’s hand stayed attached to Izuku’s back while Sero’s hand retreated, coming back a couple seconds later with what seemed to be a bundle of cloth. A pillow? And Tenya was guiding Izuku to a spot underneath one of the waiting tables. Something about there not being any benches?

Izuku didn’t mind. He laid down in the spot he was guided into, resting his head on the bundle of cloth placed beneath him.

Nothing mattered right now. Only sleep. He just… he just needed to sleep… he’d be alright in a few minutes.

That’s right. Just a few minutes of sleep, and everything would be right again.

Sports Festival, Announcements for Round Three

When the crowd had finally gathered back in their seats in the stadium, the hour for lunchtime having passed, Present Mic’s voice could be heard welcoming everyone back. Apparently, Izuku was right, and there would be a ‘recreational event’ before the main event, where anyone who hadn’t made it into the finals would be allowed to compete against one another in various activities.

Before the recreational events could start, Midnight announced she would be drawing lots to see who would be facing who in the third and final event. It was going to be a tournament, starting with sixteen students and narrowing down to two students who would compete for first place.

Izuku stood between Sero and Iida, feeling much less disoriented than before. He didn’t know why he’d gotten so exhausted all of a sudden. Maybe because he hadn’t had any downtime between the first two rounds? They were both very physically and mentally taxing. Exploding the ground beneath Todoroki’s ice at the beginning of the first round hadn’t been easy, and he’d been rushing ever since then. At least Tenya had gotten him some beef and noodles to get his strength back, even though Izuku had let Popsicle eat some of his meat.
The deputy class rep had also tried to force some of his juice boxes down Izuku’s throat.

Izuku really had no idea why Tenya was obsessed with those juice boxes.

“Let’s begin drawing lots!” Ms. Midnight was strutting around the center stage with a box labeled ‘LOTS’. As if anyone wondered what was inside.

“First, we have... Todoroki versus Awase!”

Two images popped up on the tournament map behind her, one portrait of Todoroki and another portrait of the guy with the headband from the quicksand guy’s team. If Izuku remembered correctly, he was the one who hadn’t really used his quirk.

“Yaoyorozu versus Honenuki!”

Two more images appeared, one of them being the guy with the quicksand quirk. *If it was Quicksand vs Creation... Yaoyorozu could come up with something to battle his quicksand, right?*

“Tokoyami versus Shiozaki!”

*That one was the vine girl, apparently. Tokoyami had mentioned having trouble with her before, so how would he act in a one-on-one battle against her?*

“Kaminari versus Shinsou!”

Izuku also wondered how that would turn out. *Could Kaminari keep his mouth shut if Shinsou taunted him?*

“Iida versus Sero!”

Considering that Izuku was pretty sure both boys had just tried their level best to take care of him during the lunch hour, he felt really strange about that pair-up. *But they had both been interested in challenging Kacchan for his position, hadn’t they? So it was inevitable that they would have to face each other. Izuku wondered which of them would win.*

“Bakugou versus Uraraka!”

This one also made him feel weird. He was so used to the two of them being paired up during exercises, by some weird twist of fate; and Kacchan had even chosen her for his team in the cavalry battle. That they were facing each other right off the bat was... weird.

“Tetsutetsu versus Kirishima!”

*That was the steel guy, right? So... steel versus hardening. That seemed... kind of similar. Izuku hoped Kirishima won. He had to. Right? He had to.*

“And last but not least, Midoriya versus Koda! Now, that is one interesting line-up, let me tell you…”

Present Mic’s voice could be heard reverberating throughout the sports stadium, but Izuku couldn’t seem to hear him. All he could see was an image of his face plastered next to Koda’s. What was it Tenya had said? *‘His quirk allows him to control animals...’* And Izuku was going to be sharing a stage with him? That meant Izuku would be in close enough proximity that even Popsicle’s snake form would be able to hear Koda if he yelled.

It started getting harder for Izuku to breathe, his heart rate jackrabbitting while his vision narrowed.
Was Popsicle going to be...?

Izuku cast his glance around, but Kacchan had disappeared off into the stadium. Kirishima was running off in the direction of the recreational games with Sero and Kaminari in tow. Uraraka was holding hands with Asui and pointing to the opposite side of the field.

He needed someone. He needed, he needed—

…Tenya Iida, you bright shining light of a man.

Izuku turned toward the last packmate left standing beside him. He grasped tight on the other boy’s arm, reminiscent of earlier, before the post-preliminary round.

Izuku turned his pleading eyes on Iida’s confused gaze. “Tenya, please, I know you’ve already helped me more than we’re supposed to in this festival, but… I just...” He tried to breathe, tried not to be afraid but it felt wrong it felt wrong it felt wrong.

Popsicle, are you going to be okay?

I don't know I don't know I don't know

Izuku tried to get his voice back as Tenya turned fully toward him, his gaze concerned. He didn't mean to keep worrying his friend, he didn't mean to—but he—

Izuku swallowed around a dry mouth, his tongue feeling strange against his teeth. He couldn't seem to collect his thoughts. He couldn't seem to feel himself.

Could Popsicle be stolen from him? What would happen if he was? Their bond, was it—would it—

Izuku could hear his breath passing from his lips, but he couldn't feel it. Tenya… He focused on the other boy's eyes, using them to ground himself, feeling Tenya's warm arm beneath his hand. “Please, I need your help… with Popsicle. I need to… I have to see something.”

And let it never be said that Tenya Iida wasn't born to be a hero, because he agreed on the spot without a second of hesitation. Without even knowing what Izuku was talking about. Without questioning. Because heroes always helped, didn't they? That was what it meant, to be a hero.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, loyal readers! I apologize for the delay in this chapter. I had a job interview and have been scrambling to figure out if I need to move next week. Anticipate the next chapter sometime in the next 1-2 weeks. It's a Christmas goal of mine.

Let me know what you did/didn't like about this chapter! Not much shipping in this one (except the ever pervasive Iida/Izuku that keeps happening somehow and some Shinsou/Izuku that popped up). There might be some next chapter depending on your suggestions.

I hope you don't hate me for nixing the entire Todoroki/Izuku conversation after second round from canon, but it just didn't fit. Izuku didn't make him use fire + Todoroki’s already been thinking about that shit. It will come back in a different form post-Hero Killer Stain, in a hopefully exciting/new way that you'll like.
If anyone has any hopes/dreams for things in the last round of the Sports Festival or afterward, let me know! It's going to be pretty emotional (as the ending indicates), so any lighthearted/humorous ideas to help me balance that out would be much appreciated. I still haven't decided who wins. In canon, I think Todoroki only lost because he was having flashbacks, so not freaking out might cause him to win the round. Thoughts?

Next chapter includes: the last round of the Sports Festival, Todoroki Enji always being a dick, and way more drama than you signed up for. Queue Popsicle.
Chapter Summary

Popsicle does not agree with Izuku's new plan to leave him with Tenya during his fight against Koda.

(Just a short character piece while I finalize battle ideas for the next chapter.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Soul-bond was worried. I could feel the fear running through me, making the hairs on my back stand on end and my teeth feel the distinct need to snarl at something. Soul-bond was across the room, and he was worried, and I didn’t understand.

I didn’t know how to help. I didn’t know how to calm him down. I didn’t know if he should be worried.

Packmate-chopping hand-bedsharer was holding me, and we were ‘experimenting’. Trying to see how far apart soul-bond could stand from me until I ran to him, until the disharmony was too much. The ground was cold beneath my paws. Saliva filled my mouth, and I tried to remain calm. The calmer I was, the calmer he would be. Freaking out together wouldn’t help either of us. It would only make the feeling worse, emotions amplified by their similarity. One of us had to breathe. He should be the one breathing.

This ‘experiment’ shouldn’t be necessary. We used to stand apart often. I used to fly above soul-bond and soul-bond’s mother while they traveled, and we would only sleep together at night. I would hunt and bring food and eat and curl up next to him. But now it hurt. It hurt to separate from soul-bond, like flesh being stretched too far from skin. I didn’t like the feeling.

Other-self did not like it either. He was standing on the other side of the room, feeling sad, itching and spread thin. I felt the twitch of his hand in my paw. I wanted to console him. I leaned over, paws stretched toward him as I whined. Come back come back come back. But that wasn’t the point, he said. Soul-bond needed to be apart from me in order to protect me. We needed to see how far we could go, what maximum distance could be tolerated between us.

Packmate-fast legs-worry calmer kept speaking, asking if it was ‘necessary’, talking about ‘expectations’ and ‘game etiquette’ and ‘familiar quirk’. Other-self was trying not to cry, our eyes stinging in parallel. I felt his fingers—five long spindly things on the end of paws—run through his shaggy head-hair. I watched as he took another step backward.

I whined again. Come back come back come back.

It’s for your own good. I want to protect you.


That’s not how it works, Popsicle.
I didn’t understand. Other-self worried that silent-rock body-kind face would hurt us, separate us, make us turn on each other. Packmate-chopping hand-soft voice was insistent that he wouldn’t, that another ‘hero’ wouldn’t use a familiar against his master. If anything, he would just ask me to stand down and not fight.

But soul-bond wasn’t my master. He was other-self, bond-mate, brother. We were each other, and we could not be turned against ourselves.

But what if we could, Popsicle?

We can’t we can’t we can’t.

Other-self didn’t agree with me, our thoughts divided, a confusing duality of mind that kept causing me to sneeze. I whined again. Why couldn’t he agree that we were stronger together? Soul-bond knew it in his heart. I helped him. I helped him control himself, his world-control, his fire. Being separated wouldn’t help him. Being separated could only hurt him. It was better to stay together than to realize too late that separation was weakness.

Bond-mate took another large step backward. He was now almost on the other side of the box-room we found ourselves in. Packmate-fast legs-soother held fast onto the scruff at my neck, his arm braced against my chest. Other-self was right; his presence was very soothing.

But I still didn’t agree with what we were doing.

Popsicle, I need you to promise me that if we can do this, if we think I won’t be too distracted and in danger during the fight, then you’ll let me go out there on my own. That you’ll stay with Tenya.

Stronger together. Stay together.

And what if he orders you to do something and you obey?

Never obey. No master. Together free.

You don’t understand. His quirk—it controls animals. You’re my familiar, and we have a very strong bond, but a quirk’s a quirk. He could overpower our bond. You were an animal before you were my familiar. Maybe, if it was the other way around, he wouldn’t be able to affect you. But as it is…?

Stay stay stay. Fight together.

I thought about turning into a raven. My flying form might be able to help him, to give him a vision of what was to come, to give him a feeling that we would be safe. We should be safe. I think we will be safe. I don’t know.

But I didn’t want to stay separate from him. It hurt. Not a sharp pain or a dull pain or anything that would need healing, but a hurt nonetheless. Deep inside. In my chest. Around my lungs. Between my paws.

I’m going to walk outside the door, now. Just stay still. We can do this. I believe in us.

It’s wrong it’s wrong it’s wrong.

It’s going to be okay, Popsicle. I promise. This is just a game, right? Like when we used to play in the forest.
I won’t be in that much danger. The worst that could happen is Koda pushing me out of the ring. I think he’s pretty strong, but I should be able to get around that. If not, then I’m just not strong enough yet. But I’m not in any real danger. So don’t worry.

I didn’t know how to make him listen. He felt my thoughts. He was in my chest. He knew what I felt, why I worried about this. I wasn’t worried about the danger to him. I was worried that he would be a danger to himself. Without me, was his world-control strong enough? He had enough trouble with his abilities when I was there next to him. Using his abilities without me there wouldn’t end well. We both knew that. So what was he doing?

The door shut on another whine that escaped my throat before I could stop it. This form of mine physically reacted at the same time it felt something, the two sides of action-feeling intertwined in my blood. It wasn’t like this in my flying form. I could think and feel separate, and the feelings were usually dulled. On the other hand, in my legless form, the feelings were amplified, and I often found myself so entwined with other-self’s emotions that I couldn’t tell his body from my own. We were one person, then, one soul.

But right now, in this form, he felt more like a brother, and my thoughts were driving me to reunite with him. Come back come back come back.

It was harder to hear him through the door. We could always hear each other loudest when we were touching, but the distance separated us by more than just space. Unless emotions were particularly high, being farther away meant muffling the connection so that only flashes would come through. Taste. Feeling. Pressure on skin. Pain. But not words, not the understanding that comes with touch.

I could hear something, but it was muffled. My ears twitched, but our bond didn’t work through audible words anymore. We used to talk to each other, small soul-bond with his chewable limbs, so frail, like a doe or a lamb, something I used to chase to slaughter. But now other-self was precious; he was part-me. I would never harm him. We can’t be turned against each other. We can’t we can’t we can’t. Why doesn’t he understand?

I couldn’t hear him anymore, and it hurt. Where was his voice? Where was soul-bond? His energy was too far away for me to sense, so I used my nose. I took deep gulps, but packmate-fast legs-kind voice drowned out any other scent. He smelled like metal and sweat and concern. I liked him. He was a good packmate. He helped other-self calm down; he made the racing fear trickle to slow worry. Trustworthy. Peacebringer. Action metal speed. Always running. But to where?

I liked him, but he didn’t understand us. Didn’t know us well enough to insist that bond-mate come back and let me on his shoulders and I’ll be quiet and hidden I promise I swear.

I could hear the rumbling growl come out of my throat, but I couldn’t stop it. My senses were reaching for him through the door. He was somewhere down the hallway, close enough that I could still hear footsteps, but far enough that I couldn’t feel the air on his skin. If I focused, I could feel the pressure of my paws on the floor, one foot weightless, then pressure. Footsteps. I heard them at the same time that I felt them. The scent was hidden beneath packmate-chopping arms-concern, but I would recognize the faint traces of it anywhere. Soul-bond. Pack-brother. Come back come back come back.

It felt like an eternity passed before he returned. I felt the triumph running through him before I heard his voice or the sound of his footsteps. He sounded breathless; he felt happy. I wanted to howl.

I knew what that jaunty step meant, his pasted smile as he entered the room. He was happy, but it
was only on the surface. Temporary-joy, not assurance-peace. I wanted to nip at his heels and shove
him into the wall with my paws. I wanted to tackle him to the floor and keep him in place. I knew
what he was going to say, what he was going to do. I hadn’t agreed. I hadn’t agreed to any of this.
And packmate-fast legs-soother wasn’t helping by agreeing to hold me for bond-mate.

This was wrong this was wrong this was wrong.

It’s going to be okay, Popsicle. And besides, you promised. We were able to be apart, so you have to
let me go out there and fight this round without you.

I didn’t agree to anything.

Popsicle, come on… don’t be like that. It’s going to be okay.

It’s not it’s not it’s not.

Here, come on, I’ll walk you to the stands where our class will be sitting. You’ll be able to watch me
from there. And if anything wrong happens, you can always come swooping down to save me,
alright?

Please please please—

It’s going to be okay, Popsicle.

We’re going to be separated. Nothing about that is ever okay.

Soul-bond started talking to packmate-chopping arm-worry calmer. Friendly. Smiling. Saying
something about watching ‘Todoroki’ and being worried for him, wanting to beat him, wanting to
show explosion-growling-scarred boy. All I could do was trot along behind them, my ears down, the
whine falling through my teeth as natural and inescapable as breathing. The pitch of it remained high
and grated on my ears, but I couldn’t stop. Feeling-action-thought all wrapped up into one, and other-
self wouldn’t listen to me.

I knew how this was going to pan out, and it wasn't going to be how he wanted it to.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone!

I thought there needed to be a short little break between last chapter and the next, and
my bf demanded I write something from Popsicle's POV... so this is what happened.
Popsicle's POV is impossible to include during a chapter, so I hope you enjoyed this
little interlude!
The End of the Sports Festival... for Izuku

Chapter Summary

Get ready for a quick explanatory blurb about Izuku's magic society issues (complete with phrasing from the first BNHA chapter) before Izuku competes in the penultimate round of the Sports Festival, first against Koda and then against Todoroki. Both times, shit goes sideways.

Oh yeah, and Endeavor appears. Newsflash: He's a dick. Other newsflash: He's a remarkably omniscient dick.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Here’s the sad truth. Not all men are created equal. And this world is made up of more than just men. There are werewolves, vampires, mermaids, ghosts, demons. And then there are people like me. Witches. We are a minority... or I should say, witches with any talent are a minority. And we are hunted by those who want our powers—demons, others of our kind called 'warlocks' that use dark magic—and sheltered by those who want the protection of our gifts.

For most of my life, my mom and I have traveled around seeking shelter from those who have need of our powers. A werewolf clan who offered their home in exchange for purifying their silver injuries and creating protective wards around their forest. A tengu village that offered martial arts teaching in exchange for protection wards that would work against the humans moving into the mountains. There was even a young vampire girl who offered her cave and some of her blood in exchange for the chance to walk in the daylight. We moved around, helping where we could, but we were always on the run from demons and warlocks.

There’s something special about a witch’s blood before they reach the age of majority. It’s like a power boost for several demonic species. And children can be swayed to use dark magic until their majority, so warlocks will try to capture and trick children into selfishly using their powers, which brings darkness into their souls. There are specific ways that’s done, certain selfish actions that count over others, but I’ve always tried to make sure that I only use my powers to help others and not myself. That way, selfishness can't take me over and turn me into a villain. I used to be so afraid of that, of a demon or warlock appearing that would try and turn me dark. My abilities would be terrifying, turned toward a dark purpose. A city paused in time, unable to help itself as demons rampage through.

Instead of darkness, I've always striven to embrace the light, to be a good person, a protector, a hero. I used to dream of using my abilities to save people, just like the pro-heroes on television. I would think of All Might, bravely saving hundreds of people from a bus crash, the fire around the bus threatening so many lives. But then he appeared, saying, ‘Now you have nothing to fear, because I am here!’ Once I got my powers, I wanted to be just like him. I imagined pausing time, the flames standing still, and saving each person one by one before the fire could even touch them. I thought I would just set up protective wards around a city ahead of time, so I could use my powers wherever I went. I even started using them to save people who were in trouble...

But then my mom told me about the ones of our kind who watched over the rest of us, making sure
we don't reveal magic to the rest of the world. And if we did something that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that magic existed, even in this quirk-based society, they would either erase everyone’s memories of the encounter or they would erase us, and it would be like we never existed.

I ended the day after the Sports Festival worried that I was going to be erased. Mr. Aizawa said that I hadn’t revealed too much, that everything could be explained away using my connection with my familiar. And I knew… I had always known that if I wanted to become a pro-hero, that I would have to lie about my abilities at some point.

I just hadn’t expected it to happen so soon, or so publicly.

And I was afraid. I was afraid that it had been too televised, that someone was going to be watching, that someone was going to know the truth. I was afraid I would be hunted down. I was afraid my friends and teachers would be made to forget about me. I was afraid my familiar would be taken away from me. I was afraid I would be erased.

I was afraid of many things, and I spent the night running through them in my brain. Everything that had gone wrong. Everything that could go wrong. Whether I was meant for this life, when I had to worry about things like this before I’d even made it into my chosen career. But there had been so many good things that had happened, too, hidden amongst the fears and the worries and each time I had broken down and needed someone else to put me back together.

My last thought before I went to sleep was that I really should have been more careful taking my magical blockers off a week before a publicized tournament.

Thinking back on it, that was always bound to end badly.

Izuku Midoriya was nervous. He was also, thankfully, a bit distracted. Kirishima was currently on the cement stage fighting against that guy with a steel-quirk from earlier, and they seemed to be a physical match for each other. Equal strength. Equal aggression. Equal quirks.

Kirishima was either going to be foaming at the mouth after this, or smiling his usual broad shark-toothed grin. It all depended on whether he won.

Izuku had spent most of the rounds before this up in the stands with Tenya, Popsicle, and Tokoyami. Uraraka kept fluttering in and out as she created strategies for her fight against Kacchan. Which had been… interesting to watch. Izuku hadn’t expected her to try to stone Kacchan to death using the decimated stage as ammo, but if she had asked, he would have warned her that at max-power Kacchan could explode a dent in a mountain. Izuku remembered Kacchan doing just that when they were kids. Izuku had been there, up to and including the panicked phone call to Auntie and the trip to the hospital.

They’d both gotten in a bit of trouble over that. As if Izuku had any chance to dissuade Kacchan once he was hell-bent on something.

Speaking of hell-bent, Kacchan kept giving Izuku weird looks when they were up in the stands. Kind of… assessing? Threatening? Proud? It was really hard to parse together what that particular combination of intensity-glare-confusion-smirk meant. Kacchan had been doing it ever since the post-preliminary round, so Izuku supposed it might have something to do with Izuku winning the round against Kacchan. And possibly something to do with Kacchan yelling profanities at being in
second place, again, right afterward.

Popsicle wasn’t sure how to feel about Kacchan’s moodiness, his wolf form readjusting nervously every few minutes as he stared back at the explosive teen

*Oh yeah, Popsicle...*

Izuku was worried about his familiar. The wolf had stayed on his lap the whole time in the stands, occasional whines spilling forth from his snout as though he was in pain. Izuku could feel it coursing through him, a feeling similar to the panic Izuku had felt before he went to give the speech at the beginning of the festival. Popsicle was stewing in a sludge of emotion somewhere between dread and freefall. More specifically, it felt a lot like that puppeteer villain in the market, like Popsicle didn’t have control over his own body—his limbs forced to move about while his mind cried out in protest.

But Popsicle wasn’t being controlled. He just didn’t like how Izuku had chosen to face Koda. And yet, Izuku couldn’t take back his decision. There was no safe way for Popsicle to be with Izuku on the arena stage, not with Koda’s quirk being what it was. The only safe option was to leave Popsicle with Tenya and to fight alone. And it’s not like Izuku hadn’t fought on his own before in a one on one fight. Popsicle never freaked out like this over the tournaments with the tengu.

Izuku wondered why his familiar was so worried.

This tournament was a one on one match. All of their classmates were fighting alone. Popsicle should stop being so paranoid. Everything was going to be alright.

Sure, it was going to suck. Sure, Izuku was going to be somewhat distracted by the feeling of Popsicle being separated from him. (That was why Izuku had kept Popsicle with him during the first two rounds, after all.) And sure, alright, it might be a bad (and dangerous) idea for Izuku to use his abilities without Popsicle there. At least until they had more training, post-full-moon.

But Izuku didn’t have to use his abilities to defeat Koda...

Izuku watched as Kirishima dove down and swung his fist into an uppercut, only for the other student to do the same thing. They both fell backward, knocked out by each other’s hit. A few seconds passed as they lay on the ground, neither moving, before Ms. Midnight approached them and cautiously declared the round a tie.

It was the first tie all game long, and hopefully the last. Izuku hoped he didn’t tie with Koda. He had a plan up his sleeve. He wasn’t sure it was a very good plan, but it was a plan. It was also rather simple, which made it easy to follow.

The idea was for Izuku to try and draw Koda to the edge of the ring and then use a judo throw to get him out of bounds. See? Simple. And it didn’t include Izuku needing to use his powers, which was the best part. Izuku wasn’t quite sure how his abilities would react without Popsicle there to ground him. He hadn’t been separate from Popsicle since he’d removed the two binding claws, so he didn’t have a great idea about whether he had, uh, any control over his powers on his own.

He probably did? At least, Izuku hoped he did. It all depended on his emotions and his ability to focus.

People with stretchers went out onto the field to carry Kirishima and steel-quirk-boy to the temporary nurse’s station where Recovery Girl was set up. Izuku had been by there earlier to check on Uraraka after her battle with Kacchan, and then he’d come to this tunnel to watch Kirishima from the ground floor.
Speaking of battles... Izuku was up next. He didn’t see Koda, yet, but he was certain that the other boy was somewhere around.

Izuku closed his eyes and focused on his bond with Popsicle. He imagined the link that began in Izuku’s head and melted down all the way to the base of his spine. When he allowed his breath to sink into his body, he could almost feel Popsicle lying back-to-back with him, like they’d done for the bonding ritual. Spines aligned. Cords tying mind to mind, root to root, soul to soul. He could still feel Popsicle there, breathing in tandem, if he concentrated hard enough.

Izuku heard something shuffling nearby and opened his eyes.

Koda was in front of him.

He tried not to step back in fear. Popsicle wasn’t on him, right now. He didn’t have to worry about Koda giving his familiar orders.

Izuku could defeat Koda in a physical battle. There was nothing to be afraid of.

He hoped.

Izuk’s eyes trailed over Koda’s uniform as the other boy smiled back, friendly as you please. Koda was always quiet in class. He didn’t talk much, choosing to indicate agreement or disagreement with someone’s plan by nods and shakes of the head. He seemed to have a perpetually shy grin around the corners of his mouth, although Izuku had trouble seeing it beyond the other teen’s rock-like face at first.

Quiet. Friendly. Unassuming.

It was a wonder Izuku hadn’t pegged him as a potential enemy until now. He usually had better instincts than that.

Not that Koda was an enemy-enemy; he was still a classmate, after all. But just because they shared the same pack-leader didn’t mean they were pack. Pack hung out together. Pack touched hands and shoulders and necks and had cuddle piles together. Pack didn’t draw away and not talk to each other. Pack didn’t sit at the back of the classroom and not share anything about themselves. Pack could be trusted.

Izuku didn’t know if he could trust Koda. And it was different, somehow, than Shinsou’s quirk. Izuku wasn’t worried about his potential friend brainwashing him. That could go away soon enough, and Popsicle could bite Izuku and break the effect. But interrupting Izuku's bond with his familiar...?

It was different, because Koda could potentially brainwash Popsicle.

*It was different.*

The threat itched between Izuku’s shoulder blades, even though he had figured a way out of the trap.

And that’s what Koda was: a trap. Izuku’s other classmates didn’t have anything to worry about, with Koda, except maybe Dark Shadow if shadow-creatures counted as animals to Koda’s quirk. Izuku was the only one potentially susceptible to his power. Or, well, Popsicle was. Sure, the other student seemed like a good person. And of course, they both wanted to be heroes. But still...

If someone was a danger to you, they were a danger. No two cents about it. A threat was a threat, even when they were friendly and smiled.
The fangs were always there.

Izuku didn’t know whether to smile back at the other teen or growl at him. Nip at his neck or shove him against a wall or— Popsicle, stop it. He could almost feel his familiar whining from here.

“Aaaand we come to our final line-up of the first round. First, we have Koji Koda, the solid rock animal-speaker from Class 1-A! That’s a dual power folks! And joining him is Izuku Midoriyyyy, whose team came in first place last round! He has the power to explode anything he wants from a distance… even air!”

Izuku felt his legs move his feet forward, but his eyes were purely on Koda’s form shuffling to the stage in front of him. The other teen looked embarrassed; he kept scratching at his head and shrugging his shoulders as though blushing. It was hard to tell with his skin though.

Izuku had the sudden recollection that Koda didn’t raise his hand earlier to volunteer for their classmates treating the Sports Festival like a tournament for pack placement. Was Koda even interested in joining the pack?

Izuku wasn’t sure he wanted him there. The feeling of ‘threat’ was still surging through his veins. He wondered if that was Popsicle’s anxiety talking, or his own.

By the time they had both made it to the stage, Izuku’s entire body was buzzing with anticipation. He could feel it in his teeth and in the tips of his fingers. There was an odd taste in his mouth, almost like copper. Must be the adrenaline.

Koda nervously wrung his hands before placing them next to his sides and executing a small bow, followed by an embarrassed handwave.

Izuku cocked his head, wondering at the other boy’s posturing. None of the other team-ups had done this. Izuku awkwardly tried to mimic the bow, making sure to keep his shoulders hunched up near his neck. Never bare your neck to an enemy. Even the mock bow felt dirty between his shoulder blades. Don’t trust him. There’s danger in his veins, even if he doesn’t know it.

Izuku peered up at Koda beneath thick eyelashes. Now, the round just needed to start, and Izuku could try his best to throw the other teen out of the ring.

“Ready… get set… and fight!”

Koda took off at a run, heading straight toward Izuku. If Izuku had Popsicle, he would have created explosions in the air in front of the other teen and diverted him to the side of the arena. But without the confidence that his blasts would be small enough or in the correct location in order to avoid severely injuring Koda, Izuku could only brace his legs and prepare to twist.

Once Koda was close enough and unable to stop his trajectory, Izuku dodged to the side and left a leg out to trip the other teen. Koda stumbled forward but regained his balance in just enough time to stop himself from falling out of the ring. Meanwhile, Izuku had completed a pivot on his left foot, and his right hand was primed and ready to grab Koda’s shirt, grip tight, and flip him head over heels and hopefully out of the arena…

Except it didn’t actually work out that way. Izuku gripped Koda’s shirt and went to use the momentum of his pivot to throw the other teen… only for Koda’s rock hard body to stay right where it was.

Strong. Steady. Solid as a mountain.
Izuku didn’t have enough strength or mass or momentum to overturn him.

Izuku tried not to panic. He scrambled to the side as Koda stood up straight with his feet firmly planted on the ground. Izuku tried to come at Koda from his blind spot (behind and to the right), sneaking up behind the other teen and grabbing him in a chokehold. It had worked on Todoroki before…

Only that didn’t work on Koda, either.

Seriously, what was this guy made of? How do you throw something that can’t be picked up? Or choke someone whose skin doesn’t compress?

Koda turned to look at Izuku in confusion, as though questioning what the hell Izuku was doing.

Izuku didn’t even know, right now. He hung off the other teen’s back, swinging slightly with his legs a foot off the ground, as his arms continued to clamp down against Koda’s neck. Yeah, the chokehold was definitely not going to work.

“Whoa, Eraserhead… what would you say is going on here? After last round, I didn’t expect we would get another purely physical fight, but neither opponent has yet to use their quirk!”

“Midoriya seems to have left his familiar in the stands, so Koda does not have the opportunity to use his quirk.”

“And Midoriya? We saw him exploding huge expanses of ice earlier, and making smaller explosions during the cavalry battle. Where’s all that explosive power, now?”

“Midoriya’s explosions are best controlled when his familiar is present. Without his familiar, Midoriya is likely having to be careful determining when to use his powers.”

“So this could end up in another one on one physical fight? Oh-hoho… let’s see how this cat and mouse game plays out…”

Izuku could vaguely hear his pack-leader’s commentary occurring overhead. Once Present Mic’s voice had started reverberating overhead, Koda had grabbed tightly onto where Izuku’s arms were still trying to choke him out. Before Izuku could come up with a way to get out of Koda’s grip, he found the breath knocked out of him. His vision was filled with clouds and sky and—oh, yeah, there was Koda’s weight against his ribs.

(Izuku could practically feel Popsicle whining from up in the stands, struggling against Iida’s grip, as they both felt the pain of their ribs being crushed beneath solid rock.)

Izuku tried to twist out from beneath the other teen, to no avail.

Shit, Koda was impossibly heavy.

He moved his legs to the outside of Koda’s body as the rock-strong teen moved to one elbow, as though to get off Izuku or try to pin him down further… and in those brief few seconds of freedom, Izuku’s legs took advantage of the few times he’d had to fight against the top beta in his old pack. The adult had been much stronger and much broader than Izuku, and he’d taught him a few things. Such as, for example, using his hips to body-check Koda off of him while simultaneously twisting his legs and shoving with his arms so that Koda rolled a few feet away before he managed to stop himself.

Izuku took the opportunity to roll in the opposite direction, basically flinging himself away from
Koda. *Shit shit shit.*

Izuku stumbled to his knees while Koda was still getting his hands beneath him and standing up. He only had one chance to catch Koda by surprise. He propelled himself into a quick sprint toward Koda, aiming to kick him in the face.

It didn’t end how he hoped.

At the last second, Koda’s hand came up, stopping the trajectory of Izuku’s kicking leg, and grabbed his thigh with the other hand.

*SHIT SHIT SHIT.*

Izuku didn’t even have a second to prepare himself before the other teen flung him halfway across the ring, the side of his head hitting the concrete, as his body was forced to keep rolling until his elbow acted as a stopping mechanism.

Izuku lay on the ground, panting, dazed, his arm burning as though it had been skinned.

*Popsicle…*

Izuku tried to breathe past a sudden wave of nausea as he used his wounded arm to prop himself up and see where Koda had gone to.

The other teen was standing up, staring at Izuku as though trying to make sure whether he was okay. Or trying to determine whether Izuku was going to get up. Izuku couldn’t really discern which. His head felt fuzzy.

As Izuku struggled to get his hands underneath him and push himself up (*but the world was tilting and he didn’t feel good and how hard did he hit his head because his ears were ringing—*), Koda started walking toward him.

*Was he going to sit on him again?*

Izuku scrambled backward, trying to buy time. *The other boy was crazy strong. Seriously, why hadn’t Izuku noticed this in class before?*

(And he could feel Popsicle in the stands, and the wolf had transformed into a raven and was trying to escape Iida’s flailing arms. Izuku could feel him, far off, muted, but he could feel him. Popsicle wanted to help. Izuku was in trouble. He wanted to help!)

Izuku had to win this round. He forgot exactly why he had to win, but he did. *Was it because of Kacchan? The pack?*

“*And Midoriya is not giving up yet! I thought he was knocked out by the force of that throw, but he’s getting back to his feet!*”

Izuku took another breath to clear his head. Koda was still walking toward him, but he was being careful about his steps, as though he was waiting for Izuku to try something else. Izuku shook his head and focused. Maybe he could take Koda’s legs out from under him? If he could get Koda to fall hard to the ground, that would have to hurt. And he wasn’t too far from the edge of the ring. If Izuku could just push him back far enough or disorient him…

*Screw it.*
Izuku rushed forward, lowering his shoulder as though he was going to tackle Koda in the ribs. The other teen braced himself, his hands chest-high, as he prepared to receive Izuku again. At the last second, Izuku ducked his body down so that the tackle hit Koda’s legs full-on. With Koda’s legs swept out beneath him, he would either fall over head-first or be off-balance enough so Izuku could drag him out of the ring—

Only of course it didn’t work like that because Koda was friggin’ crazy strong and what the hell was Izuku supposed to do now—

Izuku found himself once again airborne, being suplexed over Koda’s head and falling head-first toward the ground. He twisted himself just enough while in the air to brace his landing with his hands…but he hit his head again, causing the copper taste in his mouth to get worse. There was liquid in his mouth, too. Had he bitten his tongue?

Izuku tried to gulp whatever the liquid was down while he opened his mouth to breathe. Oh spirits, he was even more disoriented than before.

*Popsicle...*

He could see Koda’s feet turning in front of him, as though in slow motion. He blinked his eyes and tried to push himself away from the other teen with his hands. His body felt like a limp noodle. Maybe it was from the landing?

Izuku could see Koda’s hand coming down from above. *To help him? To hurt him? He didn’t know he didn’t know he didn’t know—*

Koda’s hand was an inch away from Izuku’s face when it happened. Izuku winced backward, trying to curl his body away from Koda’s approach. The stadium stands were silent. His ears were full of cotton—

—and then Popsicle appeared, and Koda was shoved backward away from Izuku, falling to his butt as Popsicle’s largest wolf form, which towered above Izuku and stood as high as Koda’s ribs, loomed over him, snarling. Despite his quirk’s ability to control animals, Koda couldn’t seem to say a word, Popsicle’s salivating teeth driving him to fear and silence.

Slowly, Popsicle backed away from Koda, making sure to keep his eyes on Izuku’s opponent, as he stepped back far enough to reach Izuku. Popsicle leaned down and nuzzled Izuku’s cheek, licking his neck and whining for Izuku to get back up. *To stand and fight. Because he was here, now, and everything would be okay. They were going to be heroes together.*

Izuku wanted to scream at him to run.

Instead, he reached a hand up and grabbed the scruff of Popsicle’s neck. He used his familiar to leverage himself to his feet as Koda did the same.

Koda stared back and forth between Izuku and Popsicle, waiting for them to attack, waiting for the moment when he would be forced to use his quirk—

But Izuku didn’t know what to do. Attack with Popsicle? That would make this fight two on one, rather than one on one. That wasn’t fair, and Koda would definitely use his quirk against Popsicle then. Get Popsicle to shift into snake form? Izuku was certainly hurt enough that Popsicle’s healing would be really useful, but he would still be in range of Koda’s quirk. Make him fly somewhere up above as a bird? He might not be able to hear Koda up there...

Popsicle made the choice for him, shrinking down into snake form and sliding up Izuku’s leg to his
waist, his chest, and eventually up to his shoulders. Izuku couldn’t help the sigh of relief at the familiar weight against his collar bone, even as the fear thrummed through his veins. Koda was too close.

*I love you, Popsicle.*

Popsicle radiated happiness.

*Also, you’re an idiot.*

Izuku felt Popsicle stick his tongue out, next to his neck, tickling Izuku and causing shivers to appear on his arms. Within seconds, Izuku realized that he was thinking more clearly, his head feeling less like cotton, and he could feel every part of his body. No more noodle syndrome.

Koda continued to stare.

*Well, there was nothing for it but to fight.*

Izuku raised his hands, intending to blast an explosion in front of Koda and drive him backward, but that must have been the sign that Koda was looking for. Before Izuku could fully focus on the exact region of air that he wanted to create an explosion in, Koda was speaking for the first time since Izuku had met him.

And he was speaking to Popsicle.

“Popsicle, run away from the stage. Now.”

Anger began clouding Izuku's vision as Koda used his familiar's name. *He had no right. He wasn't pack. No one was allowed to use Popsicle's name who wasn't pack!*

The anger lasted all of three seconds before Izuku felt Popsicle slithering down his neck, and then the fear took over. *No no no, don't listen, don't listen.* Something in his chest felt like it was tightening, like he was scared and his heart was breaking and the world was ending, all combined into one. Popsicle continued to slither down past his hips, dodging Izuku's fingers as they grasped to hold his familiar to him. But it didn't work, Popsicle was too fast and *Izuku couldn't feel him, he couldn't feel him.* Izuku tried to focus on the bond with his familiar, whispering the words across their connection that had become stronger than ever this past week. They could speak into each other's minds, now; they didn't need to voice their words. Popsicle should be able to hear him...

Izuku tried to speak to his familiar across the trajectory of their bond. *Popsicle, don't listen to him.*

But there was no answer.

*Popsicle?*

Just a vast empty well of silence, where warmth and loyalty used to be. Blindness, where once he could see. The cold and the dark and the desolation...

*POPSICLE!*

Izuku watched in mute horror as Popsicle slithered down his leg and changed back into his wolf form, walking to a trot, and trotting to a run, until he was far away from Izuku; he had gone down the steps, making a break toward the audience before coming to a stop on the stage near Midnight and Cementoss, and he was looking back at Koda as though awaiting more orders.
“And it looks like Koda has used his quirk on Midoriya’s familiar and ordered him to leave the ring! That has got to sting...”

But it didn’t sting. It didn’t feel like anything.

And that was the problem. Where was Popsicle? He couldn’t feel him he couldn't he couldn’t feel—

Izuku stared at his familiar in betrayal, his hand outstretched, trying to reach him. Maybe if he just reached far enough—

He could feel changes in the strength of his breath against his lips, and a small part of his brain worked well enough to realize that words were coming out, words he didn’t even realize he was speaking.

“Popsicle?”

He couldn’t make out what he was saying, but he started stumbling in the direction of his familiar, who was on the exact opposite side of the arena from the portion of stage that Izuku stood in. If he could just get to him—

“Popsicle?”

Koda took the opportunity amply provided him by Izuku’s distraction and rushed the other teen. Even though Koda came running at him from the same direction that the distressed teen was staring, Izuku didn’t move to dodge his classmates' oncoming form or stop him. Izuku just kept walking toward Koda’s charging form, trying to get closer to his familiar, hands outstretched, feet stumbling, eyes focused on what was outside of the ring.

“Popsicle?”

Koda rammed into him, tackling Izuku around the shoulders and driving him toward the opposite side of the stage. Further from Popsicle. Further from his familiar. Further from the gaping hole in his chest that wasn’t leaving and where was Popsicle why wasn’t he answering the world was turning black and it was hard to see—

Izuku’s hands kept reaching out, against his accord, trying to touch the image of his familiar hovering on the other side of the arena, the light in the darkness. He had to reach him he had to get to him Popsicle Popsicle POPSICLE—

Izuku’s hands began clawing at Koda’s face near his eyes, trying to get past the other teen, his legs too far off the ground to dig his feet into the cement. He wasn't strong enough, he wasn't strong enough, he wasn’t strong. Koda folded Izuku’s hands behind Izuku’s back to stop the attack and ensure that Izuku couldn’t hurt him with them. Izuku's fingernails were bleeding from scraping at what was effectively rock.

Feeling trapped, Izuku began to thrash and scream, a loud desperate thing that had Koda forcing his eyes shut as he continued to rush toward the opposite side of the stage with his burden. Izuku's hands were behind his back, Popsicle was getting further and further away from him, and Popsicle wouldn’t answer... he couldn’t feel him, he couldn’t feel Popsicle, he wasn’t there, that feeling in his chest, where he was always able to feel his familiar, it was gone it was gone it was gone, Koda was destroying them—

Izuku screamed again, and a wall of an explosion detonated behind him, shoving both him and Koda forward by the strength of the blast. Koda's momentum in the opposite direction caused him to soar through the air, displaced by gravity and force, to land on the ground.
Izuku fell on top of Koda, the other teen groaning beneath him. He shook his head and scrambled off the other boy, forgetting the match, forgetting that he was supposed to pin Koda to the ground and find a way to win. He started running toward Popsicle, toward the opposite edge of the stage (he would forfeit if it got him his familiar back, Popsicle Popsicle Popsicle).

Later that night, when he lay in bed, Izuku would try to figure what had been driving him in that second on the stage. His only thought at the time had been getting to Popsicle. But why? Logically, he was going to see his familiar after he won the round. If he had simply dragged Koda off the stage or pinned him to the stage for long enough, he could have won. In that instant, with Koda dazed and on the ground, Izuku could have won.

Izuku will lay on his futon and think back on his old pack, think about how Popsicle was his only living link left to them. Popsicle had used to live with the werewolves before Izuku and his mom had met them; he had lived with them and hunted with them, and they had claimed he was such a clever wolf. But he wasn’t just clever. Izuku had known that the second he met him. Popsicle could understand human speech. There was no rhyme for it, no reason. By all accounts, Popsicle shouldn’t be able to understand them when they talked. Of course, he also shouldn’t be able to transform into two other animal forms.

Izuku had met Popsicle the same day he’d met the pack, and Popsicle had become his familiar the same day his old pack-leader had said ‘You’re one of ours now’. Pack and Popsicle were intertwined in Izuku’s brain, each of them starting with the other. But one had ended, and now, Popsicle was all that was left.

Maybe that was why. Maybe there was something in Izuku that couldn’t afford to lose the last link to his pack for a single second. Or maybe it was that feeling that had been swirling in his chest in that moment. Part of the bond between Izuku and his familiar could always be felt. No matter the distance, in their hearts, they were always one. (His mother said their bond wasn’t quite normal, but what did she know, she never had a familiar, too scared of the threat they could bring. Familiars were always both a strength and a weakness.)

In that moment on the stage, it was like Popsicle had never existed at all. He wasn’t in Izuku’s chest. Izuku couldn’t feel him. Something separated them, more than distance, a great chasm in the link between their emotions. Whatever Koda’s quirk was, it wasn’t just controlling animals. It was ripping apart their bonds with other humans. It was removing their emotional ties. It was linking them to him.

Izuku had hurt so bad from the whiplash of the bond beginning to break that he was shaking and screaming. He didn’t remember what he said, only that it contained the words ‘What have you done?’ over and over, on a loop. He hadn’t even reached the edge of the ring, hadn’t left the bounds of the arena in order to get to Popsicle. Instead, Izuku had stopped several feet away from the outer edges and had just fallen to his knees, his hands useless against his thighs, as he stared in horror at the wolf-form of his familiar.

It wasn’t until Popsicle was in his arms again and lapping at his face and Koda was apologizing for doing that to them, that he realized he’d actually won. Koda had seen what his quirk had done to a fellow classmate and his familiar—the emotional devastation, the small explosions that had begun to go off around Izuku in a circle, the way he was muttering amidst his cries and his screams—and although he didn’t understand how his quirk had done such damage, he forfeited on the spot.

He didn’t want to win by destroying someone else, like that.

The audience had cheered him on, lauding his heroic spirit. They said that Koda could have won the match easily. All he had to do was pick up the motionless Izuku (and, yeah, dodge the multitude of
small explosions that appeared at random in the air around Izuku’s kneeling form and hope to whatever god he believed in that Izuku didn't create another large explosion like before) and escort him to the edge of the ring. Instead, he had given up his right to continue further in the tournament.

If Izuku could forgive him, he would probably really look up to the other teen. But that forgiveness would take time.

Instead, Izuku sat in one of the waiting rooms, recuperating with his snake around his collarbone, one hand on his scales and the other around his own folded legs, holding himself together. Holding them together.

*I told you we could be turned against each other. He was able to separate us. He could have done worse.*

But his familiar wasn't speaking.

*Popsicle?*

Nothing was wrong with him, the bond should be fine, but he wasn't saying a word. And Izuku didn't know what to do.

*I love you, Popsicle. We’re going to be okay. I promise.*

Izuku focused on not crying as he rocked himself and his familiar back and forth, back and forth, treating their bond like a small child in the night.

*I promise I promise I promise.*

Popsicle still didn’t answer. The warmth had begun swirling back into their bond, connecting them both, thoughts intertwined, but there was no answer. Izuku searched for the words Popsicle had said before the round with Koda started, back when they were practicing in one of the prep rooms with Tenya.

*Popsicle, please come back to me. Come back...*  

His familiar hadn’t spoken since the end of the round, and Izuku didn’t know how to bring him back. He could feel him in his chest, the emotions thrumming through both of them, but he wasn’t speaking, and Izuku was scared.

He lowered his head and whispered sweet nothings against his familiar’s scales. He told him stories about the wolves, about the tengu, about hanging out with his new packmates. He told him what a loyal familiar he was, and how strong, and how much he depended on him and trusted him.

He spoke for however long half of the second round of fights on the field lasted (which, okay, was only two fights, but still). Therefore, when he stepped out of the waiting room with Popsicle softly hissing against his neck and found Bakugou storming by... well, he was a bit disoriented.

Kacchan turned toward Izuku, smelling of gasoline and smoke, his eyes red and proud and angry, and told Izuku that he better not lose to Todoroki. Well ‘told him’ is a rather polite way of saying that Kacchan shoved Izuku up against a wall, the heat of his body rolling over Izuku’s cold form in waves, and snarled in Izuku’s face as he stood nose-to-nose with the freckled teen. His piercing red eyes brooked no argument as he demanded that Izuku not lose the next round, shivers traveling from Izuku's neck to the base of his spine.

*Deku had to win. Bakugou wouldn’t allow him not to.*
And well, that moment, with Kacchan’s lips near his, with the heat and the smoke and the energy that seemed to surround the explosive teen… it was the first time that Izuku realized that ‘technically’ winning the last round meant that he now had to fight Todoroki. It was also the first time that Izuku realized that Kacchan felt really good pressed up against him like this… but, well, priorities.

Kacchan pushed off of Izuku and stormed away.

Izuku gulped. He let out a breath, his cheeks flushed and Popsicle snickering next to his collarbone. Izuku cursed up a storm.

Of course he had to fight Todoroki. What’s your worst enemy (classmate), followed by the guy who challenged you to a fight? You know, no big deal.

Popsicle hissed around his neck, getting excited. (Popsicle had a hard-on for Todoroki. It was really awkward. Izuku blamed Todoroki’s utter competency during the USJ fight.)

Sighing and rubbing his fingers against his forehead in consternation, Izuku started walking toward where he remembered the entrance tunnel being. It was only two hallways down, right?

Only, the first hall Izuku turned into contained none other than Todoroki’s dad. That was his dad, wasn’t it? Kirishima had said that Endeavor was Todoroki’s father… but what was he doing back here? Was he trying to find Todoroki? Izuku tried not to track the older hero with his eyes as he proceeded down the hallway. He just needed to get to the other end, turn right, walk a bit further, and then the stairway would lead him to the tunnel.

But instead of ignoring him, the flaming pro-hero stopped Izuku’s progress midway down the hallway with his hand. Specifically, the breadth of his hand trapped Izuku’s upper arm in place. Izuku was getting very tired of feeling trapped.

Izuku stopped, looking to the right in confusion, and peered up at Endeavor. The pro-hero had a moustache made of flames, eyebrows made of flames, boots made of flames, and… costume piping made of flames? That one was a bit strange. It was also strange that he was on fire when people weren’t, you know, allowed to openly display their quirks unless they were mutant types. Izuku remembered having to learn that law during his first week of school.

So what in bleeding Tartarus was Endeavor doing covered in flames? Could he not turn off his quirk or something? Todoroki didn’t have that problem. Maybe Todoroki could just control it better than his father? But that wouldn’t make sense, either.

Oh shit, Endeavor was talking to him.

“You’re the boy who came in first in the post-preliminary round, aren’t you?” His voice was robust but grating, full of power and contempt.

Izuku nodded his head, feeling a bit dazed, very confused, and somewhat in pain. The older pro-hero hadn’t let go of Izuku’s arm yet, and Izuku didn’t like either the sound of his voice or the heat of his hand scorching through Izuku’s shirt.

Endeavor used Izuku’s arm to turn the young teen toward him, causing Izuku’s feet to stumble as he pivoted. They were now facing each other face-to… well, navel, actually. Endeavor was really tall. And from this close, Izuku could feel himself start sweating from the vicinity of the flames. Was he really not going to turn that off? It was so annoying. And illegal.

Endeavor released Izuku’s arm, only to raise his hand up to Izuku’s face and grab his chin, tilting Izuku’s chin up and to the side.
Izuku gulped. He tried not to glare at the older hero, but it was a hard sell. He didn’t like being handled like an animal, especially when the touches involved the region near his neck. ‘Never bare your neck to an enemy.’ But was Todoroki’s dad an enemy…?

“Hmm…” Endeavor was looking at him like Izuku was some sort of monkey or specimen to be studied in a lab, his fingers still supporting Izuku’s jaw while he manipulated his chin.

Izuku could feel a shiver starting at the base of his spine, but it wasn’t a pleasant shiver like earlier with Kacchan. It felt wrong.

Endeavor eventually let his chin go, and Izuku stumbled to his feet, only just now realizing that Endeavor had made him stand on his tip-toes in order for the older hero to get a ’good look’ at him.

Izuku thought ‘Screw it’ and glared back at him. He doubted Mr. Aizawa would get mad at him for disrespecting his elders if they were being such dicks about it.

Endeavor stepped away, a condescending smirk on his face as he wiped his hand off on his uniform, as though he was trying to get rid of Izuku’s germs. “If you can manage to avoid another meltdown like your last battle, you might even serve as a good measure of my son’s strength. Certainly better than the previous fodder.”

The sneer at the end of that statement made it even more obvious that Todoroki’s dad was a total dick. Izuku tried to think about who Endeavor was calling ‘fodder’. That headband kid from Class 1-B? On the other hand, Izuku could definitely imagine Kacchan calling other students ‘fodder’. Maybe Endeavor had self-worth issues, like Kacchan?

Izuku decided he was going to leave this encounter with a healthy amount of contempt and disregard for the older hero. If this was how Endeavor acted behind the scenes, then he wasn’t a hero worth looking up to. And he also wasn’t worth Izuku spending his time on.

Izuku moved to do just that, taking a step backward and to the side as he maneuvered his body to continue walking down the hallway. He wasn’t going to give Endeavor one more thought—

Only the older hero had a different idea. Izuku felt the man’s flames approach his back, the scorching heat causing him to tense up, his hands automatically forming into fists as he tried to ignore what the feeling of that heat did to him (disgust and rage and fear and pain and loneliness, so much loneliness, it was still too fresh). Endeavor’s next words were more quiet, but no less scathing, as he uttered his parting words. “Try your best to beat him… witch.”

And then he was gone, and Izuku was left panting and afraid in the hallway. Why had Endeavor said that? Why had he called him a witch? Did he know? Had someone told him? Had he figured it out himself?

Izuku tried to stifle the urge to go running to Mr. Aizawa. He could talk to him after the game and clear everything up then. Maybe the top pro-heroes all knew about the supernatural? That seemed… like a terrible idea, actually, but perhaps it was true. Izuku couldn’t know until he asked; but the next round was about to start, so there was no time to ask.

Izuku wiped at his face with his hands, as Popsicle transformed into a raven next to him and rested his head against Izuku’s hair.

_Popsicle, should I be worried?_ “Look and see.”
But Izuku didn’t have the time, right now, to sit down and meditate. He didn’t have the time to use Popsicle’s foresight ability to his own advantage, not with the next round coming up.

Later, Izuku promised his familiar. And that was that.

Izuku continued down the hallway and turned right. His footsteps felt automatic as a queasiness settled in his gut. He felt pale and sweaty, and he tried to ignore it, the heat of Endeavor’s fire having seemed to settle on his skin like tar. He tried to imagine the upcoming fight with Todoroki, moves he could make, ways he could win.

Todoroki was probably going to focus mainly on using his ice to freeze Izuku in place, rather than trying to knock him out of the ring. So Izuku just had to keep his hands free enough to explode any ice that captured him. And maybe he could use Todoroki’s ice sculptures to his advantage? He might be able to hide behind them while he snuck up on the other teen…

The nausea persisted, as did the feeling of a cold sweat beneath his uniform.

Maybe he could pull a Uraraka and distract Todoroki by flinging off his shirt in the opposite direction? Izuku just needed a good sightline…

And there was the stairway.

Izuku took a deep breath and tried to focus on the feel of Popsicle’s claws on his shoulder. His familiar wasn’t worried about the upcoming fight, and he also seemed to have shouldered any paranoia about Endeavor for later. Instead, Popsicle was filled with pure anticipation. Although the opposite of that ‘anticipation’ was a combined sense of ‘foreboding and doom’, which Izuku was really hoping to not have to worry about until after the match.

After all, ‘foreboding and doom’ was not the way to start a tournament round.

Izuku reached the upper floor where the tunnel was. At the end, he could see a figure.

Two guesses who.

Izuku tried to keep his pace casual as he stared at the other teen, taking in his stance, his expression, the fall of his hair. He really had nice hair. It was as pretty as Shinsou’s, but in a different manner. Softer, in a way, and more distinct.

Also: this wasn’t the time for that, Izuku.

Todoroki gazed impassively back at him, his heterochromatic eyes icy and strange, not at all like the Todoroki that Izuku had gotten used to. He was colder, somehow, than earlier, back in the waiting room before the festival.

Izuku wondered what had changed. Then he thought back to his conversation with Endeavor a moment ago, and he had a good idea of what had changed. Todoroki’s dad had probably hunted him down in these tunnels, before he found Izuku. Dick.

Speaking of which… Todoroki might be interested in knowing about that conversation.

Izuku reached the end of the tunnel where Todoroki was leaning against the wall. Casual. Aloof. Uncaring.

Izuku recounted his conversation with Endeavor to Todoroki, who gazed back impassively. The event itself hadn’t lasted more than a minute, and his retelling of it lasted even less so, but Izuku
couldn't help but mention his worries about Endeavor's parting words. "...and then he said something that, well, it's a secret, and I'm not sure how he knows." Izuku shuffled his feet as Todoroki continued to stare back at him, turquoise eye piercing Izuku in place. Izuku sighed and scratched the back of his neck, going for broke. "Honestly, I feel a bit threatened, now."

Todoroki was silent for several beats before his lips parted briefly and words tumbled forth. "So you really are All Might's son?"

Izuku tried not to choke on the cough that lodged itself on top of his sudden swallowing. What in the ever-loving…? "Uh, no, I'm not." He paused. "Wait, why would you think that?"

Todoroki shrugged as though that didn't matter. "Eraserhead’s son, then?"

Izuku was full-on gaping now. "Uh, no… my dad’s dead."

Todoroki blushed, a faint coloring on his upper cheeks. It felt like an apology, although he didn’t say anything further.

Izuku sighed and leaned back against the wall next to Todoroki. "Anyway… Kacchan says people aren’t supposed to touch each other like that without permission. And I didn’t like him near my neck."

Todoroki looked vaguely ashamed and simultaneously pissed off. Izuku hoped the emotions were directed toward his father, and not Izuku; technically, he could have created an explosion near the pro-hero's head, but that had seemed like a really bad idea at the time. "He had no right to do that."

A silence stretched between them as Tokoyami continued battling the quicksand-quirk student in the background.

Todoroki was the first to speak, this time. "Did he tell you to destroy my ice so that I would be forced to use my fire?" Izuku didn't know what to say in the silence following that statement, especially since Todoroki turned his face away and began staring at the opposite wall, scowling in a vacant way at nothing in particular. "That’s what he wants. He wants me to use my flames to win this tournament. But I want to show him that I don’t need him, or his quirk. I can win on my mother’s quirk alone."

Izuku stared back at him, recalling what Todoroki had whispered to him in the night, the tears on the other boy’s face. "It’s not just about this tournament, though, is it? You never want to use your flames. You didn’t want to use them at the USJ. Kirishima said you didn’t want to use them in the escape room exercise. And now here."

Izuku paused, taking in the appearance of the other boy. He looked like he was retreating into himself again, the scowl disappearing, the impassivity taking over once more. He didn’t like it when Todoroki turned cold. It felt wrong. "You can’t spend your life running from your power. If you do, you’ll never know how to control it. Trust me. Not knowing how to use it is worse."

It took several more seconds for Todoroki to respond, and Izuku was convinced at first that he wouldn’t. That he would ignore Izuku, disregard his words, retreat into himself and block off the world. But something in the other teen's shuttered expression looked sad and lost and lonely, like a child crying behind drawn curtains, not knowing where to turn.

That having been said, their match would likely begin in a couple of minutes. They really shouldn’t be having whatever this conversation was, right now.

“I had a dream about you the other night.”
Izuku felt himself freezing against the wall, half in fear, half in curiosity. *Was this 'dream' going to be what he thought it was?*

Todoroki sighed, his eyes trailing down to the floor of the tunnel, his hair falling to disguise his eyes from view. He lowered his voice, as though sharing a great secret. “Or… I thought it was a dream. You told me I didn’t have to be like my father. That I could make different choices.”

Izuku continued to stare at Todoroki, hardly breathing, not wanting to miss a word. *Did they meet in his dreams, or outside of them? Which was it? Izuku still didn’t know…*

Todoroki laughed at himself, a contemptful and hollow thing. He still hadn’t raised his eyes, focused as he was on some speck of dirt on the floor. “But that’s crazy, right? It had to be a dream. I mean, I was awake, but that’s not… that’s not your quirk. You can’t just appear in other people’s rooms. And you didn’t seem all that solid… I was convinced I was losing my mind.”

Izuku doesn’t want him to think that. He doesn’t want Todoroki to think he’s crazy. He can’t tell him what really happened (and Izuku doesn’t quite understand what happened, anyway, in order to relay that information to Todoroki), but he can tell him something. Even if he isn’t sure how to explain it, he can tell him something. “You’re not crazy, Todoroki. But you’re also right: that’s not my quirk. Maybe it was just… something that happened between us?”

Todoroki raised his head to stare back at Izuku, his aloof expression having completely fallen away, leaving a lonely and curious boy in its stead. “Wait, you’re saying that you actually were there?”

Izuku’s face flushed as he tried to find a way out of the hole he just dug for himself. He hated telling lies, and he didn’t want Todoroki to think he was insane, but he had no clue how to make the event in question seem less important. Maybe he could simply… focus on how he felt about it, rather than what he thought had been happening? Izuku licked his lips and raised his eyes to meet Todoroki’s questioning gaze. “I didn’t know if it was a dream, either. It seemed real, but you didn’t say anything, so I thought… maybe I imagined it.”

At Izuku’s lack of explanation about the logistics of the event in question, Todoroki’s brows furrowed. “But we weren’t hit by anyone else’s quirk…”

Izuku shook his head in response. “Not that I know of.”

“What…?”

Izuku shrugged and bit at his lip again, trying to think of something, anything, that could legitimize what had happened between them. He couldn’t exactly say ‘I might have astral projected into your room accidentally after releasing several years’ worth of repressed power’. And he hadn’t been able to project himself like that, since, so he didn’t even know if it was an actual ability or just something that had only happened the once with Todoroki.

Vaguely, Izuku remembered something one of his ancestor’s wrote in her journal, about visiting her soulmate in her dreams. Was that a common theme in society? Visiting your soulmate? Maybe it didn’t have to be a soul ‘mate’, just a soul ‘connection’. That wouldn’t explain why Izuku specifically visited Todoroki, but it would explain why Izuku visited Todoroki specifically. Or something. He hoped.

Izuku finally gave up on his internal debate and moved to reassure the other teen. “I don’t know why it happened. But if it happens again, and only to the two of us, then maybe our souls are just connected somehow.”
Todoroki’s gaze was intent and measuring, probing Midoriya’s argument and suggestion for the lies that were hiding underneath. But they weren’t really lies, were they? They were the truth, as far as Izuku knew it. As close as he could guess.

Eventually, Todoroki shook his head, both red and white hair falling to frame his face. Izuku could vaguely see a grin stretch across the other teen’s lips, but it disappeared seconds after it came.

“You’re a weird one, aren’t you, Midoriya?”

Izu chuckled and scratched at his head. “I’ll take weird. It’s better than what your dad called me.”

Todoroki snorted. Or laughed. Or did something with his mouth and his nose; Izuku wasn’t entirely sure. “He’s an asshole.”

Izu grinned back, wry and unamused at the thought of his former conversation with Endeavor. “No arguments from me.”

And then Todoroki was actually laughing, and Izuku was joining him, and they had cleared the air, and everything was suddenly perfect.

Which was, of course, the exact moment for Fate to rear her blind head and cause Tokoyami’s match against the quicksand-teen to end. Tokoyami had won, using Dark Shadow to knock the other student out of the ring despite being encased in the softened cement that the other student created around him.

Since the stage wasn’t harmed by either students’ quirk, the next round was set to begin in a matter of moments. All Todoroki and Izuku need to do is to walk out, go up the steps, and get on the stage.

As they made their way out of the tunnel and into the bright, glaring light of the sun, the cacophony of the crowd’s commentating a disorienting background to the moments before their match, Izuku turned to look at Todoroki. The other teen looked like he was debating something, and Izuku had a feeling he knew exactly what it was.

Izu angled himself so that his next few steps brought him up alongside Todoroki, so close that their knuckles were grazing each other as they walked. Todoroki peered over at him, eyes looking shuttered once more but also confused.

Izu tilted his head. “Have you decided whether you want to use your fire quirk during our fight?”

Todoroki looked away, up at the stage, his gaze confused and undecided. He didn’t answer Izuku, but his knuckles kept grazing against Izuku’s as they continued their walk toward the stage. It was actually soothing.

Izu sighed and tried to smile at the other teen. “Either way, I support you. But you don’t owe him anything. Not even your disgust.”

Todoroki looked a bit like he wanted to set fire to the world, and a bit like he wanted to cry, but his internal thoughts were more on the order of ‘Izuku Midoriya, what kind of strange unicorn are you; don’t you realize you’re discussing strategy with and consoling your competitor as you walk out to fight him?’

Izu reached out and squeezed Todoroki’s hand in his. “You don’t have to use it now. But next time you fight a villain, you might. But I mean… this is just a tournament, and I’m not a villain. So it’s up to you.”

Izu let go of Todoroki’s hand, ready to start walking in the opposite direction so that he could
Todoroki full-on snorted at him, a wry grin settling around the edges of his mouth. His eyes had yet to turn back to their cold glare from earlier, still soft and friendly. “Even if you were a villain, I could beat you. Fire or not.”

Izuku decided to take that statement for the challenge it was, albeit a much friendlier challenge than the one before the festival, and he began walking in the opposite direction. A couple steps away, he turned around and stared at Todoroki’s profile. Izuku’s expression got caught in a strange deadlock between serious and teasing, and even as he said the words, he didn’t know if he meant them as a threat. “If I was a villain, you wouldn’t even have a chance.”

Todoroki stared at Izuku curiously before giving up on whatever thought he had. He turned his head and walked away.

Minutes later, the round between Shouto Todoroki and Izuku Midoriya began.

Present Mic introduced them as the perfect foil for each other. Izuku Midoriya was the only student who was both a long-range fighter and capable of breaking apart Todoroki’s ice with ease. Meanwhile, Shouto Todoroki’s ice could prevent him from being knocked out of bounds due to Midoriya’s explosions. It was, supposedly, going to be a close battle. And in some other world, where all the two teens had to worry about was each other, maybe it was.

But not in this one.

Todoroki and Midoriya’s fight ended up lasting longer than any other one on one match in the entire game. Todoroki started out, rather predictably, by trying to freeze the entire section of the ring where Midoriya was standing. The broad strip of ice encased one-sixth of the arena, aweing onlookers with the display of pure strength. Midoriya exploded the oncoming frontal edge of the shaft of ice, preventing it from reaching him, while still barring Todoroki’s view of him.

Popsicle took off from his shoulder in bird form, making sure to keep close-by while still outside of Todoroki’s eyesight.

Midoriya used the seconds of confusion to dart out and explode the chunk of ice behind Todoroki. The other teen didn’t even flinch, moving to the left to create another chunk of ice behind him while throwing out another swath of ice toward Midoriya’s new section of the stage.

This continued on for a few minutes, an odd dance of ice barriers and explosions, as Izuku inched closer and closer to Todoroki’s side of the stage. As the battle continued, pocket holes appeared in various sections near the edge of Todoroki’s side of the stage, causing him to trip and have to watch his footing if he stayed near the edge. In response, Todoroki began fighting closer to the center of the stage, closer and closer as the arena was destroyed around him. Dust and sublimated ice vapor mingled together into a haze, further decreasing Todoroki’s view, until it reached a point where he was halfway up the stage with no idea which way was backward and where Midoriya was hiding.

Meanwhile, Izuku’s plan had almost come to fruition. He didn’t want to fight a long distance battle; his and Todoroki’s abilities were too well-balanced for that to end up in either of them winning. If Todoroki used his fire, Izuku could probably be forced out of the ring by it, but Todoroki hadn’t seemed to decide on using it. Without the threat of Todoroki’s fire, Izuku’s best bet was to get in close and fight where he had the best advantage with his judo training.

If he could sneak up on Todoroki and punch him enough times that Todoroki became punch-drunk, then his reaction times would be slow enough that Izuku could force him into a submission hold. If
he could manage to tackle him to the ground and capture the arm on the fire side of his body… he might be able to force Todoroki to submit. Or break his arm and then knock him out.

Something like that. Izuku could improvise.

Of course, this was Todoroki he was talking about, so Izuku had the very real worry that shit was about to hit the fan from five different angles with no warning.

And, well, he was right.

The good news was: Midoriya got in close enough to punch Todoroki. The other teen’s vision was obstructed by dust and sublimated ice, along with large chunks of exploded ice and cement. He had ice encased around all sides of his feet so that he wouldn’t be able to be knocked backward by any of Midoriya’s air explosions, but he hadn’t anticipated that Izuku would just come in punching.

Izuku came up out of the blind spot on Todoroki’s right, where two chunks of ice hid his approach, and decked Todoroki once in his right cheekbone and the side of his nose. Blood splattered out of Todoroki’s nose as he tried to raise up his arm to get enough momentum for a swing back at Midoriya. Ice simultaneously erupted in a vector from his foot to Midoriya, only for the freckled teen to dodge behind Todoroki to his other blind spot and punch him in the back, where his kidney should be.

Todoroki’s body froze up and tears rushed to his eyes from the force of the blow. (His father had punched him multiple times in the kidney during their training sessions, and it always felt like this, his whole side scrunching together as though stung, a breathless deep pain that was impossible to shut out.)

Todoroki tried to get his right hand raised in time, or his right foot in a good enough position, to freeze Midoriya, but he didn’t manage it in time. His body didn’t want to move yet, the kidney shock needing another second to pulse through his system. But Midoriya was right behind him, he was there, and he wasn’t going to give Todoroki an inch.

Midoriya continued to circle from Todoroki’s back to his left side. He dodged in, shoving his head into Todoroki’s stomach as he reached beneath the other teen’s legs and executed a kata guruma—holding Todoroki’s left thigh with one hand while raising the other teen on top of his upper back using Todoroki’s left arm. He completed the move by throwing the taller teen over his head.

Whatever breath was left in Todoroki’s body from the kidney punch was expelled forcefully, his body thrown into another dose of shock as the taste of copper flooded his mouth.

Midoriya swung his right leg over to press his calf against Todoroki’s neck. He moved quicker than the other teen could roll away to press his left foot against Todoroki’s ribs and grab up and away on Todoroki’s left arm. Within seconds, Todoroki’s head was pinned by one of Izuku’s legs while his left arm was caught in a juji gatame hold, elbow held in place while Izuku forced Todoroki’s wrist to the side, straining the bone. Izuku effectively had Todoroki caught—if the other teen tried to move at all, Izuku could break his arm, and as it was, the armlock was so painful for Todoroki that he didn’t know how to breathe.

If this was an official judo competition, that would have been the end of that. Todoroki was pinned and couldn’t move (and was dazed besides), so Izuku would have won automatically.

But… well, as typically occurred when Todoroki was involved, everything went to shit.

Or, rather, the entire front of Izuku’s body got lit up in flames.
Todoroki was in pain from the kidney punch. Todoroki was breathless and in pain from the full body throw. And Todoroki’s left arm was caught and in immediate fucking pain from Midoriya’s current armlock. So it wasn’t really his fault that he lost control of the flames, the instinct to protect himself from harm too strong, the pain arcing from his arm to his elbow, all the way up to his jaw and eye socket.

He was being forced to use his quirk. It wasn’t his choice. *(At least that’s what he will tell himself later when he’s laying in bed and he’s gripping his sheets hard enough to rip and he’s going over and over and over it in his head.)*

The second that Izuku realized his shirt was on fire and Todoroki hadn’t yielded to the armhold, Izuku released Todoroki’s flaming arm and kicked the other teen away from him. In the same move, he began ripping his shirt off and flinging it far away from him. Izuku’s shirt lay on the ground in a flaming heap as he scrambled to his feet, unsure whether Todoroki had used his flames on purpose, uncertain whether he would be safe to dart in close for another blow. There were only ten feet apart...

Todoroki stood up, his left side in flames, his right side covered in ice and sublimating. He cut a striking figure, the heat and the cold wafting off of him in waves, and Izuku could feel both waves hit him simultaneously. His skin prickled at the dual sensation onset, and his stomach lurched. The world seemed to tilt around him.

From above, Popsicle cawed at him in warning.

*Wait... what was happening? He didn't feel so good...*

Todoroki took a step toward Midoriya, anchoring his right foot into the ground. He raised up his left hand, the flames curling out, preparing themselves to reach toward Midoriya. *(Solely using his ice wasn’t working in this battle against Midoriya, so just this once, when his left side had already engulfed him, he would allow himself to use his flames. Even though he’d promised not to use it, he’d promised he’d promised he’d promised... hadn’t he promised? He couldn’t remember. Midoriya said he didn't owe his father anything...)*

Izuku tried to plant his legs beneath him so that he could face the other teen head-on, but something was wrong. He couldn't seem to find his feet beneath his legs, and his stomach felt like it was somewhere near his lungs, and something was *wrong wrong wrong, what was happening? Popsicle? What was...?*

Todoroki was a breath away from sending his flames to drive Midoriya backward, across the ring, and hopefully out of the arena, when Midoriya fell to his knees on the stage without any intervention on his part.

The stadium crowd, which had been cheering seconds before, quieted to a dull mumble.

Popsicle cawed once more, sending shivers down Todoroki’s neck and back, before the familiar flew down and landed on the back of Izuku’s shoulder.

Todoroki watched as Midoriya buried his face in his palms. He watched as Midoriya planted his
hands on the ground and scratched at the cement stage as though trying to dig through earth. He watched as Midoriya whimpered for his familiar. He watched as the raven cawed.

Todoroki released his flames and let go of his ice. He took a step forward. And another. And another.

Midoriya was saying something.

Todoroki took a second to peer over at Ms. Midnight and Mr. Cementoss, but both teachers were watching the stage in bewilderment. Present Mic’s commentating had gone silent overhead.

Todoroki stared back at Midoriya in confusion. After a few more seconds of confirming that Midoriya did not seem in a state to attack Todoroki if he got too close, Todoroki finished walking the last few steps that would bring him to Midoriya’s side. He went to one knee, putting a hand out to rest lightly on Midoriya’s back.

He tried to speak loud enough for the other teen to hear without startling him, the situation seeming strange and absurd and somehow delicate. “Midoriya… are you alright?”

It took what seemed like five minutes to get Midoriya to look at him, and even when he did, it didn’t feel as though Midoriya was looking at him. His eyes seemed to be resting somewhere beyond Todoroki, looking through him to something only he could see. His eyes were a familiar vivid green, like that night in Todoroki’s bedroom.

“Midoriya, do you need help?”

It was the only thing Todoroki could think to say. The freckled teen was clearly not alright, and his bird was behaving strangely, and they were in the middle of a tournament but no one was fighting.

All of a sudden, between one vacant stare and the next breath, Todoroki found himself tumbling forward to a heap in front of Midoriya. Izuku held Todoroki’s shirt in a strong grip and had pulled him down, his eyes wide and panicked and in a frenzy about something only he understood.

Todoroki planted his hands beneath himself, ready to push himself away, to freeze the floor, to fight fight fight, but then Izuku opened his mouth.

He whispered into Todoroki’s face, the breath ghosting over Todoroki’s cold cheekbones, the eyes pleading, tears beginning to stream like tiny rivers down his face. His grip was tight, and the raven was cawing, and Todoroki had the sudden foreknowledge that something was currently wrong or would be wrong, and Izuku needed his help to stop it.

Todoroki stumbled to his feet as quickly as he could manage and scanned the crowd. All Might was interested in Midoriya, wasn’t he? So he should be in the stadium with the other teachers. Todoroki looked first toward where the students were kept. The teachers would likely be kept in a nearby portion of the stands to help with any incidents that came up...

Ms. Midnight was saying something, asking Todoroki if Midoriya had yielded the fight, but Todoroki couldn’t spare her the attention. Midoriya was worried, and his bird was acting creepy again, and Todoroki had seen this only once before—when Class 1-A had walked into the USJ.

Whatever was about to happen would happen soon, much sooner than any other pro-hero could come to help.

And if Midoriya was right, they needed All Might. He could cross the city in a matter of seconds and save whoever needed to be saved... but it was taking too long. Todoroki couldn’t find the teachers in
the stadium stands. Everyone’s faces were tiny specks in a large heap, and he couldn’t make sense of them quick enough. He was wasting time, too much time, and Midoriya was groaning behind him.

Todoroki turned back to Ms. Midnight. She was their best chance right now. She should be able to hear Todoroki from there.

She was also much closer to the stage, now, than he’d realized before.

Todoroki took a deep breath and several steps toward where she and Cementoss were standing off to the side, both of them wondering if the round was over.

It was over. It was definitely over. But not because Midoriya was giving up.

“Ms. Midnight! Get All Might here, right now! Something bad is about to happen!”

To her credit, Midnight didn’t even pause before she switched into hero-mode.

The words hadn’t even seemed to leave his lips, the last words still going through his brain, when there was the sound of a strong wind through a doorway and then a humongous crunching sound that shook the stage behind him. Todoroki automatically braced his legs to keep his balance at the impact. He turned around, just in time to find that the man in question had somehow gotten here quicker than Todoroki expected.

“Never fear, young Todoroki! For I am here!”

Todoroki wanted to smile. He wanted to be thankful. *(This wasn’t even his problem, he didn’t know the person in trouble; he’d never met them before.)*

But nothing was solved yet. There was still plenty of fear to go around.

Todoroki took a few steps toward All Might so that he didn’t raise his voice, so that no one else would hear. Not that they could hear over the distance between him and the crowd, even if Ms. Midnight was walking toward him and trying to listen in on the conversation. “Midoriya had a vision of a hero bleeding out in a back alley. He needs immediate evacuation. The villain may still be with him.”

All Might’s sunny smile dimmed slightly as Todoroki recounted what he’d managed to understand between Midoriya’s whispered mumblings. But there was one last bit of information, and it was the part Todoroki least understood but was arguably most worried about. *(It’s not like he knew him, and Iida couldn’t even be counted as a good acquaintance, much less a friend. But still… but still…)*

“All Might… the hero who’s been hurt, it’s Iida’s older brother, Tensei. The pro-hero Ingenium. Midoriya says he’s going to die.”

Chapter End Notes

Alas, this chapter did not get out before Christmas (as is always the case). But 2/3 of it was written in time! I felt like you all deserved to have Todoroki’s fight in full without just leaving you on a cliffhanger when they walked up on stage. Which was what almost happened. My bf helped me stage the fight in our apartment, which ended up with me having a bloody nose... so if the fight seemed realistic, you're welcome.
Let me know what you did and didn't like! I tried to put some levity/light romance in this chapter, but I warned you ahead of time it was going to be more drama-ridden. Once the Sports Festival is done, the drama/action can take a backseat to fluff/humor again. Well, except for Iida. There's definitely going to be drama for Iida, and Izuku by proxy.

If there's anything you want to see next chapter, please let me know! I'm at a pausing point in my story plans until we get to the internship arc, which is a good week-worth of material, and poor Izuku needs some happiness. And I think Todoroki needs to figure some stuff out. And we need the fallout of the tournament, with Bakugou being pissed at Izuku or something (or not, let me know!). And mama Midoriya is probably really worried right about now. The class might also learn more about the pack, if you all want.

Any thoughts are welcome! Because I seriously have no idea where to begin.
And the World Spins Madly On

Chapter Summary

Alternately titled: 'Everyone Tries to Console Everyone, and Everyone Ends Up Anxious and Confused'

Featuring: the Bakugou/Todoroki fight you probably weren't expecting, dudes cuddling in tunnels (because that's apparently what manly men do these days), Tensei being offered a choice, and a whole lot of confused boys failing at figuring out feelings and emotions and shit. Also, Izuku and Todoroki need to stop being obsessed with each other, Kirishima's a good friend, and Bakugou's a surprisingly chill dude when he isn't 50% ego and 50% bluster.

Tags for this chapter: obvious Todoroki/Deku and Bakugou/Kirishima, light smatterings of Bakugou/Deku/Todoroki and Todoroki/Iida/Deku... most of them one-sided in one regard or another.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tenya had been excited to watch Izuku fight Todoroki, as had most of Class 1-A. They all remembered that first day of hero training, with the hero versus villain exercise, and how Midoriya had beat Todoroki by blasting apart the villain’s missile. Midoriya was crafty, had unexplained martial arts experience, and could shatter Todoroki’s ice in an instant. He was probably the only one in class besides Bakugou who could defeat Todoroki at full power without tricks.

But none of them had expected a reprise of the USJ incident, with Midoriya’s raven flying in large circles overhead and cawing his prophecy of doom. They had all been excited watching Midoriya get closer and closer to Todoroki, managing to pin the other teen to the ground before his shirt was set aflame. The class wanted to know what Midoriya was going to try next, now that Todoroki was using both his ice and his fire. They were on the edge of their seats, Uraraka squealing loudly, Kirishima’s smile wide, Iida’s chest thrumming with so much pride and fear for his new friend—

Then something happened, and Midoriya was on the ground, and it wasn’t because of Todoroki.

Tenya felt himself standing and grasping the railing before he’d realized he had moved. Popsicle cawing, Izuku on the ground, Todoroki reaching out to help him…

Was Tenya the only one who realized what was going on? Or was he just paranoid after Izuku’s impromptu house visit last Thursday?

Tenya dragged in a shuttered breath as his hand attempted to crush the railing in his grip. His vision narrowed on the screen, which showcased Todoroki kneeling down, Izuku dragging him to his level and saying something, Todoroki moving away while looking confused and slightly panicked…

Tenya didn’t need to see anymore. He felt, in his bones, that he knew what was happening. Either the Sports Festival was about to be attacked by villains, or Tensei was in trouble. Tenya didn’t know which potentiality was true, but he didn’t have the time to wait. He was the fastest student in their
class, and he needed to get down there right now.

He turned around and let go of the railing to rush up the steps, but Kirishima’s hand on his chest prevented him from leaving.

“Whoa, man, what’s wrong? You look pale.”

Tenya tried to shrug him off. He needed to get to Izuku, he needed to know—

Kirishima became distracted by the large screen over Iida’s shoulder. “What the—All Might? Why’d he interrupt the match?”

Tenya turned around to see the large form of All Might speaking to Todoroki on the screen. Tenya couldn’t read lips. He didn’t know what was being said. But whatever it was, if All Might was there, it was bad.

Tenya turned back to Kirishima and pulled the other teen’s hand off his chest. “I have to go check on Izuku. Something’s wrong.”

Whether from Iida’s passionate concern for their classmate or his use of Midoriya’s first name, Kirishima’s eyebrows climbed high on his forehead, and before Iida could reach the last step, Kirishima grabbed his arm. “I’m coming with you.” At Iida’s furrowed eyebrows, Kirishima laughed, his shark-like grin only reaching halfway up his face, his red eyes squinting with worry. “He’s my friend, too. And you’re right, something seems off.”

By the time they both reached the tunnel where the competitors entered the stadium for the one on one fights, Todoroki was escorting Midoriya from the stage, his right arm supporting Midoriya’s back while his left arm hovered nearby waiting to stabilize him, almost like a hero from a romance novel. The image was slightly destroyed by Ms. Midnight walking beside the pair, her consoling hand on Midoriya’s shoulder, with Midoriya sending a shaky smile her way. Popsicle flew overhead once more, still cawing, sending shivers down Tenya’s neck and back.

He was really starting to hate that sound. It never meant anything good.

Midnight was giving Todoroki some parting words when the two students reached the tunnel. “The stage will take a while to set up again, so you should have a good ten or fifteen minutes before your match with Bakugou. Get Midoriya to one of the prep rooms, and rest up. Try not to worry about this. All Might will take care of it.”

Todoroki nodded at her before his gaze shifted to the Kirishima-Iida duo waiting in the tunnel. He raised an eyebrow at both of them, his face impassive, his emotions hidden, as he continued to escort Midoriya into the tunnel.

Iida wanted to ask Todoroki why he was doing that. Was Izuku alright? Could he not walk on his own? Izuku looked a bit infirm and pallid, perhaps as though he needed the assistance. But why?

Izuku’s smile, when he saw the two friends waiting for him, was bright and thankful. “Tenya, Kirishima, you came…”

Todoroki moved to hand Izuku over to Iida, only for Izuku to grasp for him, entangling his fingers with Todoroki’s right hand. He didn’t seem willing to let the other boy go yet. “Are you going to Recovery Girl?”

At Todoroki’s raised eyebrow, Izuku nodded toward Todoroki’s left arm, which Izuku had almost broken when he had Todoroki in an armlock during their round together. Todoroki shook his head.
“It doesn’t hurt as much, and Recovery Girl’s power would drain my stamina.”

Izuku nodded along. He’d never been to Recovery Girl since Popsicle did all his healing for him, but that was good to know. Izuku leaned his right shoulder against Iida’s stabilizing presence behind him, soaking in the feeling of pack-pack-pack. He kept his fingers entangled with Todoroki’s, focusing on the other boy’s energy. He could feel it, thrumming beneath Todoroki’s skin. Like All Might, but different somehow. Weaker? No, softer. Gentler. A steady flow rather than a rushing torrent. And yet something about his energy made it seem more likely to sweep Izuku away...

Izuku closed his eyes and tried to breathe. He was surrounded by two pack members and touching a potential future pack member. Their presence, alongside the familiar calm that Izuku associated with Popsicle, helped Izuku feel like he could breathe. The vision he’d had of Tenya’s brother during his fight with Todoroki still sat in his brain, but it felt more disjointed than before—almost as though Izuku had managed to put up a thin screen between him and the images. He could think more clearly than before, and the sounds around him didn’t seem muffled. He could also stand, which was no small feat.

A few minutes ago, he’d been so nauseous and disoriented that he hadn’t been able to manage standing. The whole world had tilted around him, the shapes distorting, as he felt himself both there and not-there with his vision. He was standing by Tenya’s brother, and then he had fallen to lay beside him. There were others there, but he couldn’t tell who they were. And there was so much blood and Tenya’s brother was so pale and Izuku didn’t know how long he had been lying there—

There was still crusted blood on Izuku’s fingernails from where he had tried to root himself to the ground despite being surrounded by cement. He hadn’t been able to dig through dirt, and there had been something important about needing to touch the earth while he was having that vision… it was so strange. Izuku couldn’t remember having a reaction like that, before. Or a vision like that. He didn’t generally see physical precognitive images during the day. Sometimes, after he slept, Izuku could recall seeing images from his dreams in the morning. But ever since he’d gotten the two Binding claws removed, Popsicle’s precognitive effects on Izuku had been strangely overwhelming. He would have memories of nightmares during the day, and now this waking nightmare that he couldn’t escape…

And none of it made any sense. This was Popsicle’s power, or the effect that Popsicle’s form had on Izuku or whatever. It wasn’t Izuku’s intrinsic ability. He couldn’t do it without Popsicle there. So why did the Binding claws affect it? Why would Izuku having what amounted to ‘more magic’ cause the visions to be stronger and to appear during the day as well as the night?

Izuku really needed to get a handle on this power. Standing in the tunnel hallway, he was trying to do just that. With two packmates and someone thrumming with energy beside him, it was probably the most stabilized he would become for the foreseeable future.

Todoroki moved to let Izuku’s fingers go, and Izuku stepped away from Iida to stop him, unwilling to be separated. “No, don’t…”

Todoroki stared back at him, a bit perplexed, and lowered his eyes to their joined hands. The rest of his face was impassive and shuttered. It was a face that Izuku was starting to connect with Todoroki trying to seem strong. “I have to prepare for the next round.”

Izuku drew closer to him. “No you don’t.”

Todoroki’s lips twitched, and his eyes lifted to meet Midoriya’s. “No, I don’t.” His face grew serious once more. “But your friends are here, now. You don’t need an escort anymore.”
Izuku tilted his head as he stood toe-to-toe with Todoroki, Kirishima gaping in the background next to an Iida with his hand outstretched toward Izuku. “Is that what you think you are?”

Todoroki’s face broke out into a flush, his cheeks reddening as he looked down at the freckled teen who had stepped in much closer than was acceptable. “You definitely don’t seem as traumatized as you were a few minutes ago.”

Izuku shook his head, his eyes never leaving Todoroki’s face. “You helped. Touching you helped.”

Todoroki felt the way his heart began pounding in his chest as he stood, perplexed, staring at the teen beside him. Hadn’t he been wondering, not too long ago, whether it hurt other people to touch him? Whether he would burn them just by reaching out?

Before Todoroki could think of a proper response (an appropriate response, one not including holding another boy’s hands and gazing into his eyes and what the hell was going on right now—), a roar filled the hallway.

“Todoroki! Deku! What the fuck was that fight just now!”

Because of course Bakugou wouldn’t be waiting in a prep room for their match, either. Todoroki felt himself falling into his usual stoic mask, stepping away from Izuku and releasing his fingers from Izuku’s shocked grip. The last thing he needed was Bakugou flipping his lid because Midoriya was being touchy again.

The sound of small explosions followed Bakugou’s entrance to the tunnel as the other teen stalked up to the group with a small confused glare in Kirishima’s direction. Bakugou headed straight for Izuku, grabbing his slightly singed undershirt and shoving him into the wall two feet from Iida.

“Deku, what were you fucking thinking?”

Izuku didn’t know how to respond. That statement seemed to hold layers upon layers of meaning. What was he thinking, allowing Popsicle to be in bird-form and chance a premonition during a fight? What was he thinking, falling to his knees and telling Todoroki what he saw and getting All Might to come down to the ring? What was he thinking, not leaving the stage immediately and calling someone once he was away from prying eyes? Wasn’t he supposed to keep the premonitions hidden? How was he going to explain this to the public? And probably most importantly to Kacchan: what was Izuku thinking, allowing himself to be distracted by a vision during a tournament match for pack standing? He was supposed to beat Todoroki, wasn’t he?

Izuku bit his lip as he stared into Kacchan’s piercing red eyes. They were glowing like embers waiting to set him on fire, and maybe Izuku deserved it. He tilted his head and bared his neck in submission as he stared up at Kacchan. His heart was jackrabbiting in his chest as he berated himself. What was he thinking. What was he thinking? What was he thinking?

Vaguely, in the back of his mind, Izuku could hear someone screaming. Before he could even think to focus on the voice, his stomach lurched, and he found himself falling forward onto Bakugou, his face planting in the explosive teen’s chest. Izuku heard a groan coming out of his mouth as he searched his mind for the noise. Where was it coming from?

Todoroki’s voice floated in, as though from far away. “It’s happening again.”

Someone growling, likely Kacchan. “What’s happening?”

“Here, sit him down on the ground.”

“Should I get a teacher?”
“Who would you get?”

Izuku kept a tight hold of Kacchan’s shirt, his head still buried in his chest, as he tried to look around the screen he’d set up in his mind, searching for the voice.

The screaming was getting louder, sounds of beeping, a flash of bright light…

Izuku twisted fabric in his hands as he gnawed at his lip and panted aloud past the tightness in his chest. “Who are you?”

No one answered.

Izuku’s mindscape went dark. In the darkness, as though around a corner, he saw a flash of red fabric, a wave of black hair, and a trail of white bandages. Then the vision disappeared, and Izuku was alone. What was happening to him?

Izuku looked up and found that he was shaking in Kacchan’s lap with Todoroki’s left arm around his shoulders, warm and solid and thrumming, still thrumming with energy. Izuku tried to focus on the waves lapping against his back and the fire in front of him. Kacchan. Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan. Izuku looked to the side and saw Kirishima crouching beside Kacchan and looking worried; above them, Tenya was standing with a panicked look on his face. Izuku tried to reach out his fingers to touch Kirishima, but they twitched uselessly in his lap. Tears of frustration prickled in the corners of his eyes. Izuku took two deep breaths and let them out, focusing on Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan and Todoroki Todoroki Todoroki.

He just needed to breathe, and it would go away.

Izuku had thought it was over.

He’d thought it was all over. Why was he still seeing things? He couldn’t do anything else about them. He’d gotten Todoroki to tell All Might everything he’d seen. He couldn’t help them. He’d done his best to help them. So why were the images not leaving him alone? Why did their shadows and after-effects haunt him? And why was it all about that villain?

“Stop…”

Todoroki leaned closer as Midoriya began whispering, his ear drawing close to Midoriya’s mouth while his heterochromatic eyes stared straight into Bakugou’s, the two teens a breath away from each other. Bakugou didn’t say anything. He didn’t shout at Todoroki or growl at him or shove him away. They were both doing their level best to help Midoriya. It was a strange moment of peace between two warring clans.

In the back of his mind, Todoroki was infinitely thankful that Cementoss was taking a long time to rebuild the stage.

Although Midoriya’s voice was soft, it was also pained, and Todoroki tried his best to stifle a flashback to that time he’d been scared and alone and trapped in that Room. It took a few seconds for Todoroki to parse it out, Midoriya’s voice basically mumbling at this point, but he eventually made out the words:

“Popsicle, please stop…”

The bird, who was perched on the ground a foot away, cawed back at Midoriya before, supposedly, acquiescing. Between one instant and the next, the bird had transformed into a wolf, which immediately began sniffing at the Todoroki-Bakugou-Izuku hybrid statue on the ground. Popsicle
“Well, it’s your fucking fault,” Bakugou snarled at the wolf, as though he understood that Popsicle was worried about Izuku.

Todoroki hadn’t thought Bakugou had enough emotional perception to comprehend things like that. Gold star to Bakugou.

Izuku tried to focus on the feeling of pack-pack-pack surrounding him, on the thrum of Todoroki’s energy, and on the calm presence of Popsicle. He shouldn’t get any more visions as long as Popsicle stayed out of his raven form. Izuku knew his familiar was simply trying to help, but he probably should have transformed out of his raven form sooner, for Izuku’s peace of mind if nothing else.

“Oi, Deku…” Hands trailed through Izuku’s hair, and they smelled smoky. “I’ve got a match to get to. You gonna be alright with hair for brains?”

Kirishima whined from his side, putting a hand on Bakugou’s back. “Aw, man, again with the nicknames?”

Bakugou didn’t pay him any attention, keeping his gaze focused on his lapful of Deku. Bakugou gave Izuku’s curly bangs one last tug before he pushed the smaller teen off his lap and onto the floor. As Izuku’s head moved out of his vision, Bakugou was faced with the two-toned hair and mismatched eyes of Todoroki. Fucking half and half freak. He glared at him for good measure. “You better not think I’m weak just because Deku… on my lap.”

Todoroki had enough foresight not to allow a smirk to form at the lack of words between ‘Deku’ and ‘lap’, as though Bakugou were allergic to the term ‘cuddle’ or ‘sit’ or, devil-forbid, ‘hold.’ Instead, Todoroki kept his face impassive as he nodded his head back at Bakugou and kept an arm behind Midoriya so the other teen wouldn’t hit his head on the wall. “Of course not. Why would that make you weak?”

While Todoroki meant the question to be innocuous and rhetorical, it made both him and Bakugou pause. They stared at each other, each one lost in their thoughts for a brief second, before the eye contact made them both uncomfortable enough to look away. Neither of them were touchy people by nature, and they were sitting much too close to each other on the floor for it to feel acceptable.

Within the next minute, they were both standing up and brushing off their legs, ready to leave the tunnel. Bakugou had dropped Izuku unceremoniously on Kirishima’s lap while Todoroki had nodded at Iida to take care of Midoriya. An odd emotional standstill had charged up between the two upcoming competitors, only partly due to their upcoming fight. The rest had to do with that moment, down on the floor, when both of them had been trying to hold onto something out of control.

“So, uh, good match?” That was Kirishima, ever the friendly competitor.

Bakugou snorted as he dusted off his hands. “It’ll be short.” Bakugou dragged his gaze from Todoroki’s feet to his face as though sizing the other teen up and finding him lacking. His leer made Todoroki bristle.

Todoroki glared back at him. Gold star rescinded.

They walked out of the tunnel and disappeared, one in smoky bluster and the other in icy rage.

“Well, that’s not gonna go well,” Kirishima quipped.

The remaining three students could hear the audience go wild. It was hard to imagine there would
still be a final round after this. Iida would be fighting Tokoyami in a matter of minutes, depending on how long Bakugou’s fight lasted, and then whoever won that battle would compete in the final against either Bakugou or Todoroki. Iida wasn’t sure which of his classmates he would prefer to fight, but until then, he had a few questions he needed Izuku to clarify.

Tenya helped Izuku to his feet with a hand supporting the freckled teen’s elbow.

Izuku smiled up at him, thankful, before his face fell. He wasn’t sure what to tell Tenya. He didn’t have any good news, only bad images that were lodged into his mind and a vague sense of hope that All Might could save the day.

Something in Izuku’s face must have clued Tenya in to which potentiality of Izuku’s possible premonitions was true. Tenya’s hand fell away from the smaller teen as he searched Izuku’s eyes. “It was about Tensei, wasn’t it?”

Izuku felt his heart crumble and deform into an unrecognizable shape, something small and warped, as he tried to find the right words to soothe his friend.

Kiishima was the first one to break the silence. “Uh, why do I feel like both of you know something I don’t?”

Tenya didn’t move an inch, his face set in stone, as he waited for Izuku’s response.

But how could Izuku make this right? How could he make it better? He didn’t know what was currently happening, whether All Might had managed to find Tensei in time, whether the doctors at the hospital would be able to heal him…

“Midoriya?” It seemed Kirishima was being persistent enough for both Iida and himself.

Izuku switched his gaze from Tenya’s lack of expression to Kirishima’s eternally hopeful face. He licked his lips, briefly glancing back at Tenya (he’s always trying to be strong, as cold and hard as his hero costume), before he answered Kirishima. It was easier to admit when he wasn’t looking at the person it affected the most. “Tenya’s brother was attacked by a villain and left for dead, along with two other heroes. I, uh… Popsicle gave me a vision about it, and All Might went to save them. But I don’t…” Izuku glanced once more at Tenya, his voice tightening into something higher pitched. “I don’t know if he found them in time.”

Tenya’s face was pale, and Izuku felt guilty, but he wasn’t sure what to say to make this better. He refused to lie. He refused to say it was going to be okay. He didn’t know that for sure.

Kirishima turned to his left to focus on Iida. “Holy shit, man, no wonder you’ve been acting weird.” He paused, a befuddled expression slipping over his face as he ping-ponged his gaze between Izuku and Tenya. “Wait, but Iida acted like he already knew who your vision was about.”

Izuku bit his lip as he looked back at Kirishima almost guiltily. “I’ve been having similar dreams this past week. I might have, uh, already tried to warn his brother and him about it.” Izuku hunched in on himself as he twisted in Kirishima’s lap to stare at the wall. “A lot of good that did, though. All those nightmares, and for what? Three people got hurt in that alley instead of one, and he still seemed just as wounded. I don’t… I don’t understand why I had the vision at all unless I was meant to do something about it. But every time I see something, it just seems to mess the situation up more.”

By the end of his speech, Izuku had worked himself into a frenzy, one of his hands flailing uselessly as he gestured at the air. Tears filled his eyes and streamed down his cheeks, and Kirishima didn’t know what to do. He hadn’t meant to upset Midoriya. He was just wondering what all the weird
commotion was about—why Todoroki had walked him to the tunnel, why Iida wasn’t saying anything except asking about his brother, why Bakugou had started freaking out. It felt like Kirishima was always on the outside looking in, when it came to Midoriya. Like he’d picked up a book and started reading at the middle while everyone else had already covered the first few chapters.

Kirishima began rubbing circles onto Midoriya’s back. Midoriya invariably seemed to take on more guilt than he could chew, and definitely more than he deserved. Kirishima could still remember him crying after the USJ attack and blaming himself for what happened. As if any of that was his fault. “Hey, don’t feel so bad. All Might’s on the case, right? He’ll find your heroes. He’ll make sure Iida’s brother gets to a hospital, I’m sure of it. You just have to have faith.”

Midoriya’s returning smile was wobbly and insecure, but it was something, and Iida’s shoulders even began relaxing from their stiff position.

“You are correct, Kirishima. We cannot expect the worst. We must put our faith in the pros. All Might is the Symbol of Peace. If anyone can save… them, it is him.” With each sentence, Iida’s back became straighter and straighter, his tone more confident, his eyes more passionate. By the last word, he had started chopping at the air with his arm.

Light seemed to come back into Midoriya’s eyes as Iida became more animated, and Kirishima sighed, relieved that his pep-up talk had worked. This was his second big situation as class president. The first was on the bus after the USJ incident, where he’d tried to calm Midoriya down. Now, it was his duty to soothe both Iida and Midoriya while they waited for news about the search and recovery of Iida’s brother. He wondered how often the Class I-B president had to deal with significant emotional upheavals among his classmates. Her classmates? Damn, he didn’t even know the gender of the other class’s president. Kirishima really needed to get on that.

But first thing's first. Iida was definitely not in the right headspace for his fight, and it was Kirishima’s job as class president to make sure all his classmates were in the best position to give it their all during the Sports Festival. How their class did during the Sports Festival reflected both on the students themselves, their homeroom teacher, and their class president. So it was his duty to make Iida smile again and get him back into a competitive mindset, all before the end of the next match.

He just hoped Todoroki could give Bakugou a run for his money. Or Bakugou could give Todoroki one. Kirishima didn't have a clue how that fight was going to turn out.

Nor did anyone else.

“Whoa, look at Bakugou go! He managed to keep his explosions small enough that he escaped that mountain of ice Todoroki threw at him without caving the mountain on top of him. That kid might have a bad attitude, but man, he can fight!”

Todoroki erupted another spire of ice from his right foot, before pivoting on his left foot and running to a better vantage point. Once Bakugou had escaped the initial onslaught of ice, he had started using his explosions to fly around the stage and attack Todoroki. And Todoroki had to give it to him, the other teen was fast. Like, really fast. And he was a lot quicker on his feet than Todoroki had given him credit for.
Todoroki hadn’t been able to watch Bakugou fight during the tournament. While Bakugou was fighting Uraraka, Todoroki had been busy checking on the hypothermia recovery of the student he’d iced during his own fight, and then his dad had caught Todoroki while he was making his way to the tunnel during Bakugou’s fight with Kirishima. So Todoroki was having to rely on his earlier altercations with Bakugou from the post-preliminary round in order to develop a strategy to defeat him.

Within the first five minutes of their fight, he determined that Bakugou’s inability to break apart Todoroki’s ice during the post-preliminary round must have had more to do with Bakugou protecting his teammates and needing to stay attached to his group than Bakugou not being able to fight on a level playing field with Todoroki’s quirk. That having been said, Todoroki also had much more training in physical fights with his ability than Bakugou, all thanks to his dad’s obsession with making Todoroki the person who would replace All Might as the number one hero. And speaking of his father...

“Todoroki! You are letting him win. Use your fire! That boy is nothing if you will submit and allow yourself to achieve your full potential!”

That man was shouting at Todoroki from the stands, and it was making it difficult for him to focus. Already, Todoroki had slipped up twice—sending his ice a few inches to the left of where Bakugou was going to land rather than managing to hit the other teen straight on.

Bakugou didn’t seem too happy with Enji Todoroki, either. He had already thrown three scowls toward the section of the crowd that Endeavor’s voice was coming from.

If Todoroki’s memory was correct, Bakugou was obsessed with being the best, both mentally (with class homework and test scores) and physically (with fights and exercises during Hero Studies). Before the round, Bakugou had said it wouldn’t take any time to defeat Todoroki… which suggested that he probably wouldn’t want ‘outside interference’ messing up how thoroughly Bakugou wanted to thrash him. Or something like that. Todoroki couldn’t claim to understand the other teen’s motivations. Bakugou vacillated too often between always wanting to be the best and then being more concerned for Midoriya than how he appeared to his classmates. It was starting to give Todoroki whiplash. It was also starting to make him more curious about Bakugou's childhood than he wanted to be. Beginning to care about Bakugou, to any extent, seemed like a recipe for disaster. Todoroki refused to be caught in his orbit alongside Midoriya and Kirishima.

A flashback to that moment in the tunnel, with Midoriya being cradled in Bakugou’s arms, made Todoroki slip up for half a second and almost get his face blasted in. Todoroki ducked to the ground and slammed his hand on the surface, causing a tower of ice to spring upward out of the ground, driving Bakugou up and away from Todoroki as he scrambled backward to get a better vantage point for an attack.

Bakugou jumped off the top of the ice tower, erupting explosions from his hands that pushed him in a vector toward Todoroki’s side. Even though Todoroki turned around in time, he couldn’t fully dodge the side kick to his chest.

Todoroki coughed as he stumbled backward, a foot-thick wall of ice appearing between him and Bakugou as he tried to catch his breath.

Bakugou growled in rage as he landed on the ground. “Come back here, you motherfucker!”

See? Recipe for disaster.

From the other side of the wall, Bakugou braced his left hand with his right and erupted a
humongous blast that was roughly a meter wide. At the last second, Todoroki managed to duck
down and evade the roaring explosion and shattering ice. The shock of it blew out a hole in the
surface of the stage, gouging a crater in the arena. Todoroki used his hunched over position to trail
his fingers across the ground in the hole that Bakugou’s explosion had made. Ice spread outward,
slicking the floor between Todoroki’s fingers and Bakugou’s feet.

Bakugou managed to avoid the sudden surge of icy ground with one of his feet but not the other; but
before Todoroki could get another hit in, Bakugou aimed small explosions near his feet to dislodge
the foot that had gotten stuck.

Endeavor shouted something derogatory from the stands, causing Todoroki to pause and grit his
teeth while Bakugou growled in fury at the disruption of their fight.

Bakugou dodged an icy spire and fist headed his way. He glared as the other teen avoided his
retaliatory blast, managing at the last second to grab a hold of Todoroki’s shirt and shove him into the
cement. Bakugou leaned forward as his opposite hand prepared for an explosion, sneering in the
other teen’s face, a breath away from Todoroki’s cheek. “Your dad really needs to stop butting in
where he’s not wanted.”

Todoroki froze Bakugou’s leg in place with his right leg, pushed off from the ground, and kicked
back at the other teen’s face, scrambling away from immediate range of his blasts. Todoroki panted
as he twisted to dodge an explosion, stumbling to his feet. He had enough time to pause and glare at
the other boy from around a half-fallen wall of ice, a pissed off and sardonic expression settling over
his face. “Agreed.”

Bakugou didn’t give him time to say anything more before he was rushing in again and attempting to
remove Todoroki’s head from the rest of his body with a blast.

Seriously, this kid didn’t have a dial-down-your-explosions button.

The next time Enji Todoroki tried to shout at his son to use his fire, Bakugou lost it. He rounded on
the pro-hero, dodging away from one of Todoroki’s stuttered attacks to glare up at the stands; he sent
out a warning explosion half a meter wide into the air between him and Endeavor. He then started
snarling at the pro-hero, “Shut the fuck up, second-place! Leave him alone. I don’t need some
number two geezer butting into my fight!”

Todoroki gawked at Bakugou, his right hand lowering, his eyes wide and in shock.

Bakugou turned around to look at Todoroki and the stupid expression on his face. He brought the
hand he’d been exploding in Endeavor’s direction to focus on Todoroki instead. There was a brief
second of silence as they stared at each other, neither one attacking, both waiting for the other to
move.

It was Bakugou who broke the silence, his hackles raised by the strange way Todoroki was staring at
him. He growled down the length of his arm, ready to fire. “What? He was starting to annoy me.”

Bakugou watched in a strange combination of wariness and fascination as Todoroki began laughing,
ligh chuckles giving way to full-on, body-heaving guffaws that had him leaning his hands on his
legs and peering up at Bakugou from beneath red and white bangs.

His defenses were down, and Bakugou should have taken the advantage provided to him and blown
Todoroki backward with an explosion. At this distance, he might have even managed to knock the
other student out of the ring. But something stopped him—maybe it was the silence from the crowd
or the realization that he’d never seen Todoroki smile like that before. It looked weird and friendly
and almost as though...

Bakugou shifted on his feet and scowled at Todoroki, the adrenaline still pumping through his veins along with anger and pride and a strange bubbling feeling he couldn’t name. Bakugou lowered his hand, paused, and raised it again. He puffed his chest out as he stared the other teen down. “Yeah, well, even using your fire, you couldn’t beat me.”

Standing up straight with a light feeling in his chest, Todoroki searched Bakugou’s expression for something that would help him make sense of this moment and what was happening. Was Bakugou trying to bluster during their temporary standstill? What was this, a nature documentary? Todoroki didn’t know whether he found that thought ridiculous or hilarious, especially after his exchange with Midoriya before their fight not that long ago. “Funny. I had a similar conversation with Midoriya earlier.”

Bakugou let his hand fall when he realized Todoroki wasn’t about to attack. Was he seriously encouraging a conversation during their fight for pack dominance? Also, why was Todoroki always stalking and obsessing over Deku? His eyes narrowed on the other teen. “You got your fucking fight with him. Stop obsessing about it.”

Bakugou sneered as he watched Todoroki’s expression change. He geared up to goad his competitor into another fight. “What, you didn’t get the fight you wanted? Welcome to the world of Deku. You’ll never get a good fight outta him because he’s always fucking saving someone. Fighting him isn’t any fun… and fighting you isn’t any fun, when you’re pussyfooting around your power. Seriously, what the fuck? Do you think I can’t stand it? You just trying to stick it to that cinderblock you call a dad?”

“It’s none of your business.”

Bakugou glared at him, his tone curt and cutting, grating on Todoroki’s nerves with the sudden switch from helpful to callous. “I also don’t give a shit. I’m not here to solve your problems. I’m here to prove I should be in charge, since I can get past my fucking feelings to do what needs to be done.” He took a step forward. “You willing to fight me yet? Because I’m starting to get pissed off. Are you strong, or aren’t you? A couple weeks ago, I thought you might be a worthy rival.” He snorted. “Guess I was wrong.”

Todoroki didn’t say anything in return, but the shift in his stance and the emotionless mask that took over his face alerted Bakugou that Todoroki might break their stalemate and attack soon. But Bakugou wouldn’t allow himself to be on the defensive.

Bakugou’s fingers twitched at his side. Were all those preparations for nothing? All those hours of training, coming up with strategies to defeat the fucking two-face bastard… what was the purpose, when the idiot was just going to half-ass it? Bakugou didn’t even need those strategies. He didn’t need to plan for the long-run, because this dumbshit wasn’t gonna last another minute. “You know, I’ve been waiting for you to take this fight seriously. But if that’s all you got, why don’t you fuck off and DIE!”

A humongous explosion followed that proclamation, which Todoroki threw up layer after layer of ice to avoid the impact of. However, the number of layers needed to diminish the explosion’s effect landed Todoroki two feet from the edge of the stage with very little room to navigate.

“Do you want to become alpha? Or do you wanna be a follower for the rest of your life? A fuckin’ two-faced kid in second place, just like his dad.”
It was the last taunt that did it. For a second, Todoroki forgot about his father. He forgot about winning with his mother’s power alone. He forgot about the promises he’d made to himself at night. He forgot about all the training and the expectations and the tug-of-war he had with his dad over his soul. And in that second, the flames on his left arm leapt forth, melting several layers of ice in front of him and blazing a path through.

The dark form of Bakugou appeared overhead, the other teen exploding himself through the sky to reach Todoroki’s crouched form.

Todoroki raised his left arm up, the flames following the direction of his will, ready to spread out in a cone that would unfurl itself around Bakugou and _burn him alive_ —

And then Bakugou’s explosion knocked him backward out of bounds and down several steps before a wedge of ice stopped him. Right before Bakugou had gotten too close, Todoroki had called his flames back. He’d deactivated his left side, too afraid to strike the other teen. Todoroki had realized, in that split second before his attack, that he didn’t know how to control his power well enough to avoid hurting Bakugou permanently. And if he set him on fire and caused serious injury to him… Todoroki would never have been able to forgive himself.

Bakugou glared at him from inside of bounds, his arm still outstretched, his expression pissed off. _Todoroki had started using his flames and then stopped. Did he think Bakugou couldn’t handle them?_

“What the fuck was that for, you half-and-half bastard? Our fight was actually about to go somewhere, and you just gave up?”

Todoroki felt shaky from the adrenaline and the fear of what had almost happened. His heart was jackrabbitsing in his throat as he stared back at the other teen, his eyes raking over Bakugou’s uniform for any sign of charring or injury. His voice came out unsteady and uncertain, faltering halfway through. “I would have hurt you…”

Bakugou’s glare only deepened. “You think I’m weak enough to be hurt by a little fire?”

“I didn’t want to hurt you.” Todoroki sounded confused when he said that, as though he wasn’t sure why Bakugou would be upset at his self-restraint.

But Bakugou didn’t need self-restraint. He needed a goddamned fair fight. He needed them to both go all-out, so that he could come out on top. As Midnight’s voice exclaimed Bakugou’s victory in the background, Bakugou stomped down the steps to grab hold of Todoroki’s shirt with both fists and growl in his face. “You don’t fucking understand anything, do you?” His breath ghosted over Todoroki’s lips, and Todoroki could have sworn he saw tears of frustration in Bakugou’s eyes as the other teen continued to rage at him. “It’s not a win if you’re too afraid to fight. That doesn’t make me strong. It just makes you a coward.”

Todoroki was halfway between confused and upset, his emotions a rollercoaster, when Bakugou forcefully released his shirt, causing him to stumble backwards into the ice wedge he’d created in the stairs. He wanted to say something about how he wasn’t a coward, about how caring about the well-being of others was what classified you as a hero instead of a villain, or maybe even about how part of being strong was knowing when to step down and stop yourself from hurting someone… but Bakugou looked so lost that Todoroki wasn’t sure whether the teen believed his own words.

Todoroki tried to release the anger bubbling up inside of him. He wasn’t angry at Bakugou. He was angry at himself. All these years, his avoidance of using his fire, trying to spite his father… it all just made him unprepared to use his flames when he needed them. Bakugou could throw ten explosions
in your face, but none of them would kill you unless he allowed them to. Todoroki wasn’t sure how to send out a single cone of flame without permanently maiming the other person. What kind of hero could he become, with such lack of control over himself? He’d set Midoriya on fire earlier, and he’d almost just—

With Bakugou, he almost—

The other teen stalked his way down the stairs past Todoroki, forcefully shoving the uncertain teen aside. Before Bakugou got too far away, Todoroki overheard him muttering one last insight.

“Forget it.”

As if Todoroki could.

Iida’s fight with Tokoyami included much less fanfare and confusion for the audience. It lasted less than one minute, as expected when one of the students had a speed quirk and the other student won all his other matches in under two minutes. Still, as Kirishima and Izuku watched from the tunnel, both were surprised at how quickly Iida defeated Tokoyami.

Tokoyami’s strength was in standing still while Dark Shadow shoved the other person out of bounds. Dark Shadow could be used to defend against a variety of attacks—explosions, ice walls, quicksand, vines, etc. But Tokoyami’s weakness was that he tended to plant himself to the ground in order to focus on his bond with Dark Shadow. He did not have much practice in physical fights, including the art of dodging.

And if he couldn’t dodge quick enough, he couldn’t avoid Iida’s Recipro burst.

In fact, the fight might have only lasted thirty seconds. The result was an uproar of cheering from the stadium crowd as Tokoyami accepted his defeat and walked over to engage Iida in conversation while the deputy class president’s leg engines rebooted from being overcharged. Once he could move again, Iida and Tokoyami walked off stage side by side, in the middle of what seemed to be a conversation about the physical detriments of each others’ fighting styles.

The stage would take only a minute to reset, but Present Mic announced a brief interlude before the final round of the Sports Festival, which would showcase Tenya Iida versus Katsuki Bakugou.

Tokoyami nodded to Iida at the entrance of the tunnel, moving to the side as Izuku rushed over to hug Tenya in excitement. “That was so cool! I love that turbo charge thing. It’s so fast!”

Izuku’s exuberance rubbed off on Tenya, causing him to smile and blush as he accepted the praise. Kirishima finished patting an awkward Tokoyami on the shoulder before walking over to throw an arm around Iida. He joined in on the praise brigade, causing Iida’s flush to deepen as he tried to figure out a way to extricate himself from all his classmates’ touching.

His win had, after all, been a gamble. Dark Shadow could have knocked Iida out of the ring, easily, if he hadn’t managed to push Tokoyami out first with that Recipro burst. That technique was a double-edged sword.

Once again, their team was broken up by the perfect timing of Katsuki Bakugou. “Seriously? I’m fighting four-eyes in the final? Guess you’re actually gonna get to fight for alpha, aren’t you?” By
the time he had finished stalking up to the group, his face was set into a permanent scowl. “And what the fuck would you do if you were in charge? Chop your arms at us?”

Iida didn’t rise to the bait, but he did shrug off Kirishima’s arm so that he could straighten his back as he stared Bakugou down. “A true alpha cares about his packmates.”

Bakugou leaned in to knash his teeth in the direction of Iida’s neck. “And what the fuck do you know?”

Iida responded in a tone reminiscent of a student answering their professor. “I have watched several documentaries and read through various articles about pack habits amongst wolves and—”

“I meant, what the fuck do you know about me? Shitnerd.”

Iida was about to respond (and it was going to be something clever about ‘well, obviously, you don’t care about your classmates, or you would soften your tone and treat them more amiably’) when his cell phone rang. He’d asked Izuku to hold onto it during his round against Tokoyami, just in case his family called about Tensei’s attack.

Iida held up a finger in Bakugou’s face as he took his phone from Izuku and answered it. “Hello?”

Bakugou glared at him, his eyes burning red as he forced himself not to bite the finger in front of his face. The slim digit was tempting him… and it was small enough to fit in his mouth… he could probably imprint his teeth all the way up to the webbing between the nerd’s fingers—

But fucking Deku’s hair got in Bakugou’s way before he could do anything about it. And Deku was saying something, his voice insistent, his back to Bakugou as he put his hand on four eyes’ shoulder. And now that Bakugou was looking, that bossy motherfucker was looking a bit pale, a strange yellow-white color mottling his skin.

The words erupted from his mouth before he could think them through (not that he would have, of course). “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

But Deku, for some reason, seemed two steps ahead. “It’s bad, isn’t it?”

Bakugou tried to glare over Deku’s shoulder. He didn’t like being left out of the loop. “What are you talking about?”

Iida didn’t even seem to hear him, his gaze falling somewhere around Izuku’s head, which was a few inches shorter than Bakugou’s. “The nerve damage is… severe. He won’t be able to walk again, which means he can’t…”

“He can’t be a pro-hero,” Izuku finished for him.

Iida nodded.

“He’ll offer you the Ingenium name.”

Iida nodded again. “It is a distinct possibility.”

Izuku’s responses continued to be short and concise. “You don’t want it.”

A shaky breath left Iida’s lips as the taller teen looked away from the group and toward the wall. “I want him to still be the hero I look up to. I want him to…”

Izuku’s voice sounded light and empty as he interrupted him. “He’s your All Might.” Iida turned his
head away from the wall to gaze at Izuku questioningly. Izuku was the one to look away this time, toward the floor, as he clarified himself. “The hero you think is infallible, that can never lose, that you want to become...”

Like All Might had been for Deku and Katsuki, back when they were kids. Bakugou opened his mouth to say something, but Kirishima’s hand on his arm stopped him. He whipped his eyes around to see Kirishima shaking his head. Did hair-for-brains know something?

Iida’s voice was low and somewhat broken when he responded to Izuku’s unspoken question. “Yes, he is.”

Kirishima was the one who butted into the conversation this time. His hand consoling, his voice soft, as he reached out to Iida. “Man, I’m so sorr—”

“I might have something that can save him.”

Iida’s neck almost got a case of whiplash from how quickly he jerked from looking at Kirishima to staring at Izuku in shock. “What do you mean, save him?”

“I have, uh... something at home? And if he drinks it, he’ll heal completely in a matter of minutes.”

Considering Iida was just talking about his brother being paralyzed, there shouldn’t be anything liquid in existence that would heal him. The second that thought processed in Bakugou’s brain, he realized two things. One: he was absolutely going to fucking kill Deku. And two: he needed to get Kirishima the fuck out of here while Deku revealed way more than he should be fucking revealing to that four-eyed dickhead. Fucking fuck, Deku.

Bakugou frog-marched a protesting Kirishima away from the two teens, dragging him down the stairs and pressing him against the wall once they were a far enough distance away from Deku and Iida.

Kirishima was flailing next to him, his eyes wide and indignant. “Whoa, man, what the hell was that for?”

Bakugou shoved a hand on top of his mouth as he stared at the wall over Kirishima’s shoulder. Fucking fuckity fuck fuck.

Kirishima tried to push Bakugou off of him, but the explosive teen wasn’t having any of it. He shoved both of Kirishima hands against the wall, both of which hardened in automatic defense. But Bakugou didn’t do anything else but hold him there, their bodies pressed up against each other as Bakugou tried to stop the other boy from going back up the stairs and hearing things he wasn’t allowed to know. That fucking four-eyes wasn’t allowed to know, either, but Deku was being a motherfucking idiot right now.

A few seconds passed, and Kirishima shifted against him. Kirishima's body froze in place, his breath stuttering. Bakugou leaned his head back from its position near Kirishima’s neck to glare at the other teen. “What the fuck is wrong with you?”

Kirishima seemed breathless as he answered in a much higher tone than normal. “Nothing!”

“Tch.” Bakugou settled back in to his previous position, using his chest to keep Kirishima’s chest and back against the wall, his hips to keep Kirishima’s hips from moving, and his hands to stop Kirishima from pushing away from the wall. It was actually a rather effective position, Bakugou realized, and it didn’t require him to waste his sweat on creating explosions to keep Kirishima in place. He might use it again in the future.
Kirishima swallowed, shakily, against him.

Bakugou peered up to see that Kirishima’s cheeks were red, as though he had been exerting himself. But he hadn’t fought in at least thirty minutes…

Bakugou found himself scowling at Kirishima’s cheekbones as the other boy began trembling beneath him. His breath was hot against Kirishima’s jawline. “Do you need to fucking poop or something?”

“Uhm, uh, no?” Kirishima’s voice was still oddly pitched.

Bakugou peered down to make sure he hadn’t accidentally kneed Kirishima in the balls or anything. Nope, perfectly clear. Or… a bit large…?

Oh.

Oh.

Bakugou pushed off of Kirishima as a flush began staining his own cheeks. He didn’t know where to put his hands or his face or— what the fuck —

“Right, uh… stay here,” Bakugou ordered. Then he turned around and fled.

Kirishima stood in place for the five seconds it took for Bakugou to run up the stairs and around the corner, before turning around and slamming his head against the wall repeatedly, muttering, “I will not let my hormones control me. I will not let my hormones control me. I will not let—”

Iida came rushing down the stairs too quickly for Kirishima to pretend like he’d not been bashing his head against the wall, but thankfully the other teen seemed to be in too much of a hurry to recognize what Kirishima was doing. Midoriya rushed down behind him, following Iida down the stairs, around the corner, and toward what seemed to be the exit of the stadium.

Kirishima had enough time to wonder ‘Where are they going?’ before he heard a familiar bellow of rage from the direction Bakugou had run in. That thought was followed by the realization that ‘Oh shit, Iida’s leaving the stadium before the final round. Baku-bro is going to kill him.’

____________________

All Might wished that he could say he got there in the knick of time. He wished that he could tell his student that everything went alright, because he was there. But the student in question didn’t seem likely to believe him. He also seemed to be caught in a furtive discussion that only he, Midoriya, and his brother seemed to understand. All Might hadn’t been able to make out the whispering at first, but young Iida was becoming louder and louder with each passing phrase.

“What do you mean you won’t take it? We rushed to Izuku’s apartment! This is a miracle in a bottle —”

All Might should really honor his students’ privacy. He should leave the room, or at least walk over to the two other heroes that lay in hospital beds awaiting surgery. Instead, he remained paralyzed in the middle of the room, trying to be discreet as his eyes kept shifting over to his two students.

Ingenium was speaking again, and All Might was able to make out several of his words.
“...in any other circumstance, I would... that kid... dragged him into this... training under me because I said he could make a difference...”

All Might allowed his eyes to slide over to the young adult that he had assumed was another hero. He had dark hair and a plain face, which looked pale and lifeless on the bed. All Might's heart felt like it was rupturing in his chest as he processed his failure. All Might had saved three heroes today, but he hadn’t managed to save any of them. This one in particular was in critical condition, his life hanging on by a thread. He’d been stabbed in the appendix, and dirty alleyway water had gotten into the wound and spread an infection throughout his body quicker than anyone could have anticipated. The doctors had to amputate his legs, and they were now saying that the infection was still spreading into his arms. They were going to have to amputate both of them unless his body fought off the infection, and fast. If his body couldn’t do that, the amputation procedure would be the only way for him to survive.

Ingenium’s voice was getting louder and more insistent. “...I dragged him into that alley and couldn’t protect him. If you have a miracle, I don’t want it for me.” There was a pause, and All Might spied Ingenium raising a weak finger to point over at the hero in critical condition. “I want you to give it to him.”

Young Iida seemed to be upset by the end of Ingenium’s statement. “Tensei—”

There was more whispering as Ingenium weakly patted at his young Iida's hand on his chest. Ingenium was wheezing, but his emotions were collected, his face calm. “He’s just a kid. He’s got a whole career ahead of him. He’d be a great sidekick for you...”

Young Iida’s face had fallen into a familiar anguish that Toshinori knew all too well. “I don’t want your name.”

Ingenium smiled at his brother, his face pallid, his movements sloppy. He patted once more at his brother’s hand. “Too bad, I’m giving it to you.” There was a pause, some shuffling, an object being passed back and forth. “And you’re giving this to him.”

All Might wished that he could make everything in that hospital room turn out well. He wished he could turn back time, run faster, find the alleyway quicker, rush them to the hospital within thirty seconds rather than sixty. Maybe that would have saved his student this pain.

All Might stared at the whispering forms of young Midoriya and Iida as they tried to hide an object between them. An object that was, apparently, a miracle. And a miracle that could only be used once. Was it some form of witchcraft? Could young Midoriya not create more? If he could create more, they wouldn’t be debating about which person to use it on... All Might wasn’t sure if he would ever summon the courage to ask. Midoriya seemed to hold many secrets that he wasn’t able to talk about. Principal Nezu had referred to it as a 'curse,' although All Might wasn’t able to gather any particulars about the situation other than Midoriya needing to dodge certain lines of questioning. This object was likely something he couldn’t talk about. Young Midoriya also seemed very distressed about it. His hands were fiddling with what sounded like glass as he and Iida tried to inch their way closer to the young man in critical condition.

All Might had woken up that morning hoping to be inspired by the students at the Sports Festival and, if he was lucky, to find a worthy protege to pass his quirk onto.

All Might ended his day witnessing a miracle. No one in the world had the power to regrow someone else’s limbs, and yet here the young hero in critical condition was—two legs longer, sitting up, with a warm complexion and a smile on his face. A feeling rushed through All Might that he had
long forgotten, a sense that the world was filled with wonders that he had yet to see. It had been years since he felt comfortable pushing himself beyond his limits, instead being limited to three hours of hero work followed by twenty-one hours of feeling weak and broken. Unable to help anymore. Unable to save another person. Delegated to the sidelines where he couldn’t give every day his all.

Toshinori kept up All Might’s radiant smile despite the feeling of having been punched in the gut and kidney simultaneously, his throat tight, tears wanting to well up in his eyes. He wasn’t sure if it was from awe or a bittersweet sort of hindsight. If only, on that day, he’d had a miracle like this one to bring him back...

But it was too late for him now, and Toshinori had to make do with what he had left of himself.

Izuku’s bus-ride home from the hospital felt anything but inconspicuous.

All around him, adults and teenagers were giving him the side-eye, whispering about the Sports Festival and whether he looked familiar. One little girl eventually came up to him and asked if he was ‘that boy with the cool bird-wolf pet’, and after a little bit of stuttering, Izuku clarified that Popsicle was technically called a familiar, but yes, he was very cool, and no, he couldn’t bring Popsicle out to show her on the bus. Other people became more confident after that, leaning over to greet him and praise him for his heroics during the first round and his team winning the second round. Someone even mentioned liking his speech, which made Izuku blush since he hadn’t prepared it beforehand and still felt very self-conscious about it.

No one mentioned his fight with Koda.

They did, however, mention his fight with Todoroki. One kid asked him where he learned to fight like that and what style it was, and Izuku happily divulged that it was judo and he learned it with… uh… his sensei. The young girl from before asked why he’d used his bird instead of his wolf, and he answered that it was to protect his familiar. A couple of adults lauded him for facing ‘Endeavor’s son’ and making it so far in the fight. It made Izuku wonder what kind of pressure Todoroki was under, being the son of the number two hero. Todoroki had mentioned not wanting to be like his father, but Izuku didn’t know whether that was a result of something his father did or a result of the way others treated Todoroki because of his father. It could be both. It could be neither.

Izuku really wished he understood what was going on with Todoroki. Every time he thought he was learning more about the other boy, Todoroki would clam up or act indifferent or tell him that he was floating intangibly in his bedroom and wasn’t actually at UA anymore. Izuku knew that Todoroki didn’t want to be like his father, that he resented his father pushing him to use his fire quirk, and that Todoroki only wanted to use the ice side of his quirk; but Izuku didn’t know why.

It was frustrating him, and his mind was torn between worrying about Tensei (but he was trying not to think about that, Tenya’s brother had made his choice, and Tenya wanted to be alone as he processed his brother’s demand that he take the Ingenium name) , worrying about his bond with Popsicle (but he was waiting to do something with that until he went home, which would probably involve looking through his ancestors’ journals for anyone mentioning their bond with their familiar being strained or broken by an outsider) , and worrying about Todoroki’s hesitation during the festival and the things his father had said to Izuku backstage. Honestly, it was mostly the latter, and it said something weird about Izuku’s priorities that he didn’t quite know how to name.
When he finally got home, away from the gossiping on the bus and the stares at the bus station, Izuku made a beeline for the shower and locked himself in the bathroom under the hot water for longer than their family budget would suggest he should have. Most of that time was spent with his head against the wall of the shower, the warm water trailing down his shoulders, as Popsicle lay in wolf-form on the floor outside the stall. Afterwards, he spent a few minutes with a towel around his shoulders, sitting next to his familiar on the floor of the steamy room, just looking at the ceiling and pondering the day.

Everything appeared so surreal, now that he was home. The fights, the competition, the visions, the conversations… it all seemed like it had happened to some other Izuku that wasn’t him. It was hard to reconcile then with now and to convince himself that he’d have to face the fall-out tomorrow for everything that had happened.

For dinner, his mom had apparently saved up money to buy pork for katsudon, with leftover pork being used for a quartet of steamed buns. Izuku tried to show his thanks sufficiently before completely hording all the steamed buns into his mouth, with a small bit given to Popsicle. Popsicle loved any and all icy treats, but he also had an obsession for steamed buns whenever they appeared. It had something to do with their texture. His familiar was weird.

Despite how tired Izuku was from the day, his mom agreed to help him look through some of their ancestors’ journals for references to familiar bonds. She’d been worried about Izuku during his fight with Koda, and she’d been fussing over both Izuku and Popsicle ever since they got home. They only finished skimming about four of the journals before his mother took note of his bleary eyes and hunched over position and called it a night.

Before they both fell asleep, his mom recited their old pack’s saying to him as a way to help Izuku calm down.

Izuku repeated it along with her. It seemed especially apt, tonight.

“The day was long, but the night is here. And the night is where we are free.”

The words tumbled in his head over and over as he closed his eyes, Popsicle’s snout against his thigh. The day had been long, and Izuku had been so worried over a number of things going awry. He was afraid that he would use his ability to slow down molecules (and effectively pause time) in front of the audience, especially since Principal Nezu and Mr. Aizawa had told him to never use it in front of cameras. Izuku had been afraid he would hurt someone or make one of his friends mad or, somehow, someway, lose a packmate. He’d been afraid of fighting his friends and beating them; he’d been afraid of the competition aspect of the festival, in general. And he’d been afraid he was going to mess up his powers all over the place, since he’d started out the day feeling exhausted from all the nightmares he’d been having lately.

Instead of a range of screw-ups, Izuku had potentially gained several packmates (if they were still interested in joining, after today), and he hadn’t revealed any powers he needed kept secret. Except maybe the precognition thing, but no one on the bus seemed to know what had happened at the end of the fight with Todoroki. They all just assumed Todoroki got in a good hit on Izuku, then got worried about it, and All Might appeared to… check on Izuku or something? He wasn’t sure about that part. No one seemed to notice that Popsicle’s different forms had varying effects on Izuku, which shelved that discussion and reveal for another day.

Hopefully, that day was far away, and Izuku wouldn’t have to worry about public opinion or gaining recognition for a while yet. He searched the darkness behind his eyelids and tried to calm his mind, focusing on each breath as it left his lips. He could feel his fingertips buzzing, his magic thrumming through his body. Popsicle shuffled against his leg before relaxing again. And with the last deep
Many miles away, Todoroki laid on his side with an arm beneath his head, staring up at the window and the night sky. He thought about duty and ambition and happiness, and he wondered whether it was possible to find the latter two while spiting the other. He thought about Midoriya’s soothing words before their match together, about how he didn’t owe his father anything. He thought about Bakugou’s frustration and confusion as the other boy tried to rile him up; he thought about the way the explosive teen defended him against his father. He had many things to think about, tonight, and he refused to allow one of them to be that scum that had polluted his aspirations.

Enji Todoroki hadn’t been happy about his progeny’s performance today, and he wouldn’t allow his son to leave the Room until he’d produced flames five separate times during a fight.

Todoroki had a slowly-healing burn mark, which stretched from his elbow to his shoulder, to prove it.

The day had been long, and Todoroki just wanted to go to sleep so that it could be over, and then tomorrow could begin. A new day. Another chance.

But you know what they say about Shouto Todoroki. That boy has the devil’s luck.

Which was probably why Izuku Midoriya appeared at the foot of his bed, right before Todoroki was about to fall asleep. He must have spent a whole fifteen seconds simply blinking back at the vision of the other teen, who was thankfully clothed this time in what appeared to be pajamas. That was much less distracting than the bare-chested version of Midoriya from before. Also: Was this seriously happening again?

“Oh… hey, Todoroki.” The illusion (not-illusion?) of Midoriya paused and began nibbling at its lips. “So… how’s life treating you?”

Chapter End Notes

Heyya, folks!

This chapter came out quicker than anticipated thanks to your comments and suggestions last chapter. Some suggestions have been shelved for the next two chapters, but keep them coming! They help me brainstorm where to go next and speed up my writing process.

As always, let me know what you did/didn't like! If you're wondering "Uh... wait, weren't you intending for Bakugou to be demisexual?" or "Wait, does Todoroki like Izuku or Bakugou?" or "What's going on, Kirishima?" The answer to all of these questions is: They're still figuring that shit out, so your alternating unreliable narrator
will continue to be unreliable. Also, reader feedback has some sway on when they figure it out and in what direction, because I have in no way decided on anything... except that the Stain Saga will be a shitstorm. :)

Also, let me know if my Bakugou characterization was alright in this chapter. His tone was really hard to get, and it would be nice to know if I nailed it or need to change it some. I'm a bit beta-less right now.
Chapter Summary

Izuku discusses this weird astral-visitation thing with Todoroki, Class 1-A pick their hero names, and a certain pro-hero offers a draft pick to Izuku. Will he accept? And is All Might right? Can Izuku trust him?

Also, Tenya won't talk to him, and Sero keeps offering to save the day, and Izuku's emotions are really confused right about now.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

(Continued from Last Chapter)

“Uh… hey, Todoroki.” The illusion (not-illusion?) of Midoriya paused and began nibbling at its lips. Todoroki had no idea where it had come from. “So... how’s life treating you?”

“Not that good.” Todoroki stilled, not liking what he had implied with the statement. His eyes shifted over to where Midoriya was sitting at the end of his futon. “What are you doing here?”

Midoriya shrugged, his eyes trailing over Todoroki from head to foot. A hesitant smile bloomed on his face as he hunched over on his arms. He looked tired. “Seeing you, I guess.”

“And you’re real?”

Midoriya tilted his head casually to the side, seemingly at ease in his new position. His tone was lighthearted and dismissive, as though he didn’t care whether he was real or not. “I think so.”

Todoroki’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t seem all that certain.”

Midoriya chuckled, his smile falling to a grin that eased around the edges of his mouth without preamble or fanfare. Todoroki couldn’t remember a single time in his life when he had been allowed to be so carefree with his emotions. He envied the other boy.

Midoriya began rubbing circles through the hairs on his arm. Now that Todoroki was looking, Midoriya did seem to be a bit awkward. Awkward yet untroubled. Midoriya was definitely strange. “I mean, this isn’t really my, uhhh, quirk? So I don’t, um, know what I’m doing here. I guess.”

Todoroki kept his eyes on the other teen as Midoriya released his arms from their position and began scooting forward on the floor, closer to Todoroki. He leaned down, looking to all the world like he was imparting a great secret. His voice turned softer, quieter, even as it held a hint of doubt.

“I’ve tried to look up information about this, but it’s just a lot of dead-ends and soulmate stories.”

“Soulmates,” Todoroki deadpanned. He squinted his eyes in thought as he watched Midoriya lean a bit closer. “You said something about a soul connection, before.”
Midoriya nodded his head, seemingly happy that Todoroki had remembered. “Yeah, that was my guess from the soulmate stories. But, I mean, they’re just stories.” He shrugged again, as though he was trying to discount them. But he was obviously not discounting them, if he kept bringing it up.

_Soulmates, huh?_

There was a pause.

Midoriya looked around the room as though he was expecting something to happen. When it didn’t, a confused expression settled over his face, and he turned back toward Todoroki. “It, uh… doesn’t seem like I’m going back, anytime soon.”

Todoroki’s eyes were drawn once more to the pajamas the other teen was wearing. They looked thin and worn, as though they’d been used for years. Todoroki tried to recall what other clothing he’d seen Midoriya wear, but it was only new school uniforms in addition to the gym clothes and costume that the school had given them. He wondered what Midoriya’s home circumstances were.

Was he poor?

Was he happy?

_Also, if he was in his pajamas and wasn’t just some illusion created by Todoroki’s overcompensating imagination, then… “Where were you, before you came here?”_

Midoriya grinned back at him and patted at his own leg before leaning on his folded arms once again. “In bed with Popsicle. It’s been kind of a long day, so I was having trouble getting to sleep.”

Todoroki nodded back in recognition. Something about the darkness of the room and the late hour and Midoriya’s candor drove him to respond honestly. “Me, too.”

He kept responding to Midoriya much too honestly. Maybe Midoriya was onto something with this ‘soul connection’ theory.

Todoroki watched as Midoriya’s eyebrows furrowed. “Are you worrying about something?”

Todoroki stared at him and tried not to get lost in his previous thoughts. _He’d been thinking about Midoriya, hadn’t he? And Bakugou. And the tournament. And now Midoriya was sitting in front of him, just like last week._ A side part of Todoroki’s brain wanted to laugh at how absurd their situation was. A tight smile began stretching over his mouth as a short chuckle tried to make its way out of his throat. Everything about this encounter was ridiculous. Midoriya was in pajamas.

Midoriya scooted closer and leaned over on his arms, effectively lying parallel to Todoroki with only a foot width between them. He reached out as though to put a hand on Todoroki’s chest but settled for the region of floor beside Todoroki’s right shoulder. His voice was soft, and it reminded Todoroki somehow of moonlight. “Are you alright?”

Todoroki allowed himself a brief sigh as he looked sideways at the other teen; he stared past his own white bangs at the way Midoriya’s curly green hair just flopped all over the floor. _He was intangible, yet his clothes and hair obeyed gravity. How did the physics of whatever was happening even work?_ If Todoroki had been anyone else, he probably would have smiled at Midoriya; but his face just felt tired. “It was a long day.”

Midoriya smiled for him, and it was reminiscent of how Todoroki would have managed—small, a bare twitch of the lips. “The day was long, but the night is here. And the night is where we are free.”
Todoroki gazed at him in confusion. When Midoriya didn’t seem likely to say anything further, the other boy’s eyes caught somewhere on the wall behind the futon, Todoroki raised an eyebrow and deadpanned, “What?”

Midoriya shifted his eyes from the wall to Todoroki, a light blush seeming to settle over his cheeks. “Oh, it’s just a saying. From my old pack.”

Todoroki didn’t know whether to be curious or frustrated by Midoriya bringing up the idea of a ‘pack’ again. When Todoroki had challenged Midoriya earlier in the waiting room, and first found out that an apparent ‘pack’ existed among some of his classmates, he had been confused. He’d felt like a foolish, ignorant child who hadn’t been able to figure out that there was a pre-established pecking order between his soon-to-be competitors. It seemed like something he should have been perceptive enough to discern on his own; and it was definitely something his father would scold and berate him for not noticing, if Todoroki told him about it. But other students had known about the ‘pack’, and Todoroki was on the outside looking in, once again. Like always. He was forever on the outside. Just where his father wanted him.

“Why are you so obsessed with packs? Bakugou claimed he was your alpha, so I assume you must have formed some group together based around wolf dynamics.” Todoroki’s subtle disdain for Bakugou’s constant claims of superiority was apparent, even though there were several things he respected about the explosive teen. His mastery of his quirk, for one. His determination, another. The way he didn't consider all victories a win.

Enji Todoroki would. A win was a win. And winning the public’s respect and regard was everything.

Midoriya shrugged and treated the question as though it wasn’t five-parts jealousy, two-parts self-recrimination, and only three-parts Midoriya’s fault in the first place. “I guess I’ve just always been alone, and being in a pack makes me feel like I belong.”

“Belonging…” The whisper left Todoroki’s mouth at the same time the thought pierced his brain. What did it mean to belong? What did that feel like? Was it nice?

The silence began to stretch on as Midoriya stared at Todoroki. It made him self-conscious, and he turned away from the freckled apparition to focus his eyes on the ceiling. Midoriya kept staring at him, and Todoroki could feel the gaze trying to pick him apart and see inside. Todoroki gulped, his throat dry, his chest feeling simultaneously frigid and warm.

Midoriya leaned over, his face inching closer to Todoroki’s neck, his eyes watching for any movement or telltale signs of agreement. “Do you want to join the pack?”

Todoroki tried to swallow again as his eyes flicked over to Midoriya’s head, only a foot away from his neck. From here, he could see the way that some of Midoriya’s hair was still wet, likely from a recent shower. He could almost imagine the way Midoriya smelled, that mixture of roasted green tea and hope. But Midoriya wasn’t here, not physically, not actually. If Todoroki reached out, his hand would go straight through. Everything about this situation was confusing and frustrating. And now Midoriya was asking him to join in on more of his craziness?

“I’m not sure how that would help me.”

“Don’t you feel alone?” Midoriya reached out a hand and put it on Todoroki’s chest, his body too intangible to fully rest his skin against Todoroki’s. Midoriya’s thumb stroked the top of the sternum, trailing the back of his knuckles down the length of Todoroki’s sternum to his navel. His hand hovered over Todoroki’s stomach as Midoriya raised his eyes to meet Todoroki’s unbreathing gaze.
“Don’t you grow tired of being alone?”

And yes, of course Todoroki did. But he was always going to be alone. His father had made that perfectly clear.

Midoriya’s voice was low and hypnotic as he leaned ever closer. “You don’t have to be. You can be with us.”

Todoroki watched Midoriya’s lips, feeling like a deer caught in the headlights. He could hear himself breathing, slow, light, the air thin around him.

Midoriya’s whispers seemed to caress Todoroki’s neck, spreading warmth down his chest to his stomach, where Midoriya’s hand still hovered, intangible, not real. “Kacchan and Kirishima and I hang out together. Tenya doesn’t really hang out with them, but I go over to his place a lot, and we do homework and watch videos. You don’t have to hang out with Kacchan if you don’t want to. It could just be us.”

So Midoriya had picked up on Todoroki’s wariness of Bakugou? Todoroki had a feeling that Midoriya was much more perceptive than he’d previously realized. He seemed so oblivious most of the time that it was easy to assume he wasn’t actually observing his peers. Also: what the hell was happening, and why was he feeling this way, and what was Midoriya doing to him?

“Just think about it. I think there’s something important between us. Maybe this is why.” Midoriya’s smile was sweet and enticing.

Todoroki was beginning to think he had a thing for boys showing up in his bedroom in the middle of the night. Heaven forbid. His father was going to kill him.

He was also beginning to think that Midoriya might be right. If it wasn’t a quirk, and this was the second time Midoriya had shown up like this, maybe there was something between them. Perhaps. But Todoroki doubted whatever was between them necessarily needed to involve some archaic, animalistic notion of ‘pack.’

Midoriya leaned over to fake-nuzzle at Todoroki’s jawline, his insubstantial nose passing through Todoroki’s cheek. The normally stoic teen grasped handfuls of his bedsheets beneath him as he tried to stop himself from showing any emotion, even though he wasn’t sure what emotion would display itself. Was he interested? Was he scared? Did he want to grab Midoriya’s head and kiss him, or did he want to shove him far away, somewhere he’d never have to be confused and frazzled by his green, green eyes ever again?

He held his breath as Midoriya moved away from him and, without any more fanfare, disappeared.

A tear fell from the corner of Todoroki’s eye as he turned over on his side, curling his body around itself. Just forget about it. Forget he was here. It doesn’t mean anything. Todoroki’s hand twisted in his pillowcase as he swallowed past the lump in his throat. So then why did he want Midoriya to come back?

Many miles away, Izuku’s eyes opened as he shot up out of his bed with a gasp. Popsicle whined at him for disturbing his rest, and Izuku ran a soothing hand over his familiar as he tried to settle his breathing into a more normal pattern. He looked around the darkness of his room, hoping for inspiration or some sort of explanation for what had just occurred. What in the spirits’ afterlife had that been?

Izuku Midoriya had no idea, and he really wished he had some answers.
The next morning, Izuku admitted to his mom that he’d used his only vial of vampire blood to try to heal Iida’s brother, and that Iida’s brother had asked him to give the blood to another hero that was in critical condition.

His mom wasn’t happy. That blood was supposed to be for Izuku, for some future emergency where he was hurt too badly for Popsicle to heal him. He wasn’t supposed to use it on someone else, and he definitely wasn’t supposed to use it on a normal mortal who didn’t have any connection to the supernatural. However, even though Izuku understood that she was worried for him, he didn’t agree with her.

*Heroes didn’t keep magical cures for themselves, right? If someone was in need, they gave the cure away.*

Maybe he was just being stupid. But how could he not have tried to help? It was Tensei... Tenya’s Tensei...

Izuku figured everything was out in the open already (and his mom was upset anyway), so he also admitted that he had been planning and hoping to give the blood to All Might. The pro-hero had a bad injury that prevented him from working as a hero full-time, and if Izuku could heal him, then All Might would be able to save more people and continue working as the Symbol of Peace. As it was, the Symbol of Peace was in danger of disappearing before someone could train and become strong enough to take his place.

His mom admonished him for using the blood (and having planned to use it, in advance) on someone who wasn’t part of the magical community. How was he going to explain it, when someone asked? Would the doctors accept that it had been the ‘last vial of blood of someone with a regenerative quirk’? Would the healed hero have any weird after-effects? That blood wasn’t meant for mortals. They didn’t know what the complications could be.

But to Izuku, it had been worth it. Even though he had wanted the blood for Tensei, being able to heal anyone involved in that horrid vision was worth it. Seeing all three of the heroes from his premonition on the hospital bed, each of them grievously injured, made him wonder why he even had the vision if All Might, the greatest hero in the world, couldn’t completely save them in time. But that vial of blood had saved the hero who was in critical condition, and Tensei and the other hero would still live to see another day. Everything would turn out alright. There was no death that day. The heroes were safe.

However, he didn’t have the blood anymore. It was used up. So now, Izuku couldn’t save All Might. And in that regard, he had failed, and he wondered at the repercussions of a weakening hero with no successor to supersede him.

The Sports Festival had taken place a Monday, and they had classes for the next four days. The classes before lunch proceeded as normal, covering the normal topics of English, Science, Literature, and History/Modern Art. However, the foundational hero studies that took place after lunch took a
new turn, with a special focus on public perception, the image of a hero, and working in a team environment. They workshoped the proper way to respond in a crisis, to handle a crowd, and so on. They learned how to figure out the chain of command and whose orders had to be followed first in any given situation. The classes seemed surprisingly focused, considering most of their previous foundational hero studies classes had been a range of fighting techniques or battle and conflict simulations.

In addition to the strange shift in the focus of the second half of their school day, there had also been something different in how they were treated by the public. Or more specifically for Izuku, it was weird that people seemed to know who he was and would come up and talk to him.

Part of Izuku’s whole plan of becoming a future hero (who was also a witch) was to be like Eraserhead, to fight crime on the downlow and to avoid the fame and the spotlight. Izuku worried that, the more people who knew about his power, the more they would find it suspicious. Izuku could explode things and had a familiar-based quirk? That seemed an unlikely and tenuous explanation of his magical abilities, and he worried that a closer spotlight would only shine more holes in the story.

Mr. Aizawa took him to the side on the day after the festival to help coach him through how to explain away the abilities he had shown, how they coincided with what his quirk was registered as, and how Popsicle could fit into the story. All Might also suggested that Izuku could copy him and dodge answers about how his quirk worked. (Izuku tried not to take advantage of that conversation and badger All Might about how, exactly, his quirk did work, because Izuku was still very curious about why he and Todoroki had that weird energy that Izuku associated with their quirks. Not that it was any of his business, or anything.)

Mr. Aizawa also warned him that, whatever was going on with his familiar, Izuku needed to find a way to protect himself against quirks like Koda’s. He couldn’t afford to have a breakdown like that in a fight with a villain, if their bond was somehow stretched or muted or temporarily torn apart. While his pack leader understood that it was the first time something like this had happened, it was still a dangerous drawback to his ability that he needed to be able to handle.

Izuku promised that he was looking into ways to make certain that would never happen again. Of course, those ways were magical, so he couldn’t exactly specify what they were… but he had a theory. And he was creating a ritual for it, with his mom’s help.

Hopefully, it would work.

From that conversation, Izuku also learned that none of the public had understood Izuku having a premonition, during his fight with Todoroki. Izuku had been thankful to learn of this, since it was such a fickle ability that depended entirely on Popsicle’s form and circumstance. However, All Might also warned him that some pro-heroes might be clever enough to put two and two together to equal, well, Izuku sending All Might to save Ingenium and two other heroes. Mr. Aizawa agreed, pointing out that both Principal Nezu and himself would have been able to figure it out.

Izuku worried what that meant about villains being able to figure out Izuku’s precognitive ability. That was definitely the sort of thing he wouldn’t want them to know. Heroes with future-predicting quirks (or even present-predicting quirks) weren’t exactly common. The witch who came through U.A. before Izuku was actually the only one he’d ever heard of, although Izuku hadn’t done intense research into the question. And even though Izuku didn’t have control over his ability (and even though it depended on Popsicle to even occur), no one who watched the Sports Festival would be able to discern that. They would either figure out he’d had a vision and think that the ability just debilitated him when it activated, or they wouldn’t realize it at all.
No matter if they were heroes or villains, Izuku was hoping for the latter.

Another thing that had changed since the day of the Sports Festival: Izuku couldn’t seem to get Tenya alone, anymore. Tenya didn’t show up as early for homeroom, and he rushed out of class the second that school ended. He still performed his duties as a student and as deputy class representative, but outside of that, he wasn’t smiling as much as he used to. Or when he did smile, it didn’t seem to reach his eyes. He never had that soft grin for Izuku, anymore, the one that had first appeared in Tenya’s room when they were on his bed bonding over Sports Festival videos of Tensei…

Izuku figured the behavior changes were likely related to Tensei’s health or Tenya’s emotions about Tensei’s health, but he didn’t know what to do to help his friend. He didn’t even know if he could do something, or if it was one of those things you were just supposed to watch from afar and not interfere with. Izuku hated things like that. He wanted to be able to help.

He didn’t know how to help.

Tenya sat with Tokoyami during lunch and looked away when Izuku approached their table.

Izuku sat with Sero and Kaminari instead.

Uraraka gave him consoling glances, a sweet smile, and then scanned Iida from head to foot with worried eyes.

No one said a thing.

The next day, Izuku was determined to sit with Tenya at lunch and try to get him to talk, but when he finished making his way to the lunch hall, Tenya was already sitting with Koda. Izuku eyed the pair, debating whether it was worth Tenya likely avoiding him to have to sit next to Koda.

Popsicle hissed around his collarbone, still upset at what the rock-skinned teen had done. I won’t I won’t I won’t.

Izuku sighed. Not this again. Popsicle.

I won’t. I’ll bite him!

You can’t bite students. Izuku adjusted his grip on his tray and tried to walk toward the pair, but Popsicle tightened around his neck.

Bad animal-speaker. Traitor!

Izuku balanced his tray on one hand and tried to release Popsicle’s grip on his neck with the other hand. Popsicle loosened as Izuku focused calming feelings through their bond. He’s not a traitor, Popsicle. He didn’t mean to do what he did. I’m trying to forgive him. You should try, too.

At least temporarily, the debate was a lost cause.

Popsicle wouldn’t do it.

Izuku turned away and sat at a table with Sero, Kaminari, and Kirishima. Sero gave him another one
of his friendly smiles, all perfect teeth and warm eyes, which made Izuku feel warm inside. It didn’t heal the hurt in his chest from Tenya’s avoidance, but it helped fill the hole with something that cooed happiness and hope. Izuku rubbed at the middle of his chest with his thumb, trying to massage the feeling in and encourage it to blossom.

Kaminari made a joke, and Kirishima elbowed him in camaraderie. Bakugou sat down at their table, spicy noodles overflowing on his tray, and snarled his way through wanting to know what they were talking about. Kirishima regaled the table with a grandiose version of his former story while Bakugou watched Izuku beneath furrowed eyebrows. Izuku laughed at something Kaminari said, blushed under Sero’s soft gaze, and hesitated a longing glance Tenya’s way.

No one said a thing.

After lunch, Mr. Aizawa was in charge of their end-of-the-day hero course. He popped up out of his sleeping bag with a worrying announcement. He made it seem like they would be doing something boring (‘Hero Informatics’ classes were generally boring laws and legislation), before he revealed that the students would be coming up with their ‘Hero Aliases’. And Ms. Midnight would be helping them.

Izuku wasn’t sure whether he wanted to jump for joy or curl up into a ball at Kacchan’s feet. Hero Aliases. He’d used to dream of what kind of hero he could become and what kind of name would represent him. Back when he was five years old and obsessed with All Might, he would come up with names like ‘Mighty All Man’ and ‘Mighty Boy’ and ‘All Might Jr’. When he’d moved on to a more sensible hero idol (Eraserhead), he had scribbled similar ideas in his journal. ‘Stophead’ and ‘Pauseface’ and other such simplistic names. But none of those seemed acceptable, now.

Mr. Aizawa’s voice dragged him out of his thoughts, and he realized his pack leader was telling them something about the the Pro Draft Picks again. Mr. Aizawa had mentioned something about this yesterday, how some pro-heroes would pick students who they thought were ready to join the hero workforce right out of highschool. Basically, if you showed enough promise in creativity, fighting skill, and problem-solving abilities during the Sports Festival, and if you made enough of a splash during the Sports Festival to get pro-heroes to notice you in the first place, then some heroes might offer you an internship at their agency.

It was a way for current heroes to invest in the future of heroes-in-training, and it scared Izuku half to death. Whoever they would intern and train under could decide to keep them on, and if they were kept on each year during the Internship Week, then they could eventually get a spot at that hero’s company.

So why was Izuku scared? Well, for the simple fact that he really didn’t want anyone else knowing about his abilities and it already freaked him out enough that Principal Nezu and All Might and Present Mic and Eraserhead all knew, and now Endeavor figured out he was a witch, and Izuku was going to get found out, he was going to be in trouble, and the ones who erased people were going to find him, and he was just going to disappear, and his mother would be all alone, and—

You know, normal worries.

Oh yeah, Mr. Aizawa was saying something. “And any offer that you receive now can be rescinded in the future. Actually, that’s generally what happens, so don’t slack off.”

Behind him on the board, Mr. Aizawa reproduced a list of which students had received Pro Draft Picks and how many they had each received. Apparently, the list was generally more spread out, but Todoroki received over 4,000 draft picks while Bakugou received over 3,000. Izuku scanned the list to see that Tokoyami and Iida both had about 300, while Kaminari, Kirishima, and Yaoyorozu all
had roughly 100 each. Uraraka, Sero, and Izuku were listed at the bottom with double-digit numbers of draft picks, none of them higher than 30.

Izuku turned to share a quick smile with Sero as the other teen joked about Bakugou scaring off the pros when he needed to be chained to the winners’ stand. Izuku was glad he had missed that fiasco.

The humorous thought sobered him for a second. He’d missed the award ceremony because he’d been hunting down vampire blood with Tenya, and then Tensei wouldn’t take it, and now Tenya wasn’t talking to him. He couldn’t regret saving the life of a hero, but Izuku could regret the outcome. He didn’t understand what he’d done wrong, or what he should be doing to make whatever-it-was right. Tenya wouldn’t tell him.

“Now, whether a pro tried to draft you are not, you will still be engaging in the Internship Week. Every one of you will be working alongside a pro, so that you can get a better idea of how the hero industry works. You might have some experience with fighting villains, but being a hero is more than that. Your internships will introduce you to what the daily life of a hero is. A quick warning: it’s not all exciting rescue missions. You’ll have a lot of downtime, so figure out a way to go ‘Plus Ultra!’ even when you will likely be bored.”

Everyone in class had quieted down from the Draft Pick reveal to a somber silence. Mr. Aizawa didn’t typically lecture them on what it was like to be a pro-hero, and the warning about having a lot of ‘downtime’ dashed some of their expectations.

“Since you will be working beside pros, each of you is going to need your own hero name. It’s only tentative, but make sure to pick something appropriate.”

Ms. Midnight took that opportunity to slam open the doorway and make their name-choosing ceremony a dramatic affair, intimating that they would know ‘true hell’ if they picked the wrong name now. Izuku wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or to sweatdrop. She really knew how to throw things out of proportion.

Before he wrapped himself up in his sleeping bag, Mr. Aizawa gave them one last bit of advice. “Make sure whatever name you choose represents the image you want to created. To the public at large, your hero name will reflect your character. Don’t mess up.”

Izuku gulped as he nodded his head.

A name to represent what kind of hero they wanted to be.

Just like ‘All Might’ represented how the hero wanted to be perceived as all-powerful and able to save everyone, Izuku needed to find a name that would describe his ideal hero image. But what was his ideal?

Izuku stared down at the board he was given to write his name on. Ms. Midnight suggested they use the typical hero name formula of ‘XXX hero: (hero name)’, giving Mr. Aizawa’s alias of the ‘Erasure Hero: Eraserhead’ as an example. She also suggested that they be more inventive than that.

Mr. Aizawa rolled over in his sleeping bag to prove that he was ignoring her.

Essentially, Izuku had to come up with two names. A name for what type of hero he wanted to be, and a name for the image he wanted to represent. Fifteen minutes passed as he doodled theories off to the side. He wanted to be a hero who stopped things, who could come out of nowhere and turn every bad situation into a positive one. But he didn’t want to be in the spotlight or be up on a pedestal or be the number one person in anyone’s minds. He wanted to be a hero, but he wanted to
be free. Like Eraserhead.

Aoyama was the first student to go to the front of the classroom, presenting his board with a whole sentence written on it: "Shining Hero: I cannot stop twinkling." Ms. Midnight loved the idea of the name but suggested shortening ‘I cannot’ to ‘can’t’, so that his name would be ‘Can’t Stop Twinkling’.

Izuku stared at the other student’s board in confusion. He hadn’t known you could choose an entire phrase as a hero name. That opened up even more possibilities!

More students began coming forward. Some of their names were weird or ridiculous (like Ashido wanting to become the ‘Ridley Hero: Alien Queen’, which Ms. Midnight turned down because it was too scary), while others were cute (Asui’s choice of ‘Rainy Season Hero: Froppy’ in particular), and others were heartwarming (like Kirishima’s goal to be like his favorite hero, Crimson Riot, by choosing the name ‘Sturdy Hero: Red Riot’).

Izuku made a note to ask Kirishima about Crimson Riot, later. He couldn’t remember learning about him before.

Ms. Midnight warned Kirishima that bearing the name of a hero that you connected with, personally, would likely put a lot of pressure on him to conform to his ideal of that hero. Kirishima was more than ready for that, and he accepted the advice with a wide smile and a fist to the air.

It wasn’t until Todoroki put up a sign that simply read ‘Shoto’ that Izuku realized other students were having trouble with creating a hero name for themselves.

Izuku put his marker to his board, having the sudden inspiration that he could use ‘Izuku’ or ‘Deku’ as his name… but that wouldn’t be right, either. Izuku didn’t want people knowing who he was, and too many people had heard the name ‘Deku’ in reference to him. It was too recognizable.

He lifted the pen from the board and gazed back at his list of ideas. What type of hero did he want to be? He didn’t want cameras following him. He didn’t want demons or warlocks to use his hero image to hunt him down. He wanted to be hidden and safe, but he also wanted to jump out of nowhere to save the day, to solve any problem, to come up with a way to make everything better even if it was unconventional. He wanted to be the person who came just in the nick of time, since no one had come for him.

There was only one hero name that could fit all that.

Izuku finished writing the kanji and stood up on shaky legs to walk to the front of the class. He felt a nervousness and a certainty settle within him, blood rushing through his veins, as he publicly declared for the first time what kind of hero he aspired to be.

"The Hidden Hero: Black Maverick."

There were some murmurs from the class, Uraraka asking what a ‘maverick’ was and Aoyama questioning why anyone would want to be ‘hidden’. Even Hagakure had chosen the adjective ‘stealth’ to describe her role. But Izuku didn’t just want to be stealthy. He wanted to be a hero who no one knew existed, except those whose lives were saved by him.

Todoroki was, surprisingly, the first to understand. "‘Maverick’, because of the unconventional way you solve problems."

Izuku smiled at him and nodded his head. "Yeah, I want to be known as the hero who can solve any problem, even in ways you wouldn’t expect."
Ms. Midnight hummed in thought. “But why ‘the hidden hero’?”

Izuku shuffled in place, a blush stealing over his cheeks as he glanced over at the teacher beside him. “Because I don’t want people to know who I am or where I come from.”


Izuku thought about that title. *Secrets, huh?*

Izuku did have a lot of secrets, and he was trying to keep himself a secret. It fit perfectly. And if it made him seem mysterious in a positive way, then he was all for it. “That sounds perfect,” Izuku smiled. He shuffled back to his seat and erased the word ‘hidden’. Not hidden. *Secret*. He felt a connection with that word.

A couple minutes later, Iida walked to the front of the room and presented his name. The board said simply ‘Ingenium’.

Izuku tried to choke back tears as he smiled at his friend, both proud and sad at the same time. Pride, because Tenya hadn’t wanted to take his brother's name, but had enough courage and honor to acquiesce to his brother’s wish. Sadness, because Tenya would always be trying to live up to that name; and after what Ms. Midnight had said to Kirishima earlier, Izuku doubted he would ever feel like he managed to.

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_All Might stood in a faculty office next to Cementoss, staring in shock at the name on the screen._

“*Are you sure? This… are you certain that this pro-hero wants to draft young Midoriya?”*

_A curious hum. “Why, is there a problem?”*

“No, not a problem. I simply… did not expect to see his name again.”

_More papers being printed and shuffled around. “Didn’t you use to work with him?”*

_A softer voice, empty and reminiscing. “Yes. A long time ago.”*

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It would be a week and a half until they would start their Internships, so they only had a couple days to choose where they would be interning. Then, the pro-heroes would have the following week to get paperwork so that they could be legally shadowed by students who didn’t have provisional hero licenses.

Mr. Aizawa handed out a list of agencies willing to recruit and intern first-year students. It would be up to all the students who didn’t receive a draft pick to go through the list, figure out what each agency specialized in, and determine where they would get the most out of their internship.

Izuku looked over the list, wondering if he should go with one of the few draft picks he’d received or pick somewhere from the free-for-all list. It would have been really useful to have a map of where
Izuku sighed as he browsed through the forty hero agencies that everyone could choose from while he waited on his specialized list. Each entry had the name of the agency, the main city/location, and the specific hero they would be working under. The latter column was needed because, sometimes, larger agencies offered to intern students, but the students would directly intern under one of the second or third tier heroes at the agency, rather than the top name. Therefore, each student had to be careful when picking through the list to make sure that they would be training under someone that matched their desired skillset.

Once Mr. Aizawa had handed out all the specialized lists, Uraraka only took about ten minutes to decide that she wanted to intern under the Battle Hero: Gunhead, who was known for his focus on physical brawling. He was one of the only heroes from her personalized list that would allow her to strengthen what she considered one of her weaknesses: physical fighting.

Izuku smiled as she mimed boxing the air beside him. She was really cool, sometimes. She was always optimistic and friendly and loyal, and she kept striving to be a better hero. He wondered if she would be willing to join the pack. She’d raised her hand before the Sports Festival, hadn’t she?

“What about you? You already know how to physically fight, so are you going to intern somewhere you can learn stealth techniques?”

Izuku hummed at her suggestion, his thumb typing away on his phone as he entered another name from his personalized list. “I’m thinking of it. I’m trying to look up what each of these heroes is good at, but it takes a while to do on my phone.”

“I know a lot of heroes, so I might be able to give you a few hints.” Sero leaned over from where he was going through his own list. His dark eyes distracted Izuku for a second, when he raised his head to stare into them.

It was kind of hard to look away when Sero gazed at him like that. Izuku's mouth got all weird and dry.

Izuku tried to redirect his focus to his personalized list again, nodding his head enthusiastically as he agreed. “Thanks, that’d be great!”

The other teen moved his chair about a foot away so that he could see the list better, just as Izuku raised the page between them. “So are you trying to decide on an internship based on their focus? Like, fighting or stealth or whatever?”

Ignoring the way his heart rate sped up, Izuku scratched at his hair with his opposite hand. A furrow appeared between his eyebrows. “I guess? I mean, location doesn’t really matter. If it was close to one of my friends, that would be cool, but otherwise choosing based on their focus is probably my best bet.”

Sero nodded and hummed, his black hair falling out from behind his ear to cradle his jawline. “Hmm… well, number three and, uh, I think nine and ten are mainly physical brawlers. You might like number twelve, though. I remember watching him fight once, and it was a bit like Eraserhead.”

Izuku got excited about the idea of that one. “Really?”

“Oh, heh, yeah, he’s pretty cool, and I know you like Eraserhead, so it would probably be a great opportunity. And uh…” Sero switched back to the top of the list, his fingers trailing over the second name. Izuku liked watching his hands. “I grew up near this agency. They’re really focused on
logistics and planning, but they’re also hands-on in the city itself. They’re mostly female, so it’s interesting that they offered to draft you.”

Izuku peered down at the name, his breath ghosting over Sero’s knuckles. The other teen blushed and scooted his chair closer, pretending he needed to be nearer to the list in order to read it better.

Hearing the screeching of the chair on the floor, Bakugou glared over his shoulder at Sero. He raised a questioning eyebrow at the lack of distance between Sero and Izuku. Sero raised an eyebrow back, almost challengingly. Bakugou snorted and turned away to focus on the list he was creating of potential hero aliases. Ms. Midnight hadn’t liked any of his ideas so far.

A few minutes later, a knock came at the classroom door, causing a few of the students to look up as All Might appeared. “Young Midoriya! May I have word with you?”

Izuku looked up past Sero to the tall, broad figure leaning at a forty-five degree angle through the doorway. He had no idea what All Might wanted. He had talked to his teacher the day before about the festival, so he wondered what All Might might need to talk about now. Izuku shrugged over at Sero with a brief smile before getting up and heading to the door.

A few minutes later, they were in the faculty lounge that Izuku had grown increasingly familiar with. He could already count on two hands the number of times he’d been here, most often sitting on the floor next to the coffee table.

Not knowing how long the conversation would take, Izuku trudged over to the coffee table and sat on the floor on the opposite side of the couch. His usual spot. He crossed his legs and leaned over onto the surface of the coffee table, peering up as All Might sat on the couch across for him, his lanky form still covered in smoke from changing out of his All Might persona.

“I apologize for tearing you away from your peers, but I felt it best to explain this to you away from… prying eyes.” All Might’s expression looked troubled as he laid a piece of paper on the coffee table between them.

Izuku picked up the paper, which appeared to be a last-minute draft pick from a pro-hero. It had his name on the page, along with the name of the hero agency. “Sir Nighteye? Who is that?”

“He is… was a friend of mine. In fact, he was my partner once, many years ago.” All Might waited until Izuku had raised his eyes up from the page to meet his. “More importantly, he is one of the smartest people in the world.”

Izuku furrowed his eyebrows as All Might continued.

“In the world, young Midoriya. Therefore, it should come as no surprise to you that he managed to figure out what happened during your fight with young Todoroki.”

Izuku felt as though all the blood had frozen in his veins. “He knows I had a premonition?”

All Might reached a hand out on the table as though to console him, before realizing that the distance between them was too great and that leaning over any further would cause undue pressure on his
wound. He retracted his hand as he gazed down at Izuku, his smile wide and reassuring. “Do not worry, my boy. Sir Nighteye would not cause you troubles because of your ability. In fact, I expect that he issued you an offer because of your gift.”

Izuku peered at his teacher, wary and unsure. “Why?”

All Might cleared his throat, as though the next bit of information was the part he was afraid Izuku would have an issue with. “Because Sir Nighteye’s quirk is Foresight. He has the ability to see the entirety of a person’s future with a single touch while looking into your eyes.”

If Izuku had been standing, he would have likely scrambled backward in a vague sense of fear and perturbation. As it was, he jerked away and braced himself on his hands, his eyes wide and his voice strained. “What?”

All Might’s smile dimmed as he made another abortive hand gesture. Always trying to console others. Always trying to make it seem okay. “Ah, you are worried. I did not mean to frighten you. Indeed, I meant to recommend him to you, as a possible mentor during your Internship Week.”

Izuku leaned forward toward the coffee table as he peered into All Might’s shadowed eyes, searching for answers. He kept his voice low as he tried to find the right words. “Why would I train with someone who could figure out what I am with a single touch? The danger that could put me in, that it could put both of us in. Why would I do that?”

All Might shook his head. “I would not worry about him discovering the supernatural world. Much like Principal Nezu, I assume he knows about it already. He has a vast information network, in addition to his quirk and mental acuity.”

Izuku took a deep breath, trying to center himself as he splayed his hands out on the coffee table. The surface felt cool to the touch, and it helped him calm down. He took another deep breath and looked up at his teacher. “Alright… but why would I train with him?”

All Might’s eyes turned piercing, giving Izuku the feeling that they could see into his very soul. His next words dug at Izuku’s insecurities and at the many thoughts that had plagued him before his visit to Todoroki several nights before. “Your premonitions. You do not know how to handle them, how to use them or how to deal with the emotional fall-out from having them.” His voice softened. “He would be a perfect mentor for helping you deal with them. In fact, I can think of no better mentor for a student with multiple abilities who wants guidance on how and whether to reveal those abilities. You can trust him. He will not lead you astray.”

Izuku looked down at his lap as he pondered his teacher’s words. Sir Nighteye was smart and clever and had a precognitive quirk. Those seemed like a dangerous combination to be around. However, All Might was right—Izuku was having trouble with his premonitions. He didn’t know how to control them, and he didn’t know how to control his emotional reactions to them. He’d been having nightmares for weeks because of whatever happened with Tensei, and he was starting to be afraid of Popsicle’s raven form. He had the meditation stone from the tengu, and that helped him recall dreams, but it didn’t help him tell truth from fiction or discern premonitions from dreams. And then there were the thoughts he had after revealing someone’s future to them or revealing the vision to someone else, how his decisions affected those potential futures, and whether Izuku only made the situation worse by revealing it. Having someone to guide him, someone to help him, someone who could show him the way…

In many ways, this offer from Sir Nighteye should probably be the perfect opportunity, but Izuku still had a bad feeling about it. Everything hinged on whether this Sir Nighteye was a good person, and honest, and willing to keep a secret. All Might had said he was smart, but being smart could be a
dangerous thing when you were around Izuku Midoriya. It could get you into all sorts of trouble. It
could get both of them into trouble. If those people found out… the ones who erased anyone who
shared secrets of the supernatural world… Izuku didn’t want to imagine what would happen.

On the other hand, if Sir Nighteye already knew about the supernatural, then Izuku wouldn’t be
revealing anything, would he?

Izuku chewed at his lip as he massaged his left hand with his thumb.

Was the offer too good to be true, or dangerous… which was it? All Might trusted him; he even said
they used to be partners. But All Might also trusted that strange supernatural hero agency…

Izuku raised his eyes to look at his teacher. “Do you think I can trust him?”

All Might’s face looked serious, his eyes hooded and old. “I think he is one of the only people that
you would be safe in trusting. He is a good man, and if he has offered to intern you, then he must
have seen something in you that he wants to protect and nurture.”

Izuku nodded his head in acquiescence. “If that’s your recommendation, then I trust you. And I’ll put
my trust in him.”

And that, as they say, was that.

(Although Izuku will later double-check his decision with his pack leader to make sure that yes, Sir
Nighteye is a clever and trustworthy hero; and yes, he should be safe to mentor under him; and yes,
Mr. Aizawa gives the decision his seal of approval and thinks it will be a good idea. That, more than
All Might’s sympathy and assurances, will make Izuku feel like it was the right decision to make.)

Without the worry over which pro-hero agency to choose hanging over his head, Izuku was able to
enjoy the rest of the double class period with his friends. When he opened the door to the classroom,
Izuku saw that most of his classmates were staring with wide eyes at Katsuki Bakugou.

When Izuku had left, Mr. Aizawa had finished handing out everyone’s personalized pro-hero draft
pick lists, so no one had noticed… but apparently, Kacchan hadn’t actually picked out his hero name
yet. The rest of the class were supposed to be choosing where they would intern while Ms. Midnight
continued working with Bakugou in a personalized workshop session to help him find the right Hero
Alias.

Bakugou didn’t look happy.

The rest of the class looked a bit like new kids watching a circus—wide eyes, mouths dropped open,
some covering their smiles and withheld laughter behind their hands. They all looked to be ‘working’
on their lists, but the wandering eyes and obvious lack of progress indicated otherwise. Izuku walked
back to his desk, crossing between the weird energy bubble between Bakugou and Ms. Midnight,
and sat down. Bakugou chose that moment to choose another name from a list he held in front of
him. He offered the potential hero alias to their teacher, in typical Bakugou politeness.

Which is to say a snarl. He was snarling at their teacher.

“Boomboom Killer Fire.”
“No.” And she was raising her eyebrow back at him.

Izuku looked over as a snicker actually made its way past Sero’s mouth. Izuku’s eyes quickly jerked back to Bakugou to see whether his friend would get mad at Sero.

Nothing. Just a growl and another name from the list.

“King Doom Explosion.”

“Still no. And you are now forbidden to request any names including the word ‘king.’”

Another growl.

_How long had this been going on? Since Izuku left?

“Badass Motherfucker.”

“Language, Mr. Bakugou, and no, _obviously not,_” Ms. Midnight scolded.

Mr. Aizawa rolled over in his grave, er, sleeping bag, as Bakugou scowled. He then seemed to skip a few lines down his list.

_Were they all bad words?

“Grenadier Demon.”

Ms. Midnight sighed and wiped at her face with her hands. “That is… not terrible, if you are going for a villain name.”

Kirishima, who was sitting in Jirou’s seat beside Bakugou, snickered. “Come on, man, you can do this! Just don’t suggest names that sound evil?”

Bakugou glared over at his friend, having picked another name. “Murder Death Kill.”

Kirishima rolled his eyes. “That’s not a name, Baku-bro.”

Ms. Midnight hummed and nodded, her thumb stroking her chin. “Baku-bro could work as a hero name—”

But Bakugou cut her musing off with another suggestion. “Hard Body Face Killer.”

Izuku gulped as he watched Midnight level Bakugou with a deadpan stare that obviously meant ‘no’.

“You are also now forbidden from using the word ‘killer’ in your hero name.”

Bakugou rolled his eyes. “Fine. Hard Body Face _Melter._”

Kirishima joked about Bakugou not needing to compensate for anything while Ms. Midnight regretted her life’s choices and refused another of her student’s pro-hero name suggestions. Honestly, she’d never seen a student struggle this hard to come up with a hero name that wasn’t offensive or villainous. She was starting to question what was wrong with him. Or society. Or her theory that being a teacher in her off-hero time would be a good idea.

“Face Blaster Man Cannon.”

Izuku spied Kaminari slightly gaping at Bakugou, alongside an incredulous Sero and a snickering
Jirou. Kirishima fell out of his chair laughing. Apparently, that name had been suggestive of something. Izuku didn't know what.

“Not that one either. And might I suggest not focusing your name on destroying people’s faces?” Ms. Midnight walked closer to her student’s desk and seemed to be trying to read his list while he glared sideways at her approach. There was a pause, and then Midnight hesitated as though unsure how to word her next question. “Are… numbers seventeen through fifty all based on different combinations of ‘grenadier’ and ‘demon’?”

Bakugou grabbed his list, moving it closer to him and away from his teacher’s prying eyes. “Grenadiers are awesome,” he said, as if that was the concept in question.

Ms. Midnight sighed and took a step back toward the front of the classroom.

Bakugou searched his list for a name that didn’t violate the naming requirements he’d been given. Izuku could hear him growling low under his voice. Kirishima leaned over into his friend’s space, and surprisingly, Bakugou didn’t shove him away or move his list out of eyesight.

A couple seconds later, a smile lit up Kirishima’s face. “Oooh, what about number thirty-two?”

Bakugou barely deliberated the suggestion for a second before offering the name up for Ms. Midnight’s consideration. “Master Nitro-splosian Grenadier Demon.”

Ms. Midnight raised an eyebrow at Kirishima, who shrugged. “What? It’s got potential. And you edited Aoyama’s name…”

Ms. Midnight sighed and went to the front board, writing down ‘Master Nitro-splosian Grenadier Demon’. She hummed for a few seconds in thought before crossing out ‘demon’. A few seconds later, she crossed out ‘master’ as well, causing Bakugou to groan and Izuku to reach out a consoling hand to rub at his friend’s shoulder.

Bakugou shoved it off.

Ms. Midnight made an ‘aha!’ noise followed by drawing arrows and crossing out more words. She displayed the final product on the board using a pose worthy of a game show, her hands splayed out at different heights to make the final hero alias seem to sparkle. The result of her efforts read: Nitro Grenade.

Bakugou growled again, half in disgust and half in anger, his shoulders bristling and tensing up. “Nitro-grenade?!”

Ms. Midnight smiled, proud of her work. “Yes.”

A few seconds passed before Bakugou’s shoulders relaxed and his face melted into a less-angry scowl that typically indicated happiness. “…okay.”

Kaminari cheered from three seats away. “Finally!”

Which of course caused Bakugou to stand up. “Shut the fuck up, extra, or I’ll—”

“Sit. Down.” Mr. Aizawa’s voice cut through the ensuing drama before it could begin. He didn’t look happy to be awake.

Bakugou sat down.
Izuku covered a smile behind the hand that was propping his chin up. *Bakugou was obeying the pack leader!*

“Well, Eraserhead, if that’s all… I will be getting back to my lunch in the faculty lounge.” Ms. Midnight gave the class a wave and a strut as she headed out the door, while Mr. Aizawa settled back down into his sleeping bag, quiet once more.

Kirishima broke the silence in the room by leaning over to Bakugou and nudging him with a single elbow and a broad grin. “Hey, I like the name you decided on. It’s pretty manly.”

As if he’d actually decided on the name.

Izuku figured Kirishima must understand what he was doing, making it seem like it was Kacchan’s choice in the first place, since Bakugou relaxed and smirked back at him. In turn, Izuku’s tense shoulders relaxed, and he found himself smiling.

*His pack was happy. Crisis averted.*

Izuku pulled out his phone and decided to try to search up more information about Sir Nighteye until the end of the class period. He wasn’t a terribly publicized pro-hero, which was good for Izuku’s public scrutiny paranoia, and he seemed to be incredibly effective at what he did. Sir Nighteye’s hero agency was two-parts information gathering, one-part government involvement, and three-parts hunting down hidden villain sects. It was actually really interesting to read about, and Izuku had to blink himself out of a daze as Sero tapped him on the shoulder and told him that school had ended.

Izuku hadn’t even heard the bell.

Izuku smiled up at Sero and thanked him for the warning. He got up and put his notes in his bag, jostling Popsicle, who was curled up around his neck, in the process. Out of the corner of his eye, Izuku spied Tenya slinging his backpack over his shoulder. Izuku had been trying to find a way to ask the other teen whether he could go over to his place and hang out, after school, because he thought his friend might need some emotional support. Tensei was likely still in the hospital, and Izuku knew that if his own family weren’t doing well, then he would want a friend. And Izuku wanted to be that friend for Tenya, even if it had been difficult to sit with the other teen during lunch and even if it was harder to corner him alone.

Plus, Izuku’s mom would be working a late-shift tonight, and Izuku didn’t really fancy being alone again. Spending time together with pack sounded perfect.

However, when Izuku walked over to offer that they hang out tonight, Tenya’s eyes grew hooded and his tone was more cold than usual. “I’m not ready yet. I… need more time.”

Izuku didn’t know what he was talking about. *Time for what? Time to be with Tensei? Time away from Izuku?*

Izuku’s heart stopped in his chest. *Wait, was Tenya actually upset with him? Had Izuku done something wrong? Had Tenya been avoiding him on purpose? “Oh, uh, o-of course. I mean, yeah, sure, it was, um, just if you wanted.”*

Izuku stared after Tenya as his friend walked away, a sick feeling settling in his stomach. His eyes felt like they were stinging, and his skin prickled with cold even while his body flushed with heat. He looked down at the floor and took a deep breath, everywhere from his gut to his throat feeling like it was made out of sludge. *What was wrong with him? Just because Tenya was busy with family stuff or his own emotions doesn’t mean he was mad at Izuku. And even if he was…*
Even if... he was...

“Hey, Midoriya?”

Izuku blinked away the blurriness in his eyes (Wait, was he crying? Were those tears?) as he turned to Sero, who had put a warm hand on his shoulder.

Sero dropped his hand and smiled at Izuku, supportive, friendly. He leaned in closer with his kind, dark eyes. “Would you like to hang out with me?”

Izuku blinked several times within a few seconds to get rid of the blurriness in his eyes. “Uh, what?”

Sero’s smile waned before picking back up at full-capacity. “If you wanted to hang out with someone? I’m free, and my parents aren’t at the apartment, so you could definitely come over. Maybe look at draft picks with me?” At the last suggestion, he adjusted the backpack on his shoulder and tilted his head—innocent, inviting.

Izuku tried not to be distracted by the way his smile shone or the descent of a single lock of hair that fell from behind Sero’s ear to dangle enticingly in front of his eye.

The sickness in Izuku’s stomach eased. The cold sweat trailed away.

Izuku wished Sero would put his hand back on his shoulder. That had felt nice.

Izuku grinned back at him, a weak twitch of the lips that slowly transformed into something more as he realized a potential packmate wanted to spend more time together. He hadn’t yet gotten the chance to hang out with Sero one on one, and it made his heart race and his blood sing to have the opportunity to get to know him better.

Alone. Together.

Izuku flushed with gratitude, or whatever that warm feeling in his chest was. It felt nice to be wanted, and even nicer because it was Sero. “Yeah, that sounds great!”

Sero seemed like such a cool guy, and so talented. Izuku felt lucky to go home with him and share stories about how their respective weeks had gone, especially when Sero helped guide him to the correct train with a warm hand on his back.

He really liked Sero’s hands.

---

Izuku Midoriya had never felt like this before. He didn’t know if it was because of Tenya not wanting to hang out, or if Sero’s apartment just had a peculiar energy, or if there was something about Sero himself... but Izuku couldn’t stop feeling overheated and nervous and dry-throated and a bit prickly.

He was sitting on Sero’s couch as the other teen handed him another piece of fruit (because Sero was apparently a health food nut?) and encouraged Izuku to sip on his water again.

Because Sero? He had apparently taken it upon himself to provide for any of Izuku’s needs while they were hanging out. At first, that included turning down the thermostat because Izuku was getting too hot. Then it involved putting a blanket around his shoulders when he got too cold. Then Sero had
gotten Izuku some water when he was thirsty, and some oranges when his stomach grumbled. He also kept touching Izuku, light brushes as he directed Izuku’s attention to something else on the computer screen or airy caresses as he motioned to the fruit bowl, silently asking if Izuku wanted more.

Izuku always wanted more, and the stickiness of the orange could still be felt around the edges of his lips. Izuku tried to wash it away with another sip of water and a lick of his tongue, but the taste of citrus and consideration remained.

They had just finished going through Sero’s pro-hero draft picks, after Izuku had told his new friend that he had already pretty firmly decided on interning under Sir Nighteye. For each of Sero’s draft picks, Izuku would look up the pro-hero on the internet, and Sero would fill out a hand-written table about where each hero was located, what they were like, and what they did. Izuku was excited for several of his friend’s choices, and the energy kept building between the two of them as they veered off topic on different heroes that both of them admired.

Izuku wished he could say that he knew a lot about heroes, but really, he only knew about All Might and Eraserhead. (The irony that both of his favorite pro-heroes now taught his classes at U.A. and that one of them was his homeroom teacher and pack leader was not lost on him.) He’d run into articles about other pros, but none of their names and appearances stuck with him as much. He memorized what heroes he needed for homework, but he didn’t really know much about newer heroes. Izuku blamed his lack of media access. It wasn’t often that he was near internet or television, and it wasn’t very feasible to buy magazines when you didn’t have much money to your family name and you lived out of a single suitcase.

And sure, he’d used some data on his phone during class to look up a couple of the heroes on his personalized list, but he’d agreed with his mom to only use his Wifi access during school hours. Once he was home, it was like living in another world, one that was closed off, protected, safe. One where he didn’t know the news until he was on the bus the next day, or sometimes not even until homeroom or lunch. It depended on how big the news was.

Still, Izuku was enjoying his conversation with Sero. It was nice to learn about new heroes, and Sero already knew that Izuku admired Eraserhead. He just hadn’t known about Izuku’s love for All Might. And following from what Izuku had discovered earlier, his new obsession with Sir Nighteye.

Sero was happy for him, since Izuku would be interning under someone he thought was really cool.

Of course, Sero was just happy in general. And friendly. And considerate. And he kept giving Izuku things.

Izuku wasn’t used to being given things. He was used to earning things. Cast a protection circle, get a meditation stone. Cast another protection circle, get turned into a girl. Help out the child of two ancient vampires, get some of her blood. You know, normal things.

Right. Normal.

Sero seemed… normal. He wasn’t over-the-top, like Kirishima, or constantly glaring and rough around the edges, like Bakugou. He didn’t chop his arms and shout orders, like Tenya. He wasn’t sweet and giggly, like Uraraka, or silent and somewhat melodramatic, like Tokoyami.

Sero was just… normal. Or what Izuku guessed was normal. He looked out for people, even when he didn’t have to. He was nice and caring… Izuku could remember multiple times in the past month where Sero would ask how Izuku was doing because he’d noticed Izuku had seemed a bit off; and then there was that conversation in the lunchroom about Kacchan being controlling. Sero’s concern
never failed to make this warm and pleasant feeling thrum underneath Izuku’s skin, and Izuku loved
when it happened. However, he hadn’t expected that warm feeling to keep persisting the whole time
they hung out together while the other teen checked in on how Izuku was doing every few minutes.

Izuku had never had this much attention given to him. It was… nice?

Yeah, it was nice.

And Sero was nice.

And Izuku really needed to stop flushing right about now.

Izuku took another breath in and hoped it didn’t sound as shaky as it felt. What was wrong with him?
His body kept doing things today without Izuku having any control over them, like the near-crying
earlier and now this-this heat or whatever it was.

It was strange.

Izuku was used to being happy and joyful and touching the people he liked being around. He was
used to nuzzling his friends’ necks or massaging muscles or working his fingers into things he didn’t
understand (Sero’s elbows, Kirishima’s teeth, Tenya’s legs—), but right now, he kind of felt… he
felt like…

Izuku didn’t know. He didn’t know how to put it into words. He didn’t know what was wrong with
him. He kind of wanted to scoot closer to Sero on the couch? But he was kind of afraid to. And he
kind of wanted to nuzzle his neck? But it was different than with Bakugou or Kirishima, where it
was casual and warm and comforting. This was—it was—

The thought of it was—

Well, in short, it certainly didn’t feel comforting. It felt a bit scary, actually, and Izuku was maybe,
sort of, actually petrified of doing it. But he wasn’t afraid of Sero?

Izuku really didn’t know how to deal with this. He tried to refocus his attention on the computer
screen, ignoring how he was growing hotter and beginning to sweat from nerves underneath the
blanket Sero had given him.

“Hey, Midoriya, are you alright?”

But of course Sero noticed, because Sero was observant and kind and Izuku really wanted to be his
friend. Izuku wanted to be friends, right? That’s what this was. It was just… a bit different, for some
reason, because his body was being weird today.

“You’re looking a bit flushed. Are you getting too hot? I can take the blanket from you…”

Izuku peered over at Sero’s affable grin, and his chest felt really strange. Adrenaline started pouring
through his body, and his fingers tingled, almost as much as during the start of a fight. Popsicle
hissed from around his collarbone and shifted, asking Izuku if he was okay.

And he was. He was okay. He just… needed something? But he wasn’t sure what.

Sero’s hand reached over and loosened the blanket from around Izuku’s shoulders. Izuku gulped as
Sero’s fingers lightly trailed across his shoulder and upper arm, his breathing beginning to slow as his
eyes focused on the other teen. Some of Sero’s black hair had fallen loose from the ponytail he’d put
it into, and the tendrils had fallen to frame the left side of his face. Izuku felt like he was in a trance,
staring at the other boy’s hair and wondering what it felt like. Was it smooth? Or was it coarse like Kacchan’s hair, or a bit sticky like Kirishima’s?

Izuku switched his gaze to Sero’s eyes. He’d noticed them before—that first time during lunch, and then occasionally during class, and then during that one exercise where Sero and Izuku had both ended up with the air punched out of them, lying on the ground next to each other and grinning from adrenaline and the ridiculousness of it all—but they were really pretty. His eyes had these grey streaks amidst the brown that almost seemed silver in the light of his living room. It was actually a bit calming to simply stare into his eyes and stop thinking about whatever was going on with his body.

Of course, just as Izuku finally began settling back down, Sero had to go and make him nervous again. He put his hand on Izuku’s shoulder blade (and since when were his hands so big and so wide?) and began stroking the back of Izuku’s shirt with his thumb. Izuku’s heart rate doubled, tripled, quadrupled—

He tried to swallow once, twice, a third time. His throat was dry, so he grabbed at the bottle of water Sero had gotten for him and drank another swig. He could still taste the oranges in his mouth. He had a strange notion that he was always going to connect the taste of oranges with Sero, from now on.

Unable to get his breathing under control, Izuku muttered a quick "berightback" and booked it towards the restroom. He locked the door behind him and splashed his face with cold water, trying to cool down. His hands felt a bit shaky from the release of the adrenaline, just like after a fight. He rubbed at his mouth with his hand, with his forefingers, and then with the backs of his knuckles. He felt the need to call someone, but he only had three numbers in his phone: his mom’s (and she was working), Tenya’s (and he hadn’t wanted to talk), and Uraraka’s.

Izuku settled for Uraraka.

She answered on the second ring with a concerned lilt to her sweet voice. “Hello? Deku?”

“I think I’m having a panic attack,” Izuku rushed out. They’d covered the topic of panic attacks and other responses to fear and stress during this week’s Hero Psychology session.

“Okay, why do you think you’re having a panic attack?” She sounded patient but in charge, and Izuku had the sudden epiphany that she was going to be a fantastic hero someday. She was good at being in control when she needed to be. She was going to save lives.

“I, uh, I don’t think I’m breathing properly? And my heart started racing, and I’ve just—I’ve got this adrenaline running through my body, and I can’t seem to focus right, and I can’t stop looking at Sero and his hair, and his really nice eyes, and they were making me feel calm, but then he made me all nervous again?”

Uraraka’s giggle kind of ruined his paranoia. “Aw, Deku… don’t worry, you’re not having a panic attack, hun.”

Izuku paused in his pacing. “I’m not?”

Her assertion actually made him feel better, although it didn’t make his chest area stop feeling so strange. From the background of the phonecall, Izuku heard a “Gero?” It sounded like Asui.

Uraraka made a shushing noise at whomever was with her. “No, you’re probably just—” She paused. “Has anyone ever explained attraction to you?”

Izuku was confused. He sat down on the closed lid of the toilet, his hand in his hair, pulling at his curly bangs. “What? I mean, Iida showed me a sex education video, and we talked about how
attraction often leads to sex…”

Uraraka’s responding tone sounded very panicked. “NO. No no no no NO. Absolutely not. No sex.”

Izuku flushed. “Uh, okay?”

“Alright, um—” Uraraka began fumbling for words, and then there were strange noises, as though the phone was being passed around or struggled over.

Asui’s voice came out of the receiver. “Midoriya? If you’re this nervous, it might be best to tell him how you feel.”

“How I… feel?” Izuku was confused.

“Gero.”

There were more sounds of struggling over the phone.

Uraraka’s soothing tone took over. “What she means is… well, you’re probably just nervous because you don’t know how he feels back? Like, if Sero said ‘I like you, too,’ then wouldn’t you feel better?”

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed, his face dropping into a vague mimicry of a pout. “Of course he likes me. We’re friends. He said we were.”

“Well, yes, of course he likes you as a friend. You’re fun to hang out with. But uh… he might also like you as, uh, more than a friend?” Uraraka’s upward lilt at the end of her sentence made it seem as though she wasn’t sure.

Asui’s voice could be heard musing from farther off. “He is always staring at you during class…”

“What, really?!” Uraraka sounded more shocked and excited than Izuku felt. He knew Sero watched him. Sero was really nice like that. He kept an eye out for Izuku and tried to help him and protect him and he always smiled at Izuku when he—

Oh.

Oh… oh wait, like… mating attraction? She thought Sero might want to be mates? And that Izuku might want Sero for a mate? But-but what about Todoroki? Or—wait, whoa wait, what?

Asui hummed. “Gero. Just tell Sero that you like him, as more than a friend, and see what he says back.”

Izuku’s heart felt like it was stopping in his chest, and the world seemed fuzzy around him. People just announced their mating intentions like that? Wasn’t there supposed to be some sort of process? What about running together on the full moon? Sharing food? Cuddling? Izuku swallowed past his lightheadedness. “O-okay, and… if he does? Uh, like me as more than a friend?”

“Then you kiss him!” Uraraka cheered.

Wait, WHAT.

Asui’s voice butted in, sounding closer to the phone than before. “Uraraka, that might not be the best idea. Midoriya, you could just wait for him to make a move. You can be rather forceful when you hug people.”
Well, he wouldn’t disagree with that assessment. Bakugou had complained about something similar, and even Kirishima had made a joke about it. Izuku can remember having a long discussion on Tenya’s bed about how Izuku occasionally glomped people and why that wasn’t appropriate unless they were very close friends, and even then it depended on how open the friend was to physical contact. He could also remember how warm Tenya felt lying next to him, and how much he missed him, and how he wanted to know what he did wrong and why Tenya had acted so cold earlier…

Uraraka seemed sheepish. “Oh, yeah, true. Hun, do what Asui says—”

“—call me Tsu.”

Uraraka sighed before continuing. “Do what Tsu says. Be brave, my butterfly!” She cheered at the end of her statement, a light and high-pitched sound that echoed through the phone’s receiver.

Izuku just felt more confused than before. “What?”

Uraraka giggled again before trailing off. “I just, uh, I always wanted to say that, and it seemed like an appropriate sort of conversation stopper. Or, uh, maybe not...?”

Asui’s voice butted in again with a “Good luck, Midoriya,” and then the phone call abruptly ended.

Izuku stared at the wall.

They thought he was… that these weird physical feelings were his body’s way of saying that it wanted to mate with Sero? Not that Sero wasn’t nice— of course he was nice! —but Izuku had been doing all that research in his ancestors’ journals about soulmates… and soulmates were kind of like mates, weren’t they? So if Izuku’s theory about his and Todoroki’s inexplicable astral soul connection was correct, then he should be feeling like this about Todoroki. But he hadn’t felt like this around Todoroki before… of course, they’d also never hung out together, alone, before. Not where they physically sat next to each other while spending time together, like Izuku had been doing with Sero, a few minutes ago.

Maybe that was the way you figured stuff like this out? Maybe you spent time together, and if your body reacted a certain way, then it meant something?

But what if you hung out with several people alone, and you felt like this for more than one of them? Then how were you supposed to determine who your mate was? And Izuku thought that all the mate stuff wasn’t supposed to happen until he had reached majority. He still had three more years until that! So why was his body doing this now?!

Izuku needed to figure out what he was going to do. He couldn’t stay in this bathroom forever, and the phone call had calmed him down, at least. Did he follow their advice, say something, and see what Sero said in return? Maybe his friend was feeling the same way, and saying something would help them both calm down like Uraraka suggested. That would be the good thing to do, then, to put it all out in the open.

But Izuku hadn’t even noticed all these weird sensations until today. Was he supposed to wait, to see if it went away? Was he supposed to come back tomorrow, and the next day, and the next, to see if it was a repetitive feeling before he said something like ‘hey we might be mates because my body is apparently attracted to you, and I can’t stop staring at you, and I know you stare at me, so what do you think?’

Izuku had no idea what to do.

He was also getting kind of cold, huddled around himself on the toilet in Sero’s bathroom while his
friend was thinking who-knows-what outside.

Izuku took a deep breath and tried to focus. Honesty was the best policy, right? That’s what his mom always said about feelings. If you can’t be honest about your magic or the things you do, you can at least be honest about your feelings. And Izuku… well, he definitely felt something for Sero, alright. He just wasn’t used to naming whatever it was.

*It’s called liking someone,* Izuku mused. *And if you like someone, you tell them, because they might like you back. And then that’s… a good thing? And stuff happens?*

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Izuku stood up from the toilet. He rubbed his cold hands on his pants and walked toward the door, heading out into the living room to see Sero’s smiling face and a hand offering Izuku a hot cup of tea.

*Roasted green tea. His favorite.*

Aaaaand yep, Izuku was getting lightheaded again.

*C come on, Sero. You like to help people, don't you? So solve this for me. Tell me what to do.*

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks! I meant to get this out earlier, but I was debating how to end the chapter. I started writing Sero and Izuku just hanging out as friends... and then that end scene happened. Apparently, I can't put those two in a room alone together without things tumbling downhill into emotions. Sero just encourages him.

Aaand it's time for some audience participation. Sero/Izuku just kind of wrote themselves here, and I could keep going with that (which would include assuming they aren't an endgame romance, but Izuku is figuring out how attraction and other people work, and Sero tries to guide him through it while not quite knowing himself... all while Baku/Kiri freak out). Or Sero could shut Izuku down because he just likes taking care of people (and okay, low-key domming them) and didn't mean it in a romantic sense. Let me know which you would prefer! I honestly can't decide.

Either way, the beginning of next chapter will probably be Sero's POV about the situation, so that will be fun to write. I also have Baku/Kiri/Deku hangout times planned, and Izuku does a ritual to bind Popsicle further to him.
(Interlude) Tenya Iida's POV

Chapter Summary

Tenya Iida was doing the best that he knew how.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Tenya Iida was doing his best. And if his best currently involved going to school, acting like he was stronger than he felt, going to the hospital, and spending time with Tensei... well, then his mother said that focusing on himself was perfectly fine, sometimes. Heroes took so little time to themselves and allowed themselves so little leeway in their personal lives. But sometimes, you had to do what was right for you, and ignore the effect it was having on your friends until you could build back up your ability to focus on others.

Tenya spent most of his life focusing on others, observing whether they were following the rules or acting appropriately for the institution they were working at. He liked to do what was right, and he liked to encourage others to do what was right.

He was trying to do what was right, even now. It was just getting harder to tell what that was.

His heart told him to hunt down the Hero Killer, to shove him against a wall and hurt him like he hurt Tensei, to prove that Ingenium was strong enough to stop him. His gut told him to stay in place, that it wasn’t time just yet. His brain told him to think this through—Tensei wanted Tenya to take up the Ingenium mantle and be the hero Tensei could no longer be. Chasing down some dangerous and likely stupid notion of vengeance wasn’t very hero-like, and if Tenya wanted to live up to the image of Tensei that hovered over his subconscious, he shouldn’t give into his impulses. To be a hero in times like these, you had to stick to your ideals.

But ideals had a funny way of going fuzzy, just when you needed them the most. It felt like the image of Ingenium that Tenya had stored in his mind had somehow become a hazy mirage, even as Tenya sought to grasp for it and pull at it to become a part of him. What did it mean to be Ingenium? What did it mean to take his brother’s name? If Ingenium had a choice separate from the brother that became him, who did it want to be?

It was hard to organize his thoughts when his emotions kept wanting to pour out of him. He wasn’t used to crying. He wasn’t used to tears. Tenya Iida was quite proud of his emotional control. It served him well when organizing students in a classroom or determining what needed to be done in a crisis. Tenya Iida didn’t fall apart, and neither did Ingenium.

And yet here he was. And he was. And he wasn’t quite sure how to stop.

It would go away and come back at awkward intervals. He’d be doing his homework, and then he’d be crying. A few minutes later, the tears were gone, and he would stare at his English notes wondering where the shaky, breaking feeling in his chest had come from. It screeched at his insides in discord, disrupting his thoughts and making it difficult to figure out how to start working again. English. He could do English.
He walked the down the hallway to the restroom, and everything was fine. He looked out his window and got lost for a split second, but he was okay. He would be okay. He went down to dinner, and everything was fine.

Well, as fine as it could be.

The hallways of his house seemed to echo with an odd ringing sound that never left his ears. The pictures felt wrong on their frames. The silences during family mealtimes couldn’t be cured with idle chatter. Even the way the sunlight hit the window pane felt disjointed, like it was a few degrees off and everything about the view had shifted.

The house had changed even though Tensei hadn't lived there for years.

Weekly dinner nights with each of his brothers proceeded as normal, except for Tensei’s. On his night, Tenya and his parents went to the hospital with a new tradition of terrible hospital food around Tensei’s bedside. Tensei said he didn’t need cheering up. He insisted that he was doing well. But if he was doing well, Tenya didn’t understand why he was so pale or why his eyes looked sunken into the skin of his cheeks.

They played cards.

Tensei liked cards. He said it made you think quick on your feet, and it kept your mental reflexes sharp.

They didn’t play cards. Tensei didn’t need sharp mental reflexes anymore. The sunlight shifted on the window panes.

Tenya went away.

Tenya came back.

School went on.

Tenya Iida was doing his best. And if his best currently involved going to school, acting like he was stronger than he felt, going to the hospital, and spending time with Tensei… well, then his mother said that focusing on himself was perfectly fine, sometimes.

But still, that didn’t make him feel any less guilty when he sat next to Koda, because he knew Izuku wanted to talk. It didn’t make him feel any less guilty when he turned down Izuku’s offer of companionship for a single night. (It was Wednesday. Thursday nights were Tensei’s night, so Tenya needed to finish his homework ahead of time. He couldn’t have anything due Friday that he hadn’t already finished, or he would have to leave the hospital earlier. And he needed to be there. He needed to be. So… he didn’t have time to hang out with Izuku. That was just a logical decision.)

Yet the guilt of practically alienating his best friend was beginning to tear him apart even more. But what else was he supposed to do? Izuku wouldn’t make him talk. Tenya knew that. Izuku would just want to lay on a bed together and watch videos; and while it would be warm and nice, it just… it wasn’t practical. It wouldn’t help Tenya become a better hero. It wouldn’t get his homework done quicker. It wouldn’t allow him to spend any more time with Tensei, or give him any more insight into what it was that he should be doing with all the guilt and anger and confusion that was swirling inside him. He didn’t know how to get rid of the maelstrom inside himself. He didn’t know if he could get rid of it. He only knew how to clamp it down farther and farther and farther and farther, until it only ever appeared when he was doing homework or researching cures for his brother’s condition or watching a video on the news about a hero who saved—
It happened much too often.

It happened against his permission.

Tenya Iida didn’t like emotions. They weren’t something he could edit or rewrite or pull apart and put back together into something shiny, with newer parts and gleaming edges. Tenya wished emotions were like motorcycles—something you could get on and off of, something you could fix. When Tenya was younger, Tensei allowed him to watch as Tensei restored some old motorcycle in their parents’ garage. The way the leather seat felt under his small fingertips, the gleam of the handles, that strange rubber smell of the motorcycle’s wheels… Tenya had thought it was so cool—an upcoming hero with an engine quirk, working on an actual engine. Tenya had collected images and diagrams of engine parts for years, afterward. He’d thought that would make him similar to Tensei.

He didn’t know why he kept thinking about that.

It was one of those things that just kept… popping into his mind.

Tenya had been frustrated with himself ever since Monday, after the Sports Festival. He felt like he should be in better control of himself. He felt like he shouldn’t even be upset at all. Tensei was doing well; he was healthy enough, and he was alive. And while Tensei wouldn’t be able to work as a pro-hero again, he could still do desk work and surveillance for a hero company. He had a lot of experience on the field, and that could easily translate into a job that didn’t require him to run around physically saving people.

And yet… and yet…

Tenya figured that whatever weird emotions kept happening inside him had something to do with the disruption of the image he once had in his mind of who Ingenium was. Having the hero that you looked up to take a fall like this, get hurt this bad, and have so much of themselves erased forever… even though Tenya had agreed to take on his brother’s name, he doubted he would ever be able to live up to it. That hazy picture he had of the hero Ingenium in his head, it kept fading and streaking, as though it had been painted in watercolor and held up only by dreams. And as those dreams faded, Tenya wondered who he was even trying to be.

The hero Ingenium was in charge of a great agency with a diverse group of sidekicks and surveillance teams, who aided him in saving lives. The hero Ingenium always rushed to save innocent civilians in the nick of time. The hero Ingenium could take control of panic in the streets with a few words and the clear directions of his hands. He could fly around corners. He could appear out of nowhere. He knew just where to go. The hero Ingenium was invincible.

Or, he had been.

Once.

Before Tenya became him.

And Tenya Iida was anything but invincible.

Chapter End Notes
Hey everyone!

I apologize for the abrupt hiatus. I had to find a new apartment, move several states away, and start a new job all in the span of 3 weeks... and it messed up my update schedule for this story. I'm trying to get back into writing it. I had this Interlude planned as the beginning of next chapter (which is already written), but I'm putting this out while I edit that chapter and decide if I like where I went with it. It's currently written as Sero/Izuku with some Sero/Izuku/Kirishima/Bakugou hangout times and hilarities... but I'm still debating whether to commit to the Sero/Izuku tag before I write the ending.

I apologize that my Interludes always end up being sad POV switches, but I felt Iida needed to be able to say his piece. I also wanted you as readers to understand more where he's coming from, before we get to the Hero Killer arc, which is... planned to a certain extent.

Please leave comments about what you want to happen before/during the next arc! Having been away from writing for so long, it would definitely help jumpstart my creative process. :)


Chapter Summary

In which Sero teaches Izuku about dating, Bakugou gets his own show/POV filled with primetime jealousy and anger issues, and Baku/Kiri/Deku try to include Sero in their hangout-times to interesting results. Just a warning, this chapter is a bit of a see-saw of emotions. So, you know...

Brace yourselves.

I promise you'll be laughing when you aren't trying to punch the computer or Bakugou.

See if you can spot the ships! Baku/Deku, Baku/Kiri, Deku/Sero, and hey look it's Todo/Deku hiding in the corner/in the not-so-subtle ending.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was getting later in the evening, and Sero wondered if Midoriya would need to leave soon. The other teen had been in the bathroom for a while (and Sero thought he heard voices?), so he went to make him a cup of tea in case he needed to warm up for the road. It had felt nice to do things for Midoriya, this evening. It made Sero feel warm and content, with little zings of joyfulness every time Midoriya smiled at him in thanks. It made him dizzy. It made him feel strong.

At school, helping Midoriya was a constant uphill battle. Everything that Sero did, Bakugou would be there—watching him, assessing what he did, disapproving of it in his ‘I can do everything better than you’ sort of way, which was tainted by Bakugou’s devil-may-care and I’ll-burn-the-world-down-with-me aura. The constant supervision grated at Sero’s nerves, but he only ever allowed himself a challenging eyebrow as he stared back at Bakugou. He wasn’t going to bow down to whatever the explosive teen wanted, not like Kirishima did every five seconds. And he didn’t feel like the Sports Festival had allowed him to challenge Bakugou properly for… for…

Sero wasn’t quite sure how to put it, or what it would be called. For dominance? No. For power? Control?

The tea took a while to steep.

Sero… he liked taking care of Midoriya. He supposed that was where it all began. Ever since he’d figured out what attraction was, Sero had always been interested in girls that liked to be protected. He’d thought it was a weird thing to enjoy: wanting to take charge, save the day, make the girl happy. And it might still be weird, but it definitely meant Sero was hero-quality material. That’s what heroes did, after all. They saved the day.

The only thing was… it didn’t have to be a girl. And Midoriya was… well, he’d been a girl for a few days, apparently, but that was never really explained. But Midoriya was definitely a boy. Or boyish, or whatever he thought of himself as. Sero wasn’t one to judge.

And Midoriya looked like he needed to be protected.
Bakugou seemed to have taken the position of the alpha in charge, or whatever the dominant position was for the pack-that-was-not-an-actual-wolf-pack. Sero didn’t agree with Bakugou having that position. The idea of the explosive, non-apologetic, selfish Bakugou actually looking out for and taking care of Midoriya in the way he deserved to be taken care of… it didn’t seem like it was going to happen, even if Bakugou kept calling himself the alpha. All Bakugou seemed to do was pick Midoriya up and throw him down on other people. Sero had never seen Bakugou console anyone or go out of his way to make someone smile. Midoriya deserved to have someone who could do those things, and ever since that conversation in the lunchroom where Sero had to teach Midoriya that touching didn’t mean hugging, Sero had felt a distinct and absurd desire to be that person for Midoriya.

He couldn’t describe it, really, this need to be there for the other teen. It was something that hovered beneath his skin and made his hands fly out in greeting. It made him smile at Midoriya and watch him during class and look to see how he was feeling during the day. It wasn’t like Sero was a stalker or anything; he just liked to keep an eye on the other teen. Plus, they sat beside each other in all of their classes, so it wasn’t exactly hard to peer over and see how he was doing or to nudge him every now and then to offer up a smile.

By now, Sero would like to think that he knew the many moods of Izuku Midoriya. There was his cuddly mood, and that one usually involved him subtly groping Bakugou in the middle of class in one way or another. It had also prompted that class circle thing Midoriya created after the attack at USJ, where he’d just kind of laid across Kirishima and Todoroki. Midoriya got in his cuddly mood a lot, and from what Sero could tell, it seemed to directly follow him looking sad or being upset. Sero had tried to learn these moods so that he could, nonchalantly of course, offer a hand on the shoulder whenever the other teen looked off into the distance for too long with that empty look in his eye. Smiles seemed to work well, too, for making Midoriya relax. Midoriya responded positively to smiles.

Sero especially liked when he smiled back.

Another of Midoriya’s moods was when he got hyperfocused on his work and couldn’t seem to realize changes in his surroundings. He’d done it earlier today, at the end of class, and Sero had shaken him out of it; but that wasn’t the first time. Midoriya got crazy obsessed while working on the strangest things. He would get into these research moods or something, where he stayed glued to his phone or a book and his posture would get really stiff and tense. Midoriya had even been hyperfocused a couple of times during lunch, and Sero had to poke him every minute to remind him to eat.

It was kind of adorable. If not a bit worrisome. Midoriya should be eating more food, given the muscle mass Sero spied across his arms and back and legs in the locker room.

The third mood was Sero’s favorite. It was the one where Midoriya would actively engage with everyone else, listen to stories, laugh at jokes, smile at his friends’ teasing. It made something lonely in Sero’s chest feel warm and happy because it meant that his friend wasn’t getting stuck in the future or the past. Sero had been trying his best to bring out these moods. If Midoriya was sad, Sero would try to touch him to bring him back. If Midoriya was unfocused, Sero would put his hand on his neck, which seemed to have a strange effect that made the other teen blink and refocus on his surroundings.

Everything Sero did was subtle. He wasn’t trying to intrude on Midoriya’s ability to take care of himself or to make it seem like Midoriya needed taking care of… but he wanted to be the one to bring him back, when he didn’t seem to be all-there, if that made any sense.
And thus the tea. Midoriya had said his favorite hot drink was roasted green tea, which Sero’s mom only kept on hand to pour over salmon and rice as a quick dinner. Sero wondered how many hot drinks Midoriya had tried, if this was his favorite. Had he ever tried hot chocolate? Or a matcha latte? Something about Midoriya made Sero think he would probably enjoy herbal teas a lot, as well. He wondered if it would sound awkward if he asked Midoriya to hang out at one of his favorite cafes, next time. He wondered if Midoriya was even capable of feeling awkward.

Not that he didn’t enjoy the other teen in his apartment! That would be a blatant lie. There was something about having Midoriya sit on Sero’s couch in Sero’s living room, using Sero’s laptop and eating Sero’s oranges, that made Sero feel like he might just be on top of the world. He wanted to lock the door and keep Midoriya safe, to huddle him beneath blankets and make sure nothing like the Sports Festival happened again. Sero had felt like his heart was down there on the stage with Midoriya, each time the other teen’s powers caused him to have some sort of emotional breakdown.

Speaking of… since when did looking out for his friend (who yeah, okay, he was also attracted to because the other boy was cute in this awkward, nervous, cuddling wolf-pup sort of way) actually turn into Sero having overwhelming emotional reactions to any harm that came to said friend? That was new. Sero had liked plenty of people before, everything from light and frivolous crushes to heart-pounding and tongue-tying attraction, but he’d never actually been this affected by bad things happening to them. He’d always been above it all, able to help them but not be affected himself. He wondered what caused it. He wondered why it shook him up so much. He wondered if there was a way to dial down the notch on how much he cared about Midoriya, because they weren’t even calling each other by their first names yet—

Sero was still in the middle of trying to figure out when his feelings for Midoriya became this serious when the boy in question exited the bathroom. There had never been a toilet flush, so he must have spent the whole time in there talking on the phone to whoever it was. Midoriya’s cheeks and neck were flushed pink, and Sero wondered if he had made the wrong drink.

Was Midoriya feeling hot? Would water be better?

The other teen continued to walk slowly down the hallway, each step hesitant, his gaze alternating between Sero’s face and somewhere over his left shoulder. Almost as though he didn’t feel comfortable looking at Sero, which was… strange. They’d been staring on and off into each other’s eyes all night, often sharing smiles or a laugh, so it was a bit weird to suddenly have the other teen just… not look him in the eyes. Sero suppressed the desire to step so close to Midoriya that the other boy would have to peer up into his eyes because there would be nowhere else to look.

When Midoriya was near enough, his eyes shifted to the mug in Sero’s hands, prompting a half-smile from the freckled teen. He stopped and looked up at Sero, green eyes bright and focused.

Sero liked when the other teen’s eyes were focused. It meant he was staying in the present and not some far-off place where Sero couldn’t get to him.

Midoriya shuffled in place for a few more seconds before taking a short breath. He opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again. And then he pulled a confession out of nowhere. “I think I like you.”

Which… Sero really wasn’t prepared for.

Sero blinked back at him, uncertain whether he’d heard that right or understood the right connotation. He was also a bit weirded out that those were the first words out of Midoriya’s mouth after using the bathroom for ten minutes. But, well… it was Midoriya.
Midoriya cleared his throat and adjusted his stance again. He raised his eyebrows, as though Sero was being purposefully obtuse and Midoriya was being forced to explain something very simple to him. “Like... mates. I think I might like you as a mate.”

Sero continued blinking, his mind a blank slate. Midoriya really wasn’t making his previous assertion any clearer. Sero put down the mug of tea and raised his eyebrows for clarification, his tone slightly dubious. “A... mate.”

Midoriya nodded his head, his shoulders beginning to relax and his eyes becoming more animated. “Yeah! You know, as a... what do you call it? When you end up having sex, but not yet, because we haven’t eaten each other’s food or gone on a nighttime run.”

Sero blinked some more, not sure where to go with anything in that statement. “I... what...” It took him a few seconds, but a lightbulb eventually went off in his head. “Uh, do you mean dating?”

“Yeah, that!” Midoriya smiled, bright and wide, his green curls flopping into his eyes.

Half of Sero’s mind wanted to brush his curls away. The other half was still stuck in utter incredulity at where the conversation was going and what must have happened in the bathroom to precede it. Well, those aren’t the usual bases of dating, but this is Midoriya. Maybe this is another wolf thing? If so, Sero might actually have to thank Bakugou for the threatening tip he had imparted... later. Much later. Now was not the time to be thinking about Bakugou.

Sero twisted his head to stare at the front door of the apartment. When was his mom getting home? She should be bringing his sister back from her playdate by about 6pm, right?

He turned back to Midoriya and raked his eyes down the other boy’s form, taking in his lax shoulders and curious eyes and puppy smile. It was hard to tell whether the other teen was nervous or calm, but Midoriya saying that he liked Sero (and Sero was going to press a definite Pause on trying to parse out what Midoriya meant by that) seemed to have calmed him down. Sero decided that he should probably take charge of this situation before it tumbled any further downhill. At least, tumbled in a bad way. Okay, yeah, he needed to stop thinking about any references to tumbling, especially when Midoriya kept his lips open like that. Yeeah, no, not the time.

Sero cleared his throat and tried to share what he hoped wasn’t an awkward or embarrassed grin. “We should probably go to my bedroom to talk about this. I don’t know when my parents will get home, and this... might be better discussed privately.”

Midoriya shrugged and turned back toward the hallway, smiling over his shoulder. “Okay!”

Sero followed behind. He hadn’t come out to his parents as bi-curious or bi-sexual or being-in-charge-of-others-sexual, or whatever he was, so this was definitely better done privately. Especially since Midoriya didn’t seem to have the appropriate terminology for any of it. He might not have anything appropriate for this, actually. Hadn’t Midoriya asked Mr. Aizawa what sexuality was, only recently? Sero wiped at his face with his hand, unsure whether he should feel pleased or flattered or confused, following Midoriya’s confession. And the conversation had only just started.

Sero’s heart staccatoed in his chest as he closed the door behind him. Out of the corner of his vision, his eyes caught on where Izuku had perched himself on Sero’s bed without permission. Midoriya’s right leg was resting against Sero’s pillow, crumpling the starched cotton of the bedspread beneath him. His floppy hair and loose tie stood out in direct contrast to the neat folds of Sero’s sheets and comforter. He looked warm and soft, like something moldable for Sero’s own choosing. Goosebumps broke out over his arms as he moved his gaze back to the closed door. Concentrate.
Sero shook his head and took a deep breath, trying to focus on what he remembered from his previous lunchtime conversation with Izuku about physical boundaries. *Specification had been key, right? Izuku thought being allowed to touch someone meant he could hug them, as well. So if they were going to have this conversation, Sero needed to be as specific as possible.*

**Right, he could do this.**

Sero leaned back against the door as he watched Midoriya get more comfortable, maneuvering his feet and legs into a cross-legged position and further crumpling Sero’s bedspread beneath him. The other teen looked like his normal self, the nervousness and halting footsteps from his post-bathroom procession having disappeared. That should make this easier. Nervous Midoriya, especially babbling or stuttering Midoriya, was Sero’s weakness. He couldn’t help but touch the boy, and this conversation might go best if Sero could keep his distance. At least until he figured out where this had all come from. He hadn’t thought Midoriya felt physical attraction, and the other teen had been in the bathroom for a while.

Sero cleared his throat once more, drawing Midoriya’s attention away from Sero’s bedside table and toward Sero’s face. Sero furrowed his eyebrows, trying to figure out where to begin. “Alright, so… what makes you think you like me?”

“Well, I called Uraraka in the bathroom—”

Sero raised an eyebrow. *Ah, there it was.*

“—because I thought I was having a panic attack—”

His other eyebrow joined the first. *Wait, what?*

“—because I kept feeling hot and my heart was beating fast and every time you got near me it was hard to breathe? And she said that was called being attracted to someone, and that I should tell you that I like you in case you like me, so that there’s no confusion. Or something.”

Sero took a few seconds to blink incredulously at Midoriya.

That was… very honest. Sero didn’t have a grandiose amount of experience of kissing girls, or that one boy behind the bleachers, but he did know that the whole romantic aspect of getting together included a lot of ‘do they or don’t they’, with a lot of insecurity about how the other person felt and what they wanted. Sero doubted Midoriya had any idea what he wanted, at this point, but damn. He was certainly honest. And that was… kind of a turn on, actually.

After several seconds had passed and his thought processes had looped back around, Sero took another deep breath. “Wow. Okay, uh, thank you for being honest.” He made sure to look into the other teen’s eyes as he said it. His mom always told him it was the best way to let someone know you were sincere.

Midoriya smiled, perpetually innocent and trusting, and nodded back at him. “Of course!”

*So trusting.* Sero felt as a blush tried to take over his cheeks, but he pushed it away, along with any other less-than-innocent thoughts. He needed to stay calm. “And what did I do that made you feel this way?”

Midoriya scratched at this head and shifted on the bed. “Um, it kept happening when you touched me? And sometimes when you look at me. But other times, you looking at me helps me calm down…”
That made something powerful rush through Sero’s veins, his fingers tingling. “I help you calm down?”

Midoriya nodded and brushed away his curly bangs. “Yeah, like earlier on the couch. I stared into your eyes, and I just started calming down and not worrying about anything?” His brows furrowed. “But then you touched my shoulder, and that’s when my heart started beating really fast.”

At the end of Midoriya’s explanation, Sero deemed it safe enough to walk over to the bed and sit down two feet away from Midoriya. He tried to search for the right words, as caveat after deliberation after warning rushed through his head. He cleared his throat. “Look, are you sure you aren’t just—that these feelings aren’t because of something else?”

Midoriya looked confused. “Like what?”

Sero made sure to stare at the floor instead of the boy sitting two feet away on his bed. (*Midoriya was on Sero’s bed. He was on Sero’s bed.*)

The floor was really interesting. Truly.

Sero studied the wood grains critically as he answered Midoriya’s confusion with the concerns that looped around in his brain. “Like whatever’s happening between you and Iida?”

Midoriya’s nose scrunched up, and it was actively adorable. His lips were open again. “Why would Tenya being my friend matter?”

Sero turned his head toward Midoriya, risking a glance up into his eyes. “I thought you might be… more than friends, since you call each other by your first names.”

Midoriya nibbled at his lip and shook his head. “We’re just friends.” His eyes lowered. He sounded sad.

“Ah,” Sero didn’t want him to be sad, but Midoriya was definitely affected by something Iida-related. Perhaps it was related to Iida’s reticence during class this week? Sero put that thought on the backburner for when it seemed a more appropriate time to discuss. That was caveat number one solved. Now, for caveat number two. “Do you feel like this for anyone else?”

Midoriya seemed earnest when he answered, his bangs flopping around as he shook his head in the negative. “Mmm-mmm, that’s why I was freaking out. I thought something was wrong with me.”

Sero’s eyes flashed to Midoriya’s, his hand reaching out to console Midoriya before pausing in deliberation. Touching Midoriya made him nervous, didn’t it? So if he was going to console him, a smile might be best. At least until touching him didn’t have secondary effects. Their eyes stayed locked. Sero’s hand settled on the bedspread between them. His heartbeat thumped through his chest and down his arms, the awkward vulnerability of sharing eye contact for too long beginning to get to him, the feeling prickling inside.

“Nothing is wrong with you.” That came out a lot more serious and heartfelt than Sero had meant it to.

But Midoriya smiled.

So Sero smiled.

He also realized that his mom wasn’t home yet, and this conversation had the potential to go on a lot longer. Like… a lot longer. And he wasn’t sure where to go with it. What did you do after someone
confessed that they liked you? Or more importantly, what did you do when that person was Midoriya?

Sero looked down at the bedspread between them. His eyes flicked back up to Midoriya.

And after a few more seconds of Midoriya’s inability to feel awkward about prolonged eye contact and Sero’s heart beginning to take really weird dips and turns that it had no right to be taking… well, Sero figured: *Fuck it.*

He reached up his hand and placed it on Midoriya’s neck, his forefingers cradling the top of the other teen’s spine while his thumb rested on the edge of Midoriya’s cheek. Midoriya’s hair was soft, and he looked so trusting. It made Sero feel as though all the responsibility were in his court, for how this went through. Sero tried to brush away his worries and attempted to smile in a charming way as he owned up to his own feelings.

“I like you, too.”

Midoriya’s smile got wider before it abruptly dropped. He shifted toward Sero on the bed, his eyebrows furrowed. “I… what does that mean, if we both like each other?”

That was the whole question, wasn’t it? Sero allowed his hand to rest against Midoriya’s neck as he kept his tone soft. “It doesn’t have to mean anything. It can mean whatever we want it to.”

“What do people usually do?”

Sero took a breath, in and out.

*Right.*

*This was Midoriya.*

*Of course.*

Sero lowered his eyes to focus on Midoriya’s tie, needing a break from eye contact. Midoriya must have loosened it at some point, because the knot was hanging several inches from his neck. Sero’s fingers twitched, his thoughts sliding sideways into wondering about how the texture of Midoriya’s tie might feel different than his own. He swallowed and tried to refocus. Midoriya’s mouth was still open. “Well… it, uh, depends on how intense the attraction is. Sometimes, two people decide to hang out more, to get to know each other better, and if they keep feeling this way, then they have a, uh, a conversation and decide to date. Other times, two people decide they know each other well enough already and like each other, so they agree to start dating immediately.”

Midoriya shifted closer, his weight resting on his left arm as his hand splayed next to Sero’s leg. His proximity was beginning to do things to Sero, and none of those things were appropriate for the state Midoriya was at. “And what is dating?”

That state. That was where Midoriya was at.

Sero wondered if having to explain social customs to someone should be a turn-off, because it really, really wasn’t. Maybe something really was wrong with Sero, because this conversation just made him want to touch Midoriya even more. And did the other boy ever shut his mouth? Was it always open just wide enough to—

*Right. Slow. Going slow.*
No thinking about tongues.

Or tumbling.

FUCK.

Sero lowered his hand so he was cradling the left side of Midoriya’s neck. He tried to think about the best way to explain dating, or the ideal of dating, to the other teen. All the while keeping his mind blank of other thoughts. “Typically, it means that two people have agreed to enter a relationship together, where they spend a lot of time together and do romantic and, uh, physical things together.”

Midoriya blinked innocently. “Like kissing?”

Sero felt a smirk try to form on his face, but he smothered the impulse. He was going for soothing, not rakish. “Yes, like kissing.”

The other teen hummed. “What else?”

Sero shifted his leg closer to Midoriya’s hand, his eyes tracking the other boy’s movements, waiting for him to become uncomfortable. Midoriya didn’t even twitch. “Most people consider hugging and cuddling to be part of dating, but those don’t always have to exclusively happen with each other. Holding hands, being physically close in general, things like that.”

Midoriya nodded, looking suddenly excited. “I like cuddling, but I’ve only ever done it with pack.”

“Well, then we could definitely do that.” Sero didn’t even ask about the ‘pack’ part of that statement. Bakugou had definitely been on to something with that wolf suggestion. Sero just needed to figure out how far this ‘pack’ thing went, and what it might mean for Midoriya being interested in him and Sero being interested in Midoriya.

A few seconds stretched on as Midoriya’s eyes flickered up and down Sero’s face. The silence was eventually broken, about the same time that Midoriya began picking at Sero’s bedspread.

“Do you want to date? Uh, to date me?”

Sero hesitated. Part of him wanted to say a definite yes. The other part remembered Bakugou shoving him against the bathroom wall and how red his eyes were; he wondered what he would be walking into, there, if he said a flat-out yes to this right now. “I would be… interested in dating you, but I would prefer to spend more time with you alone, first. To make sure that this is a good idea, for both of us.”

Sero figured that was the most diplomatic way to word his worries that Bakugou was going to kill the both of them, when he found out.

“I’d like that.” Midoriya smiled wide enough to make Sero dizzy and leaned into to nuzzle Sero’s neck. He started to pull back but paused. His breath ghosted over Sero’s collarbone, and Sero tilted his head to look down at the other boy.

He made sure to keep his voice level, not betraying the goosebumps that had popped up all over his arms or the way his own heartbeat had definitely sped back up from its molasses pace. “What is it?”

Midoriya didn’t move, his gaze focused somewhere on Sero’s neck, his breath warm. “Doing that feels… different. I don’t know why.”

“Because you like me?” Sero suggested. Midoriya’s hair was a nice dark, fluffy green, and Sero
buried the urge to run his hands through it. That seemed too fast, for whatever this was between them. Slow. Sero needed to take it slow.

“Maybe. I feel like…” Midoriya sighed. “Like I want to eat you, or something. But not eating. Biting?”

Sero was pretty sure, at this point, that Midoriya was talking to himself. Sero probably shouldn’t be so turned on by the thought of Midoriya biting his neck. Maybe he was jealous of all the nuzzling Midoriya gave Bakugou?

Right, not thinking about Bakugou. Really failing at not thinking about Bakugou, fuck.

Sero cleared his throat. Time for a topic changer. “Midoriya, would you be interested in watching a movie? I could go get my laptop.”

The other teen’s eyes seemed to refocus as he tilted his head up to look into Sero’s eyes. He didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and Sero was about to place a hand back on his neck to help him refocus from wherever his mind was disappearing to, when Midoriya blinked several times in succession. He shook his head out of its stupor, and a smile appeared on his face. “I’d love to try a movie.”

Sero swallowed and looked away, needing to breathe and think entirely innocent thoughts that did not involve biting or fluffy hair or open mouths or, fucking god, Bakugou. “I’ll, uh, go get the laptop, then.”

Each step out of his bedroom door and into the hallway felt like both a daze and a race at the same time. Sero didn’t think he’d never been so focused in his life.

Midoriya liked him. He was actually, physically attracted to someone, and it was Sero. A smile spread out over Sero’s face as he jogged down the hallway and into the living room. He tried to think about how best to situate himself on his bed once he returned. If he propped up his pillows in the corner, then maybe they could sit beside each other, arms touching. Then, Sero might be able to put his arm around him… or maybe even hold his hand. He wondered what Midoriya’s hands felt like. Sero’s hands had always been big, much bigger than other kids’. How would Midoriya’s hand fit in his? Could Sero’s hand fit around the entirety of Midoriya’s arm? Would the other teen let Sero pull him toward him?

By the time Sero returned to his bedroom, his mind was filled with hopes and daydreams, his arms were filled with snacks, and his heart was filled with anticipation.

He’d also forgotten the laptop.

Midoriya snickered and went to retrieve it himself.

On Friday morning, Bakugou was (surprisingly) the first to notice that something had changed, and he actively hunted Kirishima down before homeroom instead of waiting for the other boy to come to him.

“Why the fuck is Deku sitting so close to tape arms?”
“Uh, I don’t know? I think they left together yesterday. Maybe they hung out?”

Bakugou continued glaring across the room as he rested folded arms on Kirishima’s desk. He watched as Deku smiled at something Sero said, before turning a sneer toward Kirishima’s clueless expression. “What, is he in the pack now?”

Kirishima blinked back before his face settled into an appeasing smile. “He did volunteer to join during the Sports Festival…?” He shifted in his seat and lowered his voice, gazing curiously at Bakugou with a bashful hesitancy to his expression. “Also, is this seriously a thing now? Like, that others can join? Are we all going to start having pillow piles on the floor? Because I’m not sure Shouji can fit…”

Bakugou leveled a piercing stare at him, his red eyes sparking. “That’s what you’re fucking worried about?”

“I mean, yeah?” Kirishima scratched his head as he followed Bakugou’s gaze over to the Midoriya-Sero conversation happening between rows one and two. He looked back at Bakugou, whose intense stare held furrowed eyebrows and a scrunched up nose, almost as though he’d smelled something rank and wanted to sizzle whatever caused it with directed laser beams. If Kirishima didn’t know better, he’d say that Bakugou actually looked upset. And sure, yeah, Bakugou wasn’t exactly a prancing pony, but when you got to know the guy, he was usually more done-with-the-world and less shred-it-with-your-teeth, with only occasional explosions and doom.

“Midoriya will be fine. It’s just Sero.” Kirishima’s face eased into a smile, one of those grins that said ‘everything is going to be okay’ and ‘you don’t have to worry’.

Except it wasn’t. And Bakugou did have to. So fuck him.

Bakugou’s shoulders tinged with something resembling adrenaline, his neck bristling, as he watched Deku lean into Sero’s space. His hands clenched into fists. “Right. Just fucking triangle face.”

Bakugou kept an eye on the pair for the rest of the day, his lower back tickling and tingling so much that he wanted to scratch his skin off. Whatever was going on… well, it was something, and Bakugou couldn’t stop being aware of it. He didn’t even have to look at them, and he could feel it happening. And sure, it started off as innocuous stuff. Deku would ask Sero a question instead of Bakugou. Which… okay, alright, whatever. He didn’t want Deku distracting him anyway.

But it kept happening. There were four questions.

Four of them.

Then Deku sat with Sero for lunch (again), and only gave a total of two sad stares toward four-eyes several tables away (down from two per minute, which was his previous record).

(And dammit, Bakugou didn’t like how much he knew about that situation, and he was trying to stay out of it; but it was hard to stay out of it when he felt like he was failing at something everything second, and he wasn’t a failure. Fuck Deku. Fuck Deku and his fucking feelings and fucking four-eyes and all the fucking things that were going wrong and had been going wrong ever since that goddamn tournament when Deku’s damn familiar had decided to FLY AS FUCKING BIRD AND RUIN THE TOURNAMENT WITH HIS FUCKING WEIRD VISION POWERS HE SWEARED TO FUCK—)

Bakugou’s eyes followed each smile that Deku and Sero shared, each one grating on him and causing shivers to run down his back and a sick, coiling feeling in his gut like something horrible
was about to happen and he wouldn’t be able to stop it. Bakugou looked away from the pair of them and tried to focus on Kirishima’s smile and his stupid red hair and how he wiggled his eyebrows every time he thought he’d said something funny and ugh that really wasn’t helping, fucking Deku FUCK.

The final straw was when Deku asked Sero to pair up with him during sparring for last period. Bakugou shouldn’t have to fucking explain to anyone why that pissed him off. Deku was a martial artist who could pause time and summon demons and had saved Bakugou from that—

So why the fuck was he pairing with Sero, who had no idea how to fucking take down an attacker when he wasn’t using his stupid elbows? Deku didn’t have to pair with Bakugou. That was fucking fine, whatever. Didn’t matter. But he should at least pair with someone who could give him a challenge. Even fucking half-and-half would be better—at least he knew how to move. And that fucking large tail freak had a martial arts background, why couldn’t he pair up with him? But no. It had to be fucking triangle face with his big hands and weird elbows and Deku kept smiling at him. Smiling at him like he was some sort of… like he was…

Bakugou shoved away the memory of a much younger Deku teetering behind him on the bridge, both of them swinging their legs up high with each kick and step. He’d always smiled so bright, like he was the goddamn sun. Like Bakugou was the sun, and Deku had never seen anything so—

It didn’t fucking matter.

Deku had left. He’d left, and then he’d come back. And then he’d left again. So fuck him and his stupid letters. Fuck the dreams Bakugou’d had of joining him and fighting demons and werewolves and vampires together. Fuck all that. Bakugou wasn’t part of that world, and he didn’t want to be. He was going to be the best goddamn hero the world had ever seen, and Deku knew his place. His place was beneath Bakugou, when he was standing at the top. And Bakugou was going to drag him to the top if he had to. Fuck that ‘hiding in the shadows’ bullshit. Deku was going to be stronger than all the rest of those extras, and they were going to fight villains together. They were going to be side by motherfucking side.

He’d promised. Deku… he’d promised.

And Deku might be a fucking idiot, sometimes, but he didn’t break his promises. And Bakugou… he just… he wanted…

Was it such a bad thing to want…? Fucking FUCK. Fuck whatever. Fuck Deku. Fuck his stupid smile and the way he kept knocking Sero down and then pulling him back up. Bakugou hated that goddamn blush on his cheeks, and where the fuck was Mr. Aizawa? Wasn’t he supposed to keep an eye on Deku? What the fuck.

By the time they were back in the locker rooms, it had all just built up, and Bakugou couldn’t take it anymore. He dragged Deku by his shirt collar into the showers, past Tokoyami and Todoroki’s secret changing spot on the other side of lockers, far away from where everyone was changing clothes. Separated from any onlookers, Bakugou shoved his idiot friend against the wall and leaned in close to hiss against his jaw. And his eyes weren’t fucking blurring because he wasn’t fucking crying. That’s what your eyes fucking did when you had to put up with watching eyesores all fucking period.

“What the fuck, Deku. Pairing up with triangle face?”

The timber of Bakugou’s voice made Deku pale, his words stuttering, his eyes switching back and forth between Bakugou’s own. He looked confused, so confused. “I-I just wanted to spend more
time with him. What—is there a problem with that?"

And that wasn’t what he was talking about, FUCK. Bakugou’s lips raised off his teeth as he tried to bury the fire in his chest. “There is, if you aren’t doing your fucking best during sparring. It’s fucking training, not some social bullshit.”

But he couldn’t stop it. The fire just kept building and rising and consuming everything in its path. Bakugou felt the sweat drip down his palms, and he lifted his hands off Deku’s chest to keep him safe. He pressed the backs of his forearms against Deku’s pectoral, pressing, giving, making sure. He was right here. Bakugou couldn’t touch him with his hands, but he was still right here.

Bakugou was better than this. He was better than… what did Deku think he was doing? Did he think he could trust that—

Deku’s eyes continued looking confused. “But it wasn’t social.”

As if that made any fucking sense. Of course it was social. Why else would he be sparring with that fucking extra? Bakugou had warned him. He’d warned that triangle face and his faux-friendly demeanor that he didn’t know what the fuck he was dealing with, and he wasn’t wrong. Dammit, he wasn’t WRONG. No one knew what they were fucking dealing with but him and Deku, and they needed to stop… everyone just needed to sit the fuck down and do what Bakugou told them to. He didn’t want to have to handle the fallout. That wasn’t his fucking job.

And then the dickhead in question appeared. The other teen had a tight grip on the dirty gym clothes in his left hand, and his face was turned down in a frown, his eyes holding a warning. As if he could take him. “Bakugou, why are you pressing Midoriya up against the shower wall?”

Bakugou sneered and leaned more of his weight (his whole arm from elbow to knuckle) onto Deku’s chest. Deku was warm against his arms, soft, hard, stuck right where Bakugou could keep an eye on him. “Why the fuck is it your problem?”

Sero’s eyes narrowed on him. “Midoriya is my problem.”

“Oh?” Bakugou asked, his tone filling with something dangerous as his eyes gleamed red.

Izuku’s hands grasped at Bakugou’s arm as he whined beneath the grip. “Kacchan, c-come on.”

Bakugou shifted his gaze to Deku, focusing his eyes on the green ones beneath him. Deku used to be so much smaller than Bakugou, some weak, thin little thing. Now, he could feel the power pushing back at him. It gave him a rush. It made him feel weak. It made him want to destroy the world until it followed his rules. It made him want to save the world from people like him. He couldn’t get anything right. He wasn’t doing anything wrong.

Everyone needed to get their shit together and wake the fuck up and stop playing pretend boyfriends when there were villains and demons out there trying to kill everyone. They were running out of time. They didn’t have the privilege to dick around or waste their class period with feelings. They were going to be the best fucking heroes in the world. They didn’t have time for normal.

“Not until you answer me.” He was barely aware of pressing harder against Deku’s chest. “Why. Did you. Pair up. With him.” Bakugou snarled the last word, his nose brushing against Deku’s jaw as he leaned in close to get his answers. They were eyelash to freckle, and he couldn’t get the fire out. His red eyes raised to Deku’s verdant green and held.

Izuku swallowed and melted against the wall, body relaxing, blood singing. He licked his lips and softened his voice. “Because.” Kacchan’s heat was infusing into him. He was so close, and the
pressure against Izuku’s chest wasn’t letting up. Pack-pack-pack. It scrambled his brain, made remembering where he was seem difficult. Sero was here, wasn’t he? Right, Sero. Sero and his citrus smile and his friendly face and his big hands. “Because we’re, uh, thinking of dating, but w-we wanted to spend more time together first. To figure out if it’s, uh, if it’s a good idea.”

The word ‘dating’ seemed to seer Bakugou like an iron brand, making him flinch away from Izuku. Bakugou stumbled backward. He stared at Izuku from several feet away as though he’d never seen him before. It made something in Izuku’s chest crumble, and his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

(And Bakugou’s chest was caught in flames, and it didn’t make sense, and it wouldn’t get out get get OUT. He could feel the crumpled letters Deku had sent him in his hands as he slept, his hands too small to hold them, and he could still taste the promises that faded to ash only to reignite once more because Deku would always come back to him, and he would never end up alone as long as Deku was alive to find him, always find him, always come back to him and smile like he was the goddamned sun—)

“Dating?” Bakugou’s voice sounded strangled, the edges of a growl still present. He looked somewhere between confused and angry, and Izuku didn’t know what to say to make it better or to make that expression go away.

Was Kacchan angry with him? Izuku hoped not. He didn’t want anyone to be upset with him. And he didn’t understand why this would make Bakugou angry, anyway.

Sero walked forward and planted a foot between the two of them, staring Bakugou down.

Bakugou’s eyes narrowed at Sero, his gums lifting off his teeth from the viciousness of his snarl. “We’re a pack.”

Izuku’s insides turned to goo and warmed to a molten core. A smile spread over his face, igniting his worries until they evaporated away, leaving only happiness behind. Giddiness rushed through him, along with a headiness that would later be hard to describe as anything other than **Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan**.

Sero nodded his head, his right hand out in supplication, more for Midoriya’s sake than Bakugou’s. “I know, and I’m not looking to step between that.” He glanced at Midoriya, his smile conciliatory, before slowly turning his head back toward Bakugou. He tilted his head and looked the explosive teen up and down, measuring him, preparing for an explosion that had yet to come. Sero weighed his options. Bakugou had spoke to ‘pack’ before his own interests. There might be a way to salvage this disaster after all.

Sero attempted to calm the snarling wolf-like teen in front of him. *(And why, if Midoriya was supposedly the one raised with wolves, was Bakugou always the one acting feral?) Sero allowed a friendly smile to ease over his face, his tone soothing. “In fact… I would be interested in hanging out with you and Kirishima, in a pack capacity, if you would allow me to.”*

That seemed to steal some of Bakugou’s thunder, his red eyes piercing even in their confusion. Bakugou’s hackles were raised, but his head was tilted.

Sero felt a bit incredulous. **Bakugou, seriously, what was with the wolf posturing?**

Bakugou squinted his eyes as Deku turned a happy smile toward tape-elbows. “You would?”

Sero shrugged his shoulders, as though anger wasn’t still simmering around Bakugou like a toxic
cloud and Sero’s continued existence didn’t depend on Bakugou not decimating him to smithereens. “I don’t have anything after school today, if you all are free.”

And Bakugou might have said no. In fact, the part of him that was upset at someone trying to date Deku (and since when was Deku fucking interested in other people like that?) definitely wanted him to say no. But the way Sero phrased the offer, it sounded like a challenge. It sounded like he didn’t think Bakugou could fucking stand to be in the same room with him sitting next to Deku or whatever, and he was fucking wrong. So fucking wrong. That fucker didn’t have that kinda power over him. He wouldn’t let him have that kind of power over him.

So Bakugou did what Bakugou always did, and he accepted the challenge with a smirk and a bluster. “Bring it.”

In the back of Sero’s mind, where he would never voice his opinions, Sero sighed. He hadn’t meant that as a challenge, but he was happy enough with the outcome that he wouldn’t say anything. If he was going to date Midoriya, then he needed to know whether and how this pack thing worked. He had no idea what Kirishima and Bakugou did with Midoriya when they hung out together. A part of him used to think that Midoriya and Bakugou were borderline boyfriends, with how they acted together sometimes during class. But Midoriya had talked about Bakugou as though he and Kirishima were on an equal playing field with Midoriya—so none of them were dating each other. Then, he’d thought that Iida might be dating Midoriya.

Maybe it was just a pack thing?

Sero needed to see it in person to figure it out. And Midoriya needed to know that Sero was okay with the pack. That seemed like a prerequisite to them being together. Possibly. Maybe. If they decided to try it.

Bakugou turned the corner of the showers as he stalked off, passing Todoroki—whose eyes were narrowed on the whole back corner where the confrontation had just occurred.

Sero wiped at his face with his hand as Midoriya practically skipped away.

Well, fuck. This was going to be interesting.

The trip to the cafe ended up being an expectedly awkward affair. Or, rather, Sero wasn’t surprised it was awkward. And Bakugou was the one making it awkward.

Kirishima, however, was confused.

Quite frankly, Kirishima spent most of their walk to the bus and then the cafe waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Bakugou had said they’d be hanging out with Deku and Sero at Kirishima’s favorite cafe after school. No reason was given. No backstory. (Kirishima firmly believed there was a purpose behind this group escapade and no one was telling him, but he couldn’t seem to get that reason out of anyone.)

Now, normally, Kirishima would have been ecstatic for the cafe outing. Sero was one of his best friends, and Bakubro was one of his best friends (when he wasn’t pressing him up against a wall and...
breathing on his neck and making Kirishima bash his hormones into a wall via head-slamming), and Midoriya was—well, he was whatever he was, but it was somewhere between ‘pack’ and ‘friend’ and ‘sexy scarred up dude with a badass wolf’ (who Kirishima tried really hard not to think about in the shower).

Anyhow, having all three of his friends hang out together was actually kind of the height of Kirishima’s day. Usually, his foundational hero studies class was the best part of his day, but he spent half the period being pummeled into the ground by Bakugou during sparring. Because he seriously wouldn’t let up. Which was kind of awesome, because Kirishima learned a lot, but: ow. Just because Kirishima could harden his body didn’t mean he couldn’t get bruises, and Bakugou was fast.

So, right. The cafe. Hanging out. Kirishima had hoped they’d all be telling stories and laughing just like lunchtime, talking about what they wanted to get out of the internships they’d chosen, and so on. Instead, Kirishima had spent the entire walk in carefully navigated silence. He’d bring up a topic. Sero would respond, Bakugou would say something sardonic, and the conversation would die. Kirishima would try another topic, one that he knew Bakugou enjoyed talking about. He’d get Bakugou into it and Midoriya would be nodding along, then Sero would say something friendly, and Bakugou would just… he would just shut down. Or growl. Or blow up at them.

Kirishima had tried more than a couple of times.

He also had no idea what was going on. He could tell that there was some disagreement between Sero and Bakugou, but he didn’t know what it was. Did it have something to do with Bakugou’s blustering before homeroom started? Or Bakugou glaring at everyone during lunch? Kirishima had tried to get him to lighten up with a couple of jokes, but nothing seemed to work.

Maybe Bakugou was just having a bad day? But then why would he tell Kirishima they were going to a cafe with Sero and Midoriya?

Kirishima tried pulling Midoriya to the side while they were all ordering their drinks, but the freckled teen seemed just as confused as Kirishima about why Bakugou was angry. But he did seem to believe it was something Bakugou-related rather than Sero-related. Which… yeah, okay, Bakugou. Wasn’t surprising.

But it was surprising at the same time, because Bakugou didn’t come and hang out at cafes. He went home and trained and worked on homework and talked shit about other people for having fun during their free time. He didn’t hang out. He only played video games when there were pillow piles and pouting Midoriya’s involved. Kirishima could count on one hand the amount of times he’d gotten Bakugou to agree to even work on homework together at a cafe. (Three. Three times.)

And yet he’d told Kirishima they were all going out together so that he could—what? Stare at Sero across the table, instead of across the room like he’d do at lunch sometimes? (Okay, a lot of the time. It had become a Thing that Happened whenever Midoriya was sitting beside Sero while Kirishima sat alone with an antisocial Bakugou.)

Kirishima was confused. And his confusion was slowly morphing into him being upset because no one was saying anything. No one was talking about the weird tension, and half of the group didn’t even understand why the tension was there in the first place.

Also, Kirishima was pretty sure he’d seen Todoroki hiding in a back corner of the cafe with his own drink, for some inexplicable reason. And ‘inexplicable’ was a nice way of saying that Kirishima was pretty sure Todoroki was stalking Midoriya and had been all day. Or the past two days. He wasn’t quite sure. He’d only really noticed it today, and every time he approached Todoroki about it, the
other teen responded with his usual ‘I don’t know what you’re talking about’ comeback, which—yeah, Todoroki did know, or he wouldn’t have been blushing about it. But whatever.

Long story: everyone was crazy except Midoriya and Kirishima, and Kirishima was pretty sure that whatever craziness was happening was in some way related to Midoriya, so… he might not count.

It took thirty-seven minutes after he’d realized that the weird angry-awkwardness wasn’t going to fade and everyone wasn’t going to magically get along, for Kirishima to snap. Of course, ‘snapping’ just involved Kirishima trying to close off his facial expressions and stare his friends down, neither of which was normal. No-bullshit confrontation wasn’t really in the Kirishima Book of Happy Friend Times. But a man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do, so Kirishima was going to go for it.

*Group Counselor Kirishima mode, activate.*

He splayed his hands out on the table, took a deep breath, and let it out. “Alright, I don’t want anyone to get upset, but can someone please explain to me why you two aren’t getting along?”

To Kirishima’s surprise, Bakugou was the first to respond. “Ask him,” he said, tipping his chin at Sero with a sneer.

Which wasn’t really helpful, but Kirishima took his advice and raised his eyebrows at Sero instead.

Sero rolled his eyes and leaned forward to take another sip of his… orange peach tea? Orangesomething tea. It smelled citrusy and a bit sweet, from Kirishima’s position next to him. Sero flashed Kirishima a tight smile filled with his perfect teeth. He looked vaguely apologetic.

“Bakugou doesn’t like that Midoriya and I are trying to spend more time together.”

Which… okay.

“He doesn’t?” Midoriya asked, brows furrowed and voice high-pitched. Kirishima wasn’t sure whether his friend was surprised or hurt by that revelation, but it sounded like a mixture of the two.

“I’m fucking fine with it,” Bakugou ground out between bared teeth.

Which… meant he wasn’t fine. Kirishima was starting to regret asking. But it was better to have it all out in the open, right?

“Then why are you being so abrasive?” Sero countered.

Bakugou scowled in return. “I’m always fucking abrasive.”

That was true.

“But you don’t usually invite people to cafes,” Sero pointed out.

Kirishima stifled a smirk at his friend’s rejoinder.

That was also true.

Bakugou leaned forward and started growling, causing shivers to roll down Kirishima’s spine. Pleasant shivers. Stupid, growly, pleasant shivers. Shit. “Why don’t you just shut the fuck up and learn your place already? Didn’t you say you wanted to be with the pack?”

From his position on the opposite side of the table, Sero crossed his arms over his chest. He raised his eyebrows at Bakugou, his voice challenging. “Is that why you agreed to come out with me? You
wanted to put me in my place?”

Bakugou scoffed. “Don’t twist my fucking words. I don’t need to put you in your place.”

Bakugou’s emphasis on the word ‘put’ involved a lot of intense eye-staring, and Kirishima got the feeling that he was missing out on something. Had Bakugou talked to Sero about this before?

“You just need me to accept the one you’ve already given me?” Sero’s voice remained level and composed, and Kirishima’s opinion of his friend went up about three notches. Not that his opinion wasn’t already high. Sero was a cool guy.

Bakugou’s shoulders seemed to become broader and his voice deeper as he challenged Sero in return. “We were at the same fucking Sports Festival, weren’t we?”

It was at that point that Kirishima realized they were talking about pack standing. Bakugou was trying to say that he was the alpha, and Sero should fall in line. And Sero… what, didn’t want to fall in line?

Meanwhile, Midoriya, who had also caught on to the implied conversation, was all bright smiles for Sero. “You want to join the pack?!”

Which, no, wasn’t the point.

“I’d like to understand more about it,” Sero offered, and he shared a soft smile with Midoriya.

That made Kirishima blink and try to process his reactions. Kirishima couldn’t remember seeing his friend smile like that before. It was… strange. Definitely strange. And Sero was still staring at Midoriya.

It had been ten seconds.

If possible, Midoriya’s smile got wider at the pause in the discussion. He leaned forward, curls flopping forward. “What do you want to know?”

Bakugou bristled for the entire exchange before interrupting with a snarl. “Deku, don’t change the fucking conversation.”

Midoriya looked confused. “But I thought this was the conversation?”

“No, it isn’t. Just…” Bakugou trailed off and switched to baring his teeth at Sero again, his eyes like twin embers refusing to burn out. “Do. You. Accept.”

“I can’t accept something I don’t understand.” Sero gave Bakugou what seemed like a significant Look, but Kirishima couldn’t for the life of him determine what it meant.

Kirishima decided it was about time he took it upon himself to act as the go-between for his friends and butt into their conversation. Because no one was getting anywhere with this conversation. “And that’s totally understandable. Right, Bakugou?”

Bakugou glared.

Kirishima smiled at him and turned that smile back on Sero. “Right. So… you’re asking about pack stuff? Because, to be frank, I’m kind of new to it as well.”

Sero gave Bakugou a hesitant once-over before turning toward Kirishima. “In the context of your, uh, pack, what exactly does the alpha do?”
Midoriya ended up being the one to answer. He leaned in close on Sero’s other side, all friendly glances and sweet smiles. *Shiiiit, that was his cute smile, too. Double shit. Quadruple the power.* “Whenever we’re all together, he’s the one in charge. So if we need stuff, he gets it for us, and if there’s a disagreement, he solves it. You know, stuff like that.”

Kirishima’s mind tried to rearrange itself five seconds too fast. “Wait wait, so is that why he said he’d pay for your drink when I took you to that cafe?”

And Midoriya grinned and nodded, because of course it was. “Yeah!”

Kirishima blinked back at him, his brain still stuck on processing. “Oh. Okay, that… well, that would have been helpful and much less confusing to understand earlier on.”

“He didn’t offer to pay for your drink?” Sero clarified with Kirishima, his brows furrowing.

“Uh… no?” Kirishima tried to work that one through in his brain for a second. Eventually, his eyes widened. “No, you’re shitting me…” He turned to Bakugou. “Was that whole not-date-thing an initiation into the pack?”

Bakugou’s deadpan stare felt surprisingly sarcastic, but Kirishima could still feel the fire behind his eyes. He’d had it there all day. “What the fuck did you think it was?”

Kirishima blinked back at him. “Uh… a really weird request?”

Bakugou looked a bit taken aback by that, the ever-present anger and misanthropy temporarily disappearing from his face. “You… you did that just because I asked you to?”

Kirishima couldn’t stop the blush that appeared on his cheeks. “Yeah?”

“Oh.” Bakugou looked surprised, his mouth gaping wider than Kirishima had ever seen. Kirishima’s heart skipped a beat.

Sero leaned closer to Kirishima and sipped some more orange-something tea, his gaze interested. “So what exactly was your initiation?”

Kirishima didn’t know how to describe the events that took place that day, other than by summarizing it as, “Bakubro being a troll.”

Bakugou snorted and leaned back in his seat, throwing his arm over the back of the chair.

“How was he a troll? They’re much bigger.”

Aaaand Midoriya had entered the conversation again. Kirishima never could expect what was about to come out of his mouth, but Kirishima hadn’t meant that Bakugou was an actual, mythological ‘troll’. *Obvioulsy. Wait, did Midoriya even know about internet sub-cultures? Had he been introduced to memes? Oh shit yes, he might get to introduce Midoriya to memes!*

Kirishima smiled at Sero, trying to placate his friend’s curiosity with a teasing voice and a wiggle of his eyebrows. “Don’t worry. I won’t let him do that to you.”

Sero didn’t look appeased. In fact, he was starting to look a bit paranoid. *Ahhh… Kirishima knew that look well. Fun times. Sero glanced back and forth between Kirishima, Midoriya, and Bakugou, his voice holding an undercurrent of steel. “Do *what* to me?”*

“Wait, are you talking about the cuddle pile?” Midoriya piped up.
“Yeah sure, that’s what we’re talking about.” Kirishima took a sip of his coffee, uncertain whether he was thankful that Midoriya had caught up to the conversation or not. Even if that wasn’t quite what Kirishima was trying to protect Sero from.

“A… cuddle pile?” Sero looked amused by that. He also had his eyes narrowed at Bakugou as though he was trying to figure out the explosive teen’s motives for willingly cuddling with two of his classmates.

Wait, was it obvious that they’d all cuddled? That seemed like something that should stay a secret between packmates. First rule about being in the Pack: you don’t discuss what you do with the Pack.

“Shut up, Deku.”

It seemed Bakugou agreed.

Midoriya clamped his lips shut around a smile at Sero.

Kirishima had no idea what was happening.

Which was why Kirishima felt a bit loony-tunes when, in the mother of all surprises, Sero actually ended up following everyone back to Bakugou’s house after the cafe incident. Midoriya ran up the stairs to build a pillow fort. Kirishima followed Bakugou to the kitchen. Sero followed Kirishima. Bakugou pushed Sero up against the wall with a vague threat. Kirishima sipped at a glass of water. Bakugou pushed off of the confused Sero, and they all made tea.

This felt very familiar. Whatever this weird ritual was, it was becoming a thing.

Kirishima left the pair alone to figure out their shit as he trudged upstairs with two mugs of tea, one for him and one for Midoriya.

He probably shouldn’t have left them alone, except… well, they had both seemed to have gotten past whatever weird emotions were happening after school and at the cafe. It had seemed like Bakubro had cooled down, and Sero had eased out, and everyone was acting like their normal lunchtime-conversation selves. Midoriya definitely seemed fine.

But Kirishima realized, when Sero rushed into Bakugou’s bedroom five minutes later, panting and wild-eyed and more frazzled than Kirishima had ever seen him, that maybe not anyone could put up with Bakugou one-on-one for a prolonged period of time.

Sero held a hand out to Midoriya and asked him to come with him. Midoriya seemed hesitant and confused, but he got up and followed Sero out of the pillow fort and out of the bedroom door.

Not too long after, Bakugou stormed upstairs and told Kirishima he had to leave. And it felt wrong. Whatever it was, it felt wrong. Something had happened between Sero and Bakugou downstairs, and it had upset Sero, and it upset Bakugou, and everyone was flying off the rails. Kirishima should have never left them alone. He wanted to ask what Bakugou had said to him (because it was obviously something that Bakugou said, and not vice versa). But… Bakugou told him to leave. And that… it was kind of a thing, for Kirishima. When he was told in all seriousness to leave, he left. He didn’t like staying where he wasn’t wanted. He had fought for too many friendships as they’d dissolved around him, he’d had too many people abandon him because he wasn’t good enough or he tried too hard or he should just let things go.
And he didn’t want to lose Bakugou. So he left.

But even as he was walking, even as he was taking the bus, even as he was shutting the front door of his apartment behind him... he felt like he should have stayed.

Eventually, sitting on his bed, head between his arms and tears welling up in his eyes... Kirishima decided to text Bakugou. *Hey, man. Are u okay?*

He never got a response.

When Sero had told Midoriya to follow him, he hadn’t been thinking. He hadn’t been trying to supersede Bakugou’s alpha-ness or tear apart the pack or force him to choose. He wouldn’t do that to him. He knew this pack thing was important to Midoriya. But right now, just for now... Sero had needed Midoriya to come with him, to choose him. And he needed them to be alone. Away from all this. Away from Bakugou.

Sero had thought it would be okay. He’d thought Bakugou was cooling off. Kirishima had acted like the whole kitchen scene was normal...

Sero’s heart raced through his chest, his legs pumping faster as he tried to get distance between himself, Midoriya, and Bakugou’s house.

*You get off on it, don’t you? The way he looks at you.*

Nothing Bakugou had said was wrong. It was all stuff Sero had told himself, all his doubts, his worries, his secret thoughts he wouldn’t admit to anyone. And how did Bakugou know? The explosive teen had never been that perceptive before. Sure, he was a good fighter. But it had never seemed like Bakugou understood people this well. He hadn’t thought—

Midoriya squeezed Sero’s hand, from where Sero had made sure to grab him and not let go. Sero tried to breathe, to slow his pace, to calm down. Midoriya’s hand was small and soft in his, Sero’s thumb trailing against the callouses on Midoriya’s palm. Sero took another deep breath. This burning feeling was rushing through him, somewhere between caffeine and adrenaline and lust and anger, and he didn’t know what to do with it. He didn’t know how to get rid of it. He couldn’t seem to calm down. Bakugou had just—

Sero knew he was going to have to find a way to get along with Bakugou, if Izuku and he were going to work. He knew that. And he liked the challenge that the explosive teen gave him. It gave him a bit of a rush, and it made him feel like his body was thrumming. But Bakugou just... *fuck.*

*You have no fucking idea what you’re walking into. Did you not listen to a fucking word I said?*

Sero’s pace slowed to a crawl, Midoriya coming nearly to a stop next to him. “Sero? Are you okay?”

Sero looked down beside him, memorizing the fall of Midoriya’s bangs, his flushed cheeks, his open mouth... *fuck.* Sero did not have nearly enough self-control right now to stop his thoughts. Half of his mind was racing with Bakugou’s recriminations, his taunts, his goddamned insight. The other half was thinking purely with his dick. He wanted to shove Bakugou into a wall and force his tongue down his throat. He wanted to cradle Midoriya and keep him safe. He wanted Bakugou to shove him into a wall and lick his neck. He wanted Midoriya’s soft lips against his, lying beneath him, moldable
and pliant and warm, all for him.

Bakugou was right. Sero’s libido was a goddamned demon, and all he wanted to do was corrupt Midoriya. On his own terms.

*I bet it gives you a hard-on. Protecting people. Saving them. Making them look up to you. You’re a real fucking hero.*

Sero’s hands shook with adrenaline. His vision narrowed to Midoriya. Only Midoriya, with his freckles for miles and the small scar on his eyebrow and the way he was waiting, just waiting, for Sero to make a move.

Sero didn’t have any control. Bakugou had taken it from him, and Sero didn’t have the ability to stop himself anymore.

The kiss was sudden, much more sudden than Sero had planned. He’d daydreamed about it, trying to think about the best time, the best occasion, the best way to kiss Midoriya for the first time. Ever since Midoriya said he liked him, Sero had watched his mouth. He couldn’t take his eyes off it. He wanted to know what his lips tasted like. He needed to know. He needed Midoriya’s breaths against his lips.

But he hadn’t planned for it to happen for the first time with Sero shoving Midoriya up against a wall in an alleyway, pressing him into the concrete, and just taking it from him. Halfway through the kiss, Sero wised up, moved a few centimeters backward and went to release Midoriya… but the whine the smaller teen let forth, that goddamned whine—

*You’re fucking coddling him. He doesn’t need all that mushy bullshit.*

Bakugou’s words echoed in his mind, even now, even with Midoriya’s lips against his. Sero ripped his mouth away, panting, and stared into Midoriya’s wide eyes. Sero kissed his lips again, softly this time, for good measure. Maybe even as an apology.

“*I’m sorry,*” Sero whispered. “*Sorry, I didn’t mean to just… are you okay? Was that… okay?*”

Midoriya took a few seconds to answer, his cheeks stained red, his lips moist from where Sero had licked his way into the kiss. “*Was that kissing?*”

Sero chuckled, his forehead pressed against Midoriya’s, trying to get his breathing to slow down and his thoughts back in order. “*Yeah. Yeah, that’s called kissing.*”

“Oh.” Midoriya’s eyes flickered down to Sero’s lips. A grin spread from the corners of his mouth as he raised his eyes back to Sero’s. “*I liked it. Kissing you. I liked it.*”

“*Good.*” Sero’s mouth twitched, trying to stifle a grin. He really had no self control right now. His left hand stayed cradling the back of Midoriya’s head and protecting it from the hard cement, while his right hand trailed down Midoriya’s shoulder to his arm. Sero kept his volume at a low whisper. “*I’m glad you liked it.*”

Sero paused, staring at the teen beneath him, his blood still pumping with a thousand thoughts and desires, most of them containing Midoriya’s breath against his lips. His shifted his feet, his right leg bumping against Midoriya’s. “*Would you like to do it again?*”

Midoriya raised up on his toes in anticipation, with his endearing blush and puppy smile. “*Can we do it now?*”
Sero made a show of looking around their surroundings with raised eyebrows and a rakish grin, but their foreheads remained touching. “Maybe we should go somewhere else? Somewhere not in an alleyway.”

“I like alleyways,” Midoriya responded, eyes gleaming.

*Because of course he did.*

*This was Midoriya they were talking about.*

*He couldn’t do anything normal.*

And to ‘always the normal one’ Hanta Sero, that was one of the most perfect things about him.

---

Many miles away, Shouto Todoroki put down his pen and flexed his right hand. His body was tingling out of nowhere, and he had no idea why. It had started a few minutes ago and hadn’t gone away, growing from barely-noticeable goosebumps to a worrisome amount of something-is-probably-wrong. His heart was racing, almost like an adrenaline surge. Todoroki sighed out a shaky breath and ran his hand over his face, fingering the raised edges of his scar, wondering what was wrong with him now. Something was always wrong with him.

He should probably finish this chapter and go to sleep, get some rest, and get rid of whatever this weird feeling was. After all, he had a long weekend ahead of him. His father was home again. And that never meant anything good. Maybe it wouldn't be too bad, if he told him that he'd made his decision: he was going to be interning with the hero Endeavor. His father would have unfettered access to him for a full week.

Todoroki took another breath and tried to brace himself. Steel his emotions, will away the strange physical sensations crawling across his arms and back. His mind flashed to Midoriya, telling him that he didn't owe his father anything. Not even his disgust.

Todoroki knew that interning with Endeavor was the right decision for the hero that he wanted to be. He just wasn’t sure it was the right decision for the boy that he was now.

Shouto sighed and tried to take measured breaths past the tingling in his lips. He didn't owe that man anything.

*One breath. Two. Turn the page.*

He didn't owe him a damn thing.

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Chapter End Notes

Hello, folks!

I hope you don't hate me for the ending. Originally, Baku/Kiri/Deku had fun hangout times with Sero all night long... but then Bakugou's anger issues kept exploding, and
that happened instead. Sero and Bakugou need to talk through their shit or hug it out or something. Pronto.

I’ve got some fun things loosely planned for the next week of school, including: 1) Izuku’s shopping trip with Uraraka and Tokoyami, followed by Tokoyami hangout times, 2) Class 1-A discusses teen hero fansites, 3) Some possible Class 1-A ‘pack’ discussions (trying to think up a catalyst for this discussion), 4) Possibly some Shinsou Hitoshi coming back for more, 5) a binding ritual for Popsicle, 6) more of Izuku’s dreams, and 7) Dear god let’s hope that Sero and Bakugou talk at some point. I’m not a fan of angst, and that part is killing me.

Any other ideas would be welcomed! I kind of need to flesh out the next week before I start writing more, so any suggestions would be helpful. Let me know how you felt about the temporary Sero/Deku. It still might end if Sero/Bakugou can’t handle the other challenging them, but otherwise Sero will be teaching Izuku how to relationship in the background. Also: holy crap, there are only 3 AO3 Sero/Deku tags? Wow. Glad to be a minority. Even though this is apparently now a TodoDeku soulmate fic, with BakuKiriDeku polyamory, because combining tropes is AWESOME.
Inappropriate Discussions at Inappropriate Times

Chapter Summary

Alternately titled: 'Inappropriate Discussions at Inappropriate Times Make for Interesting Decision Making'

Midoriya contemplates his situation, gets bombarded by girl advice, and asks inappropriate questions of inappropriate people. Meanwhile, Sero and Bakugou begin to make amends. Ish.

Minor shipping mentions for: SeroDeku, BakuDeku, KiriDeku, IiDeku, and TodoDeku.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

7:19pm Friday

This was not in his job description.

This was so clearly not in his job description that Aizawa didn’t even know where to start.

Or rather, he did know where to start. But starting at the beginning involved more repetition than he wanted to go through right now, and Present Mic was already bent over in full-body guffaws, and Aizawa wanted the story to end already.

He was talking to his friend because he wanted advice, damn it, not hysterical laughing fits and too little a modicum of sense.

Aizawa got enough of that from Mr. Kaminari.

“H-he asked you… you for relationship advice?”

Aizawa was already regretting speaking to him. The prelude to his question shouldn’t be taking so long. Aizawa wanted his friend’s advice, and he wanted it now, and he didn’t want to have to trudge his way through the whole story with his friend’s antics making everything seem like such a bigger deal than it was.

Mr. Midoriya asked him about what people did when they liked more than one person.

That was about where Aizawa wished his day had ended.

Twelve hours earlier, Izuku Midoriya woke up with his legs tangled in his sheets, sweating profusely and panting conspicuously hard.

His mom wasn’t in their shared bedroom, and from the clanking sounds down the hallway, she was
likely trying to put something together for them to eat for breakfast. But it wasn’t the clanking that had woken him.

Izuku turned over on his side and attempted to extricate his legs from the mess they’d caught themselves in. He heard clacking on the floorboards and raised his eyes to see Popsicle’s tilted head from the doorway. Curious. Assessing. As if his familiar couldn’t feel what was going on in Izuku’s chest.

Izuku felt his face flood with warmth as he looked away from his familiar and back at the knot his sheets had tied themselves in.

Right. His dreams.

_They were dreams, right? And not…?_

No, Popsicle was in wolf form. They were dreams. Although Izuku hadn’t had dreams like that before.

They had been strange. Weird? Pleasant. Good, definitely, but… strange. And revealing.

Popsicle snickered at him from the doorway and trudged away, his tail swishing around the corner with a teasing flick.

He could be such a pain sometimes.

Izuku flopped over with a sigh, one hand resting against the warmth of his face, the other hand futilely clutching at the sheets. He didn’t know what to do with the thoughts racing through his head.

He didn’t know what to do with them at all.

Tenya was still avoiding him, so he also had no idea who to talk to about this sort of thing.

Oh well, it would come to him eventually.

Izuku wasn’t expecting the strange distance that seemed to exist between him and Kacchan the next day. It wasn’t quite tangible, and he couldn’t put his finger on what caused it or why it wouldn’t go away, but neither he nor Kacchan could seem to stare at each other for longer than one second.

Izuku had tried to nuzzle Kacchan’s neck in his usual good morning, but Kacchan got stiffer than normal, and Izuku’s body tensed up, and his breath was caught in his throat, and he couldn’t seem to look past Kacchan’s jawline to his eyes, and it was all—

Strange.

And Sero was already sitting in his seat, his mere smile making Izuku feel like the world was warm and glowing and on fire. Or maybe that was just his face.

Izuku was trying really determinately to breathe and to figure out what in spirits’ name was going on.

And Popsicle wouldn’t stop laughing at him. Anything could set his familiar off. Izuku would sneak a glance, one single glance, at Sero… and then Popsicle would act like it was the most hilarious thing
that had ever happened to the both of them.

Izuku was considering giving Popsicle to Tokoyami for safe keeping. Maybe Dark Shadow could
make him behave. They had a weird bond.

Izuku slumped in his seat, rolling his pencil around his fingers.

Kacchan’s expression from the day before, in the locker rooms, sprung to mind. That horrified look
on his face, as though Izuku had tried to set him on fire or something. Izuku had only said that he
was thinking of dating Sero… and then they all went to a cafe, and Sero was thinking of joining the
pack, and they all went back to Kacchan’s house, and—

Izuku had no idea. He had no idea what to think about it all.

He didn’t know what to think about Sero asking him to come with him.

He didn’t know what to think about the impulse he had to follow.

He didn’t know what to think about kissing him against a wall in an alleyway or the way the moon
seemed to make Sero’s hair glow and the quirk of his smile more radiant.

He didn’t know what to think about the way Sero had walked him to the bus stop and they’d parted
with a smile, or the way Izuku had hesitated and turned back around and walked to Kacchan’s house
and sat on the steps, huddled against a planter with a large fern.

He didn’t know what to think about the yell of frustration he heard from Kacchan’s bedroom, or how
cold the cement felt beneath his legs, or how much he wished Sero had just kept kissing him. How
warm he had felt a few minutes before. The tingling in his fingers. And the silence of Kacchan’s
backyard seemed to surround him, echoing with the whisper of memories and times he’d sworn
never to forget.

Izuku could barely place the images as they meandered in and out of his mind. A younger Kacchan,
laughing and charging forward. A younger Izuku, following in his footsteps, trying to match them
one by one. The way the days seemed brighter. How luminously green the grass shown. Skinning
his knees on the sidewalk and Kacchan getting angry at him for hurting himself. Kacchan being the
one to fetch the bandaid. Holding hands in the night. Promises.

And it had been years since all that, decades, and Sero was kissing him, and the light in Kacchan’s
room was going off, and Izuku didn’t know what to think.

Izuku sat outside Kacchan’s house for longer than Kacchan would probably say was appropriate,
and when he eventually got on one of the last buses back to the apartment, his mom still wasn’t
home. She was never home at night, anymore. She was always working, doing her best to afford
food and rent for the both of them. Once again, he was alone with his thoughts and a raven familiar
that just wanted to curl up against his pillow and go to sleep.

Izuku could have really used his mom’s advice, but he wasn’t certain what he wanted her to say.
That Izuku and Kacchan would always be together? That it was alright to want to kiss one boy but
cuddle and pledge yourself to another before astrally projecting to the bed of a third boy who might
be his soulmate?

Maybe Todoroki wasn’t his soulmate. Maybe this whole thing was just a new power that Izuku
couldn’t control, and his subconscious was stuck on the dichotomy of Todoroki’s hair and the way
Izuku could never seem to make him smile even though he wanted so badly to help him. And as for
Sero… maybe if someone made your heart race and your face feel warm, that was just that. It didn’t
have to mean more. It didn’t have to move to kisses or dating or whatever else Uraraka was giggling
about on the phone. Maybe Izuku should stick to following around the boy who put bandaids on his
legs and knew his secrets and didn’t run away even when that demon appeared.

Demons, make that plural. Izuku almost forgot about the USJ.

Everything started out so much simpler than it was turning out.

And now Popsicle was laughing. Seriously, what was up with him?

Izuku wasn’t in control of his dreams! Why did Izuku looking at someone seem so funny to Popsicle,
all of a sudden?

This felt like Popsicle’s payback for Izuku asking his familiar to please not transform into a raven at
night until Izuku felt like he was sane enough to deal with nightmarish visions (or oddly specific and
repetitive nightmares, there was no way to tell for certain). Izuku needed more rest than he’d been
getting. He didn’t have it in him to wake up ten times in the night, with images of blood and tongues
and hands surrounding him; he didn’t want to see Popsicle’s motionless form upon the ground or
Tenya bleeding out from his shoulder, immobile. The jagged knife. The noseless face. Familiar eyes.

Izuku had wanted one night just for himself, one night of normal sleep after kissing a boy and
hearing his best friend enraged and alone.

Izuku groaned and buried his head in his arms, something inside of his chest feeling shaky and
uncertain. His cheeks felt hot, and he wasn’t sure how to cool them down.

Mr. Aizawa cleared his throat and told the class to pay attention.

Izuku’s eyes flashed forward, but soon got caught on the curve of Kacchan’s ear and the line of
muscles in his neck and Popsicle really needed to stop laughing in snake form because it was
seriously ticklish and so annoying Popsicle shut up.

When it came time for lunch, Izuku felt a rush of strange feelings pass through him. Anticipation.
Fear. Nausea. That shaky uncertainty. He tried to blink the feelings away, but they weren’t in his
eyes. They seemed to be somewhere in his chest and in his gut, but rubbing his palm against his solar
plexus didn’t seem to solve anything. The strange feelings remained.

Izuku walked on autopilot to the lunch hall, carrying his lunch bento in both hands, afraid he would
drop it. He didn’t understand what was going on with his body or why it was acting so weird.

Sero and Bakugou had both walked ahead of Izuku to the lunchroom, and once he got nearer to their
table, he realized that they weren’t sitting together at all. They were both sitting with someone else
and had a seat open beside them. A seat for Izuku. Izuku was halfway to smiling before he realized
that he couldn’t sit in two seats at once, and he didn’t know which one to choose.

He wanted to talk to Sero, to figure out what kissing someone meant, to learn whether there were
certain steps he was supposed to be taking or if they were still in the “hanging out more and getting
to know each other better” stage that they’d discussed on Sero’s bed.

He wanted to talk to Kacchan, to explain that weird urge he’d had to follow Sero out of the pillow
pile and leave Kacchan’s house without saying goodbye. He wanted to be able to look Kacchan in
the eye and smile and talk to him and have everything be normal again… not that they talked that
often, or anything. Communication with Kacchan never really required words. Kacchan always
seemed to just understand Izuku.

Until now.

Izuku hesitated, his bento between both hands, uncertain where to go. Should he join Kacchan? Or
Sero? Why weren’t they sitting together, like they had for the past several days? Were they upset at
each other?

A hand tightened on Izuku’s upper arm, and he turned around, nerves rising into his throat.

“Come on, you’re sitting with us!” Uraraka cheerful voice helped snapped Izuku out of his daze, and
he blinked at her in confusion. Uraraka leaned closer to him, her voice softer. “You can’t just call me
out of the blue like that and leave me hanging!”

Izuku had no idea what she was talking about. Call her? When had he called her? Was she talking
about the other night when he was hanging out with Sero?

Izuku stumbled after Uraraka as she practically dragged him to a table with Asui, Ashido, and
Hagakure. Izuku managed a friendly wave to the others as he sat down next to Uraraka, who
practically bounced her way into her seat.

Todoroki raised his eyebrow at Izuku from two tables away. Izuku blushed and sent a hesitant smile
back his way.

Uraraka didn’t even open her chopsticks before she started asking questions and staring at Izuku with
a strangely intense expression. “Alright, details. What did you decide?”

From two seats away, Asui blinked slowly before tilting her head at Izuku. “Decide?”

Uraraka’s cheeks turned pink, and she made a pursing motion with her lips while staring expectantly
at Asui. “The phone call?”

“Ribbit.” Asui put a thinking finger to her cheek. “Don’t you think that’s his business, Uraraka?”

“But what if he needs adviiice?” The last word came out a whine.

Izuku blinked between the two girls, wondering if he should say anything.

Uraraka turned back toward Izuku. “Alright, then just tell me this. Did you kiss him?”

Oh. They were definitely talking about Sero. Izuku paused, thinking about how he should answer as
he chewed on his lips. “I did last night?”

Uraraka squealed, her hands raising up to cover her mouth and stifle the high-pitched sound.

Asui blinked. “I think you broke her, Midoriya.”

“As-sorry!” Izuku blushed as he looked back and forth between the girls, not sure what he should be
doing. He could see Hagakure’s arm waving around on the edge of his vision.

Asui nodded her head and leaned forward to take another bite of her lunch. “So you decided against
going slow?”
Hagakure leaned over Asui to get a good look at Izuku, the shuffling edges of her shirt the only indication that her head was moving. “Wait, who are we talking about? Who did Midoriya kiss?”

“Sero.” Coming from Asui, the name sounded rather like a frog noise.

Hagakure’s shirt began jerking back and forth as Hagakure made some surprised gesture. “Sero? Sero likes boys? I thought he said he’d dated a girl in junior high?”

Ashido shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe he likes both?”

“So how was it?” Uraraka leaned closer to Izuku, still in investigation mode.

Izuku blinked back at her. “Was what?”

“The kiss!” Uraraka hissed, a blush reforming on her cheeks.

Izuku felt his cheeks heat up again. He really wished his face would stop doing that. “It was… good? I liked it.” Izuku paused, thinking back to the event in question, the way Sero tilted his head and smiled. The moon. “Is it weird to kiss someone in an alleyway?”

“It was in an ALLEYWAY?!” Uraraka’s squeal caused Jirou to wince, a table away, and look back in confusion at the other girl’s table. Yaoyorozu tilted her head and looked between the other girls with a question on her face. Uraraka waved her hands in apology and tried to hide herself in her seat, all the while looking up at Izuku with imploring eyes.

Izuku only shrugged in response and ducked his head, his eyebrows furrowed in thought. “He acted like we shouldn’t be doing it in an alleyway… but I don’t know, I kind of like alleyways.”

“DOING IT?!” Uraraka yelled this time, causing Jirou and Yaoyorozu to throw more confused stares at their table.

Asui tried to salvage the situation. “I think he probably meant that with a different connotation, Uraraka. Calm down.”

Uraraka visibly relaxed.

Then Asui put another finger to her cheek. “Although… if you only kissed him last night, what did you do after you called us on Wednesday?”

Izuku pushed around the rice in his bento, a faint blush on his cheeks. “We just talked about things. I told him I, uh, that I liked him? And he said he liked me, and then we decided to just, uh, get to know each other a bit more before deciding anything.”

“And then the next day you kissed him?” Uraraka’s voice still sounded incredulous and rushed, half a squeal hidden inside. She picked up a bite of rice and chicken to hide her interest in the conversation.

Izuku pushed his food around, wondering how to phrase what had happened. The pack, the pillow pile, Kacchan’s yell of anger from his room when Izuku walked back to his house. Izuku still didn’t understand what that was all about. “I mean, we were all hanging out as a pack at a cafe and then at Kacchan’s house, and he just kind of… asked me to come with him, and he was dragging me away from Kacchan, and then we were kissing.”

Ashido was the first to butt into the conversation this time. “So much drama. How did I not know there was all this drama?”
Izuku blinked back at her, confused. “What do you mean drama?”

“Sero dragged you away from Bakugou?” Uraraka’s eyes were as big as saucers, her fingers clenched tight onto her chopsticks. The rice that was once between the sticks had fallen back to her plate without her noticing.

Izuku’s shoulders hunched forward in sadness. Kacchan’s anger. The light in his room turning off. The frigid cement. Goosebumps prickled up and down Izuku’s arms, and his chest felt cold. “Yeah, and Kacchan hasn’t spoken to me all morning. Do you think he’s mad?”


“Wait, so you and Bakugou are dating?” Uraraka looked so earnest when she said that.

Izuku couldn’t seem to form words in response, his face scrunched up in confusion. His mind went blank. Kacchan? Dating?

Ashido made a noise of disgust before laughing. “No way, Bakugou and romance? Hardly!”

Izuku felt a flush spread from his chest to his cheeks; a rush of adrenaline made his hands feel jittery as he rolled his chopsticks between forefinger and thumb. He didn’t know whether to look at Uraraka or Ashido or Asui, so he ended up flitting his eyes nervously between each of them. “What? N-no, Kacchan and I aren’t—it’s not like that. He’s just… I don’t know, he’s Kacchan. We’ve known each other all our lives, and we have all these promises, and we understand each other really well, and… I don’t really want to think about a life without him, but that doesn’t mean we’re, you know, dating.”

Sero said that dating was hugging and cuddling and kissing and holding hands. Sure, Izuku and Kacchan did 50% of those, but Izuku was 100% positive that trying to do the other 50% with Kacchan would cause serious disfigurement to Izuku’s body and was a bad idea for his emotional wellbeing. Or physical wellbeing. Or his all-around wellbeing.

It was just a bad idea.

That seemed to mollify Uraraka, and her voice got a lot softer all of a sudden. “Are you sure you don’t, uh, that you don’t like Bakugou more than Sero?”

Izuku blinked at her, bewildered, uncertain what comparison she was trying to draw. “What do you mean more? I like them in different ways. Sero’s Sero, and Kacchan’s Kacchan.”

Uraraka rolled her eyes. “No, I mean… like-like. Wanting to, you know, be with someone.”

“I don’t think he understands, Uraraka,” Asui croaked.

Izuku continued to blink at Uraraka, confounded. “But I am with Kacchan. We’re pack.”

Asui tilted her head, her eyes wide and unblinking. “Midoriya… I think Uraraka is asking if you’re attracted to Bakugou.”

Izuku gulped. “A-attracted? To Kacchan?”

All four girls nodded their heads fervently up and down.

The flush across his chest and cheeks got even worse. “Um, but isn’t attraction that kind of, uh, warm and jittery feeling?”
“I mean, sometimes.” Ashido hummed, propped her head up with her hand, her curly pink hair bobbing along with the movement. “But whenever I find someone attractive, I just get this rushing sensation whenever I’m near them, and it makes me just want to hug them all the time or touch them or something!”

“Oh.” Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed again. “But I feel like that around a lot of people? Like Kacchan and Kirishima and Tenya and Todoroki…”

“Oh dear,” ribbited Asui.

“That sounds tough,” Ashido agreed, her eyes having grown wider with each passing name.

“So what are you going to do?” Uraraka asked, leaning forward.

Izuku tried to take in everyone’s expression at once. Why was feeling like that for several people tough? Did that… oh wait… oh no… Izuku gulped, and he had a sudden overwhelming feeling of hopeless confusion, as if he didn’t understand his place in the world and could never hope to understand it. As if he was always going to be in the middle of a forest that he would never find his way out of because every tree seemed like the end of the path.

The look of hopeless confusion must have shown on his face, because Izuku could swear that Uraraka cooed at him in response, while Hagakure made consoling noises. “Wait, so that’s… that’s attraction, too? Then why does it feel different with Sero?”

Uraraka had an uncertain look on her face. “I mean, how different does it feel? Like, I don’t know, how do you feel for, uh, each of the guys you like?”

Izuku chewed at his lips in thought, wondering how best to differentiate the feelings. “Sero makes me feel taken care of, and he’s really nice and explains things, and sometimes he smiles and it makes my heart race, or he touches my shoulder and I feel like I’m about to explode out of my skin.” Izuku paused. “And Tenya’s bed feels like home, but he also makes me feel really safe, like… everything else in the world just disappears when we’re alone, and he… I don’t know. He grounds me? Makes me feel like I’m in one place, and my heart just feels really warm.”

Uraraka’s eyes were wide, her concern showing through.

Izuku hesitated, thinking. “Kirishima is really fun to hang out with, and I never feel judged when I’m around him. So I guess he makes me feel happy and, uh, hopeful? And Kacchan’s Kacchan, and we’ve had our lives planned together since we were kids, and he always understands me. And he’s actually really sweet even when he’s angry, and he’s always got this energy, which is really hard to describe; but then he’ll just press up against me, and it—and I just—I don’t know the right words for it, I just don’t want to let him go and I can’t let him go and I don’t think that’s attraction, it’s just me and Kacchan, and that’s—that’s how we are.”

Izuku paused and took a deep breath, before remembering the last person on the list. “Oh, and I think Todoroki’s my soulmate, but we’re trying to figure that one out.”

The blushing girls blinked at him in unison before dissolving into incredulous, gaping giggles.

Ashido groaned and put her head in her hands. “Nooo, you can’t take Todoroki from us!”

Jirou turned around to stare at them, but Ashido wouldn’t let up her antics.

“You like Iida? But he’s… he’s Iida!” Hagakure tilted her head and made chopping motions with her arms.
Wiping at her eyes as her giggles trailed off, Uraraka turned to Izuku. She looked apologetic. “I feel like I might have given you some bad information, then. I thought you only liked Sero!”

“Ribbit.” Asui agreed.

Uraraka cleared her throat and pushed away her lunch, as if decluttering the space in front of her would allow her some clarity about how Izuku should best proceed. “So you… you possibly like each of these guys, but Sero’s the only one who you know likes you back, and you’ve both kissed. Problem solved, then, right?”

Asui hummed, her head tilting in consideration. “Except Bakugou has looked upset all day today. And yesterday.”

Izuku’s crestfallen expression led to another round of cooing and consoling noises.

“I mean, but you said that you and Bakugou weren’t dating, right? And Iida’s… well, he’s going through something right now with his brother, so he probably wouldn’t be interested in dating for a while. I’m not sure about Kirishima or Todoroki, but—”

Ashido groaned again. “You can’t have Todoroki! You have to leave some for the rest of us!”

“Ashido, I think you might have a problem.” Asui’s deadpan stare should have been enough to make chirping crickets appear. Ashido made a face at her.

Hagakure’s voice took on a teasing tone. “You can’t fault Midoriya for wanting the coolest boy in class. And I mean coooool—”

“Shut it, Hagakure.”

Izuku stared between them, eyebrows scrunched together so intensely, by now, that his forehead had begun to grow numb from the strain. “What does she mean ‘have Todoroki’? How can you ‘have’ someone?”

Jirou paused next to their table, her bento in one hand. She patted Izuku’s head with her other hand, and he gazed up at her with wide eyes. “Oh, you poor sweet summer child.”

Which really didn’t answer his question.

Any of his questions.

Did he really like-like most of his friends? And if so, what was he supposed to do, then? Wasn’t mating only between two people? Did that mean he had to choose? But how was he supposed to choose when he didn’t understand what the differences meant?!

He wished Tenya would start talking to him again. Izuku really needed his advice.

Even if the advice would be for Izuku’s feelings on the person advising him.

All Might announced to the class that, since they had done so well in their hero simulations this week, they had earned another fun class exercise of problem solving and athleticism.
This time, the students would be conducting a game of tag where the students would use capture tape to “capture” each other and the last person standing would win. The building they would be fighting in was seven stories and mimicked an office building, with cubicles and desks and chairs. The endless rows of cubicles and offices caused a subtle maze-like environment, around which the students would need to navigate in order to find their competitors and stage attacks, all the while keeping environmental damage to a minimum.

Sero couldn’t help but feel excited. He’d always loved hide and seek, and this game seemed far too familiar.

Plus: capture tape? Sero had this. He knew his way around tape.

…but Sero really should have anticipated, after the events the night before, that Bakugou would be gunning for him. The worrisomely familiar bellow of Bakugou’s rage could be heard from however many floors away Sero had managed to station himself.

Sero took a second to pause, contemplate the fact that Bakugou was yelling his name and not Todoroki’s, and blink several times in surprised succession before he shook his head and told himself to focus. He’d nearly finished putting up a spider web of his tape on all the entrances to his floor, along with two traps he’d set up for quickly moving classmates turning corners. If Sero was lucky, his traps would do most of the work for him.

Another bellow of rage.

…or not. There was also the possibility that Bakugou would be the first up to this floor, and he was going to recognize Sero’s tape, and use that clue to hunt down Sero’s hiding place and beat him up for kissing Midoriya.

Did Bakugou even know Sero had kissed Midoriya? Would he care, even if he did? Just yesterday, Bakugou had mentioned being worried about pack more than being worried that Sero was taking Izuku specifically away from him… so maybe Sero had his signals crossed, and Bakugou was just paranoid, and Sero wasn’t about to get beat up for kissing Bakugou’s childhood friend. Or whatever those two were.

Sero could hope.

Of course, just because he could hope didn’t mean that his first instincts were wrong.

Within the span of three minutes, Bakugou had made it up to Sero’s floor and burned all the tape off the doorway before yelling that Sero better get his ass out there and face him. Sero was just scared enough to be nearly certain that Bakugou was serious about his threat of exploding the whole damn office just to find Sero. Because apparently Bakugou didn’t care about the whole “keep environmental damage to a minimum” clause of their training.

Bakugou’s threat was probably 25% of the reason Sero’s feet dragged him down the hallway and his head peeked around the corner into the largest bit of empty space on this floor, all the while ignoring the niggling in the back of his head that this was a terrible idea and Sero should really cut his losses and run.

Bakugou was pacing, his costume stretched tight over his muscles, his blonde hair spiky, his red eyes crazed. His grenade-like gauntlets made Sero’s heart race in his chest for indecipherable reasons.

Sero took a deep breath and tried to prepare himself, making certain that he was hidden behind a fake office fern.
He tried to tell himself that Bakugou wasn’t crazy. Bakugou was just a bundle of issues that Sero was having difficulty parsing out from each other. Narcissism? Self-doubt. Possessiveness? Loyalty. Anger? Fear. Always one emotion buried beneath all the others, and it was hard to determine where one began and the other ended. And so much of Bakugou was his anger (and wasn’t that one difficult to interpret). Anger at others for interfering. Anger at others for not doing enough. Anger at others for not trying as hard as he was or for being better than he was or for not doing anything at all.

Bakugou had issues, is what Sero was getting at here.

Another 25% of the reason for Sero peering toward danger rather than sneaking his way around it had to do with this weird, perverse desire Sero had to prove himself to Bakugou. Prove himself. To Bakugou. Sero didn’t understand himself sometimes. He didn’t even think Bakugou was that amazing, but all he had to hear was Bakugou's taunts and Bakugou’s threats… and then suddenly, Sero’s heart was pounding, and his hands were sweating, and Sero was licking his lips and taking determined steps out from his hiding spot and where the fuck was everyone else when Sero needed someone else to hold him back.

Sero really needed to start getting better control of himself, around Bakugou.

Sero would like to say that, in the next ten minutes, he put up a good fight and almost succeeded in capturing Bakugou with his tape, but that would be a lie. And it wouldn’t even come close to describing what happened. The flurry of fists. How Bakugou seemed to just fly through the air. All that rage. Sero stepped out to fight him, and the next thing he knew, he was having to dodge without a plan, shoot tape out of his elbows that was immediately used to throw his own body into walls, and just in general (don’t tell Midoriya) get his ass beat.

Because seriously… Bakugou.

The explosive teen was a hurricane. He played at being a tiger, some large beast who could hunt down his prey. But Bakugou was a force of nature that tore down everything around him. The heat from his explosions, the force that propelled all his enemies backward until they were tumbling head over heels and embedding half of their body in the wall. Sero could hardly breathe after the first few explosions. He could hardly dodge enough to trap Bakugou in his tape. There was too much raw energy, and Sero couldn’t contain it.

He didn’t know why he thought he could contain it. Control it. Make it see reason.

This was Bakugou, after all.

But there was an eye in the middle of the storm, when Sero could almost see past Bakugou’s shell and into whatever secrets he kept locked up behind his anger. Their eyes met and held, and Bakugou’s heavy panting didn’t sound like rage, anymore, but despair. And Sero’s mind flashed back to their argument in Bakugou’s kitchen. You get off on it, don’t you? The way he looks at you? Bakugou’s breath against Sero’s neck. Don’t you, Bakugou? He thought back to Bakugou’s anger simmering on a slow boil, practically vibrating against him. You have no fucking idea what you’re walking into. But behind the burning red eyes and the energy humming against Sero’s chest from where Bakugou kept pressing harder and harder—the other teen hadn’t seemed enraged or upset, just confused, like there was a wall of things he couldn’t say and he was trying to warn Sero about them or get Sero to realize those things for himself.

And part of that might have been Bakugou’s selfishness, and part of it might have been Bakugou’s jealousy and his strangely covetous attitude toward Midoriya. But Bakugou wasn’t telling Sero to leave. He wasn’t telling Sero to shove off or get lost or leave Midoriya alone. He was warning Sero. Always warning him. Always trying to point out where Sero was going wrong, rather than just
pushing him away completely. And it was confusing, so confusing, because what was Sero supposed to do with that? How was he supposed to react?

And behind all that confusion, Sero could sense it. The eye of the storm. Bakugou’s desperation. That certain hopelessness and frustration, the bewildered undertone that kept asking why Sero didn’t understand, like Sero was the one trying to play with fire without comprehending that fire couldn’t help but burn you… and Sero’s heart paused in sympathy for Bakugou, tried to reach out, to connect —

Then it was gone, the hurricane was back, and Sero didn’t have a chance of winning.

It wasn’t until their fight was over (and Sero had no way of pretending that his loss hadn’t been catastrophic) that Sero even dared to open his mouth. There had been that moment in the middle of the fight, and Sero knew that there was something more going on, something Bakugou wasn’t telling him. He also knew that whatever had happened last night had unhinged something in the explosive teen, but he wasn’t sure why or what to do about it. The more he thought about it, the more certain Sero was that Bakugou was trying to warn him about something.

But all Bakugou’s warnings came out in the form of physically assaulting his peers and maneuvering them into the positions he wanted them in. He kept shoving Sero up against different surfaces—walls, ovens, desks—and when Sero’s libido wasn’t going haywire and approving wholeheartedly, the circumstance of each encounter was terribly confusing. If Bakugou wanted only to warn Sero, why press up against him? Why snarl or glare or growl? What kind of normal person did that?

Sero didn’t know what to say to Bakugou. He hadn’t been able to get the explosive teen alone to talk about what happened the night before, and they needed to discuss it, preferably somewhere without Midoriya just in case Bakugou flipped his lid. Sero wondered what he could say to fix this, what was gumming up the works, and what could be done about it. Should he apologize for kissing Midoriya? For dragging him out of that weird pillow pile after Bakugou had—after they had—even though it had been Bakugou’s fault—

Sero didn’t have a damn clue. There was only one thing in this mess of Bakugou’s anger and his taunting and the way he’d pressed Sero up against the wall of his kitchen that made any bit of sense. And Sero wasn’t going to let Bakugou leave until Sero had said his piece… ignoring the fact that Sero was leaning against a desk and couldn’t move and pretty assuredly had broken his ribs during the fight and this was probably not the time or place for this conversation. But… priorities.

Midoriya.

Sero tried his best to clear his throat, but his shout came out dry and ragged. “I’m not trying to take him away from you!”

Sero’s shout seemed to echo in the room amidst an eerie silence. Bakugou paused halfway across the room, almost to his destination. The simmering cloud of anger that drove Bakugou’s legs toward the next floor and more potential showdowns with his classmates (pawns) dragged to a halt.

“What the fuck did you say?” The explosive teen barely turned his head, but Bakugou’s movement and strangely frigid tone was all the incentive Sero needed.

Sero attempted to say it softer this time, the assurance and determination still underlying his words. “I’m not trying to take him away from you.” Against his will, Sero’s voice broke. “I wouldn’t do that.”

Bakugou’s hands clenched and unclenched. His hunched shoulders bristling upwards and back. His
Sero couldn’t move from his spot on the floor. It definitely felt like all of his ribs were broken, and there was a piece of capture tape hanging loosely from his upper arm from where Bakugou had used it to slam Sero into the ground.

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

But Sero couldn’t be imagining the furrow in Bakugou’s eyebrows or the way his eyes kept twitching to the side as though he wanted to run away. Sero prided himself on being more observant than that, and he had the certificate from a situational analysis elective to prove it. So Sero couldn’t be imagining the other teen’s hesitation, that look of a cornered animal who despite its instincts wanted the treat being offered to it.

Bakugou was… staying. Sero couldn’t move, and Bakugou had won. By all means, Bakugou should be leaving Sero to groan in misery and lauding his victory before heading toward the next floor.

But he was staying.

And the buzz that rested around Sero’s thoughts was trying to figure out why. Why was Bakugou listening to him. Why was he pausing. Why was he always saying that Sero didn’t know what he was doing or what he was getting himself into or what he was talking about. And how could Sero keep him here and talk some sense into him. Try to connect, just one more time.

Sero wondered what it was going to take to get it through Bakugou’s thick skull. Why was the other teen always warning him? Did he think Sero was just dicking around and having fun, that he wasn’t taking this seriously? Was there something about Midoriya that made it dangerous to date him? Or did Bakugou think Sero was going to hurt Midoriya, instead? Sure, Sero had only known Midoriya for about two months, but that didn’t mean that Sero couldn’t care about Midoriya. Sero was a caring person. That was just how he was built. And he wouldn’t do anything to hurt someone he cared about.

Sero tried to reposition himself against the office desk behind him. The metal was cool against his back, and Sero used it to focus. He eyed Bakugou, waiting for the big reveal, the last portion of this puzzle that would settle all the pieces into place. A warning for Sero? Or a threat to him?

You don’t know what you’re talking about.

Whichever the case, Bakugou was wrong. Sero did know what he was talking about. Sero was coming into this whole situation with his eyes wide open. Bakugou was the one who was either blinded by his own feelings or wasn’t being honest with himself about what Midoriya needed. Sero was caught between the dual desire to shake some sense into Bakugou and try to talk it out, together, to mend bridges or build the damn bridges in the first place or whatever the metaphor was for trying to connect with Katsuki fucking Bakugou.

Sero narrowed his eyes at Bakugou. He hesitated before starting. “Why do you keep saying that? You keep acting like there’s some big secret that I don’t understand, but you never try to explain it. You act like you know something that no one else can take, and you keep using it to drive others away. But that alienates Midoriya, and it alienates you, and it’s not working. I care about him. I like him, and I’m trying to get to know him, and you keep acting like you can be everything to him, but you can’t. He needs more.”
Sero had felt like he was on a roll, there, except for that last part. That had him wincing. And if the swift turn and the snarl were any indicators, it had definitely been the wrong thing to say.

“He needs me,” Bakugou growled, taking a step back toward Sero. A tingle spread its way down Sero’s spine, starting from his neck and ending at his fingertips. Bakugou was really good at growling.

“Yeah, yeah he does.” Sero agreed to Bakugou’s assessment more readily than he would have liked to. Why was Bakugou so sensitive about this? Where was it coming from, the need to be the only one in Midoriya’s life, to drive everyone else away with warnings or threats or whatever they were? Sero took a short breath, his ribs wincing, and paused. He let his eyes trail over Bakugou one more time. The bulging muscles, strained. The clenched fists, pulsating. The scowl that refused to disappear, to give up or make way for anything new.

Put another way… what was Bakugou afraid of?

Sero had thought all night long about what Midoriya needed, what was missing, and what Sero could be for him. He had thought about how warm Midoriya felt, pliable but hard, moving in Sero’s arms. That innocent smile. The way he’d told Sero that he liked him, each specific way that Sero made Midoriya’s body feel. It had been enough to give Sero a high. It had also been enough to reveal just how little Midoriya knew about relationships or dating or, hell, human socialization in general. Sero had known, from that infamous lunch period, that Midoriya needed a guiding hand. But somehow, along the way, it had become more than that. Something in the way both of their personalities interacted… Sero and Midoriya worked together. He could feel it. And there was something between them that didn’t exist between Bakugou and Midoriya, and Sero didn’t know how to say that without pissing Bakugou off.

Oh well. In for a penny...

Sero swallowed and met Bakugou’s eyes. “Midoriya needs me, too. And unless I’m missing something here, I’m pretty sure he needs Iida and Kirishima as well. He needs a lot of people, and that isn’t a bad thing, it just… he’s special, and he deserves to be treated that way. And he can’t be treated that way if you don’t let other people near him.”

That didn’t seem to make Bakugou any less angry. “Are you fucking lecturing me? You?”

If Sero had the wherewithal, he would have rolled his eyes. Instead, he responded sardonically, “Well, no one else is stepping up to the plate.” He probably should have thought through inserting himself in a position equal to Bakugou.

Bakugou turned around to face him. His profile standing strong, his voice falling suddenly flat in contrast to the growling fervor before. Bakugou looked… wary, and his eyes were wide, pupils dilated. “You want to be the other alpha.”

“I… wait, what?” Sero blinked at that, trying to catch up with Bakugou’s turn in the conversation. That had definitely not been part of the dialogue Sero was constructing in his head.

Bakugou sneered at him. “Wolf packs have two alphas that are mates, and they run the pack together. And you want to be the other person in charge.”

Sero continued to blink, his mind feeling foggy, unable to make the proper connections and figure out what Bakugou was getting at. “The other alpha would be your… mate?”

“I’m not fucking offering it to you!” Bakugou’s shoulders were bristling again, hackles raised. Sero
was once again reminded of the wolves from the videos Bakugou had recommended to him.

Sero shook his head and tried to focus on what Bakugou was saying. Wolf packs had two alphas, who were mates. Bakugou thought Sero wanted to be his mate? Sero blinked again, trying to order his thoughts. Hadn’t Midoriya mentioned mates as well? Sero squinted his eyes, trying to remember. “Midoriya was talking about us being ‘mates’…”

Explosions went off in Bakugou’s hands, and Sero flinched. “That’s goddamn bullshit! Don’t you fucking dare!”

And that… wasn’t where Sero was trying to go with this at all. He wasn’t trying to become Bakugou’s mate (although he wouldn’t say no to the position of second alpha) (and he also wouldn’t say no to Bakugou kissing him, but that didn't seem to be on the table either). Sero wasn’t trying to claim Midoriya as his own or to step between Bakugou and Midoriya. Bakugou was just… if anything, he was confusing everything further by playing along with ideas that neither of them had grown up with. Mates? Alphas? Packs? That was confusing the point. That wasn’t what Sero was trying to say. Sero had been trying to console Bakugou, to reach out, to explain and have them connect with each other.

Sero raised a hand to his head. Another flash of pain from his ribs. Another difficult breath. “Look… I don’t—I don’t think trying to fit our lives into this notion of how wolf-packs work is going to solve anything. I think it’s just confusing us further.”

Bakugou scowled and repositioned himself. “Then you don’t understand Deku at all.”

And that… that was enough. Sero couldn’t reason with someone who wasn’t willing to use common methods of reasoning. He couldn’t get on an equal playing field if the other teen would only accept a hierarchy according to atypical rules that had no bearing on their current positions as students at a high school for pro-heroes. Bakugou just needed to get off his high horse already and stop and think. Sero didn’t understand Midoriya? Bakugou was the one who didn’t understand! Bakugou was the one telling their class that a ‘pack’ existed and he was at the top and they either joined under him or couldn’t talk to Midoriya. What the fuck. Sometimes, Sero wanted to punch his goddamn face in.

Sero barely recognized his voice, how he began growling back at Bakugou, matching tone for tone. He couldn’t help the way one hand clenched against his pants and the other clenched his hair. Trying to focus. Trying to drag Bakugou back down to reality where they could have a conversation and understand what each other were saying. Where they could agree on goddamn something and have some hope of sharing Midoriya, in whatever way the teen in question wanted.

The more Sero talked, the faster his words came out. “Or maybe you don’t understand. Have you ever thought about that? I get it. Midoriya was raised around wolves for some reason. But he’s also very confused about how those wolf customs fit in with normal human customs, and that’s not something that following this strange wolf-pack structure is going to help solve. He’s already starting to change. And sure, he does stuff that’s not normal, but that’s what I like about him. And whatever he’s changing into—that isn’t going to fit with what he came from!”

The last bit came out as more of a yell than a statement, and Sero was panting and wincing with each deep breath, bright lights shooting off in his head. Midoriya had better appreciate the lengths Sero was going through to try to communicate with Bakugou.

“You’re trying to change him.” Bakugou sounded appalled.

He still wasn’t getting it.
Sero shook his head, willing the pain away so he could focus. What was best for Midoriya? That’s where they had to be coming from, in this conversation. That’s how they needed to approach this. Sero sighed briefly and tried to fill his eyes with as much sincerity as possible, and hopefully he didn’t sound like he was pleading with Bakugou, he wasn’t, he just needed him to understand. “I’m trying to allow him to change, if he wants to. I’m trying to teach him what’s normal, so he can decide for himself what he wants. Maybe he wants some weird wolf customs. Maybe he wants to go to a cafe and drink tea. And maybe we should just give him options and let him decide.”

“Deku doesn’t know what the fuck he wants. He doesn’t understand.”

Sero could have whimpered at how circular Bakugou’s reasoning patterns were. “Then let me help him understand. Let me be near him without trying to take over everything, so I can show him what the normal side of things is, and he can decide whether he wants it.”

“Fuck you.” Bakugou’s red eyes flashed, his fists curled. He took several steps toward Sero, an energy growing around him that Sero could feel from halfway across the room. If Sero was anyone else, he might have even been intimidated.

Instead, he was frustrated. Did Bakugou ever think things through? He said Midoriya didn’t understand what he wanted, that Midoriya wanted a pack structure, that Midoriya needed Bakugou; but Bakugou got to pick and choose anyone else who wanted to be Midoriya’s friend, and Bakugou would only allow friends who bought into this whole wolf-pack business. It made no sense. How was Midoriya supposed to learn what it was like to be a normal teenager, if all he had was Bakugou encouraging him to act like a wolf?

Sero sighed and tried to reason with the storm, a goading undercurrent in his tone. “Well, then do you want to do it? Do you want to be the one leading him along and showing him what a kiss is or how to hold hands or cuddle on a couch and watch movies?” Bakugou took a step back, his face screwing up in an expression of disgust. “Is that what you want? Do you want to kiss him? Do you want his eyes staring into yours? Do you want him so close that his breath is against your lips?”

“I fucking get it already,” Bakugou interrupted, his words harried. He wouldn’t even look at Sero, staring at some part of the desk over his shoulder with a constipated expression.

Sero leaned his head back against the desk and closed his eyes, his frustration making his head spin. “I don’t think you know what you want, but whatever it is, it’s not that. You just want him to follow you and stay by your side, don’t you? And I’m not going to take that away. Whatever this thing is between you two, I’m not trying to break it. I just want… I want to take care of him when you’re not there.”

Bakugou’s energy and rage were calm again, another eye in the middle of the storm. A peace offering. “And when I am there?”

Sero was afraid to look him in the eye, so he kept his eyelids firmly shut, his head still leaning against the desk, shoulders slumped. Resignation. Conciliation. A final agreement. “Then we both look out for him.”

Bakugou snorted, a sneer making its way onto his face. “Like that’s going to work.”

And Sero was 100% done with Bakugou’s cynicism, right about now. They were almost there. They’d almost come to an accord. His eyes flashed open. “What is so wrong with having others look out for him?”

Bakugou’s eyes caught Sero’s, like red embers burning, searing through Sero’s surface thoughts to
the hidden desires beneath. “Tch. Don’t fucking kid yourself. That’s not all you’re doing, all you’re thinking.”

Sero looked away with a blush. He steeled himself to meet Bakugou’s glare head-on. “There’s nothing wrong with two people being attracted to one another.”

Bakugou’s cheeks flushed and his face paled. He clenched his fists again and made an abortive gesture as though he wanted to shove Sero’s head repeatedly into the desk drawers. “We’re fucking fifteen, you shitrag. We shouldn’t be thinking about any of that shit. We don’t have the fucking time.”

Which was… definitely not what Sero thought he was going to say. Bakugou was complaining about… teenage future pro-heroes having hormones? Seriously? Sero’s eyebrows furrowed as he tried to calm the beast in front of him. “Maybe you don’t, but the rest of us do. We think about ‘that shit’ a lot. We think about it even when we try not to.”

Bakugou sneered and gave Sero a dismissive once-over before turning away. “That just makes you weak.”

That surge of adrenaline, the tingling in his fingers and the copper in his mouth, was back. Bakugou was such a fuckin—seriously? Sero glared at him from his spot on the floor. “You’re allowed to listen to your body, Bakugou. It’s not a crime.”

Bakugou turned quickly around, his expression somewhere between surprised and enraged. The flush on Bakugou’s cheeks spread, its contrast with his pale face growing even more stark. “That’s not what I fucking—fucking fuck. Shut the hell up. Stop trying to get in my head. You’ve got no right.”

Sero stared incredulously back. He hadn’t expected that reaction. He didn’t know it might be a sensitive topic, otherwise he wouldn’t have mentioned it. Sero sighed and took a conciliatory tone. “No right? No right to listen to you? To try to help you?”

“I don’t need help!” And Bakugou’s eyes were burning, they were searing, they were twin embers ready to set afame.

Sero was trying to play nice, but he was frustrated, and he couldn’t help but mock Bakugou’s bluster. “Of course. How could I forget? You don’t need anything.”

“Or anyone,” Bakugou agreed readily. Too readily. As though they were words he said to himself often enough that he believed them and could recite them without thought or deliberation.

Sero’s mocking expression faltered. How very lonely.

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Sero took a second to stare at Bakugou, at his tense arms, the mask of his face that brooked no argument. But if he was so intent on not needing anyone… Sero tilted his head, his eyelids lowering as he peered beneath his eyelashes at the other teen. “Then why care about Midoriya?”

Bakugou paused, the expression on his face hesitating, unsure what mask to settle into. Bakugou settled for closing his face off completely, his back stiffening and his fists clenching multiple times in succession. His tone was firm and dark, with something underneath that sounded ready to explode. “That’s none of your business.”

Bakugou’s eyes flashed. “I told you to stop butting into—”

Sero sighed. He didn’t want to beleaguer that point further. “Look, if you don’t want me to understand you, fine. I’ll stop pushing. But you can’t say you don’t care about Midoriya and then try to be in charge of how close I can get to him.”

Bakugou grit his teeth and snarled. “We have a past. And a future.”

*Oh, Sero was so done with this conversation.*

“Do you even realize how creepy you sound sometimes? No? For god’s sake, Bakugou… someone has to step into this crazy mess and tell you to *take a step back.* Let each other breathe. Figure out whatever you two are, because I don’t think either of you understand, and it definitely doesn’t seem like you talk about it. I saw how you were with Midoriya earlier. He looked broken and sad, and you’ve definitely been weird all day. So *talk your shit through.* And let me know what you decide, because I’m not about to step into something that doesn’t know what it is.”

Bakugou sneered and tilted his head back. “So you’re giving up?”

“What?!” Sero winced as the pain in his ribs burned from his sudden scream. He didn’t mean to sound as incredulous as he did, but seriously…? If he had more energy, Sero would wipe at his face and bang his head against the wall for good measure. “I’m not giving up, I just don’t want to handle a bomb that could explode any second! I want you and Midoriya to get on the same page, so Midoriya and I can figure out if we can be on the same page without the two of you blowing up.” Sero paused and took a deep breath, wincing halfway through. Stupid ribs. “I want Midoriya to be happy. I don’t have to be part of that. I just *want* to be.”

And something in either Sero’s last tyrade or his pleading expression actually managed to shut Bakugou up, because the other teen didn’t say anything further. His expression closed off again, but his eyes retained some strange wounded look, and his furrowed eyebrows belied the fact that something Sero had said managed to puncture through Bakugou’s tough exterior.

Sero just wished he knew which part it was.

Bakugou hesitated for a few more seconds, his posture seeming to debate with itself, before he turned around and walked away.

Sero closed his eyes and prayed that someone would drag him to Recovery Girl, because he was 100% done with the day.

Minutes later, there were the sounds of what seemed like the world ending, from the ceiling above him.

Aizawa wasn’t happy with All Might for a multitude of reasons.

First, All Might chose to conduct a second year training exercise with Aizawa’s already-confused homeroom, Class 1-A. This resulted in a multitude of injuries and necessitated the quick and somewhat expensive refurbishment of two separate floors of Training Complex 9-C.

Second, All Might listened in on his students’ fights as part of his responsibilities as their head
instructor, but didn’t feel the need to call the medical wing robots to carry off the too-injured-to-walk students because he argued that it would be a great learning experience for the students to have practice carrying injured comrades off the battlefield. And then Recovery Girl got mad at Aizawa for All Might’s decision.

And third, All Might insisted on cornering Aizawa and discussing one of the conversations he was privy to, during one of the students’ fights. Katsuki Bakugou and Hanta Sero, in particular. (Aizawa could have told his fellow ‘instructor’ how that pairing would end up. Sero was well behind several of his peers in quirk application, while Bakugou was much more experienced and determined.)

Most importantly toward the last point… Aizawa may have been the homeroom teacher of these students, but that didn’t mean that he was in any way responsible for their emotional wellbeing or what relationships (or lack of) they wanted to form with their peers. Aizawa would use the status of each student’s relationships with their fellow students in order to determine the best pairings for different combat situations or physical exercises; but other than those specific circumstances, Aizawa didn’t want to know (and didn’t care to know) about who liked who or how much. They were teenagers, for god’s sake. Little balls of hormones whose emotions and feelings were not something to be closely followed by their teachers.

And there was just something about All Might’s concerns for his students’ relationships that smelled too similar to gossip for Aizawa’s comfort.

So he shot that shit down. Quite abruptly. In the faculty lounge.

And then Mr. Midoriya had the gall to bring it up again.

It was the end of a long, long day filled with his homeroom’s changing dynamics. Mr. Midoriya and Mr. Bakugou seemed to have a falling out, Mr. Iida was still trying to overcompensate for his sadness about his brother’s injuries, Ms. Ashido and Ms. Hagakure were acting more hyper than normal, Mr. Todoroki seemed to still be having some troubles at home, and Mr. Kaminari accidentally set his homework on fire twice. Twice. Homeroom was not the place for testing the effects of electrical discharge on flammable materials, Mr. Kaminari.

So when the end of school bell rang and his homeroom filed out of their class, amidst giggles and glares and more cheering than Aizawa’s exhaustion and growing migraine wanted to deal with… well, Aizawa wanted to grab the homework materials that needed grading, head home, make some instant ramen, and pass out before his street detail that night. Aizawa was even considering skipping the ‘head home’ part and just making ramen and sleeping in the teacher’s lounge, but he was waiting for All Might to vacate the school premises before chancing that one.

Only there was a problem. Mr. Midoriya hadn’t left yet. And he was standing in front of Aizawa’s desk, shifting his feet, and glancing between Aizawa and the floor at his teacher’s feet as though he was contemplating kneeling.

Aizawa hadn’t had enough sleep to deal with Mr. Midoriya’s idiosyncrasies. He slumped against the board behind him with a sigh and leveled his best deadpan stare at his nervous student, waiting for the inevitable but not quite willing to encourage it.

“Um, Mr. Aizawa?”

Aizawa waited for his student to continue, but the teen merely furrowed his eyebrows further and played with the strap of his bag. Aizawa ground his teeth together while he waited for his student to ask him a question already.
“Do you…? Um, that is… What do you do when…? No, that’s not right.” Midoriya bit at his lips and shuffled his feet again. He shifted his hands further down his bag strap and worried at the loose threads.

Aizawa had a bad feeling about what his student was about to say. Maybe if Aizawa was lucky and gave the teen an out, then Mr. Midoriya would drop his question altogether. “If it’s nothing important, I would like to get to my dinner…”

But ‘important’ meant different things to different people, as Aizawa well knew.

As tended to happen near Mr. Midoriya, everything came out in a rush. “I think I might like-like several of my friends, but I’m not sure what to do about it, or how you know when you like someone versus like-liking someone, or what you’re even supposed to do when you do like-like someone. Because everyone makes it sound as though like-liking someone is exclusive, like mating is exclusive—”

Aizawa’s eyebrows shot to his forehead.

“—but then attraction apparently isn’t exclusive, and you’re supposed to be able to figure out how to tell one from the other, and I just… no one will tell me how to figure it out. Or what if I do figure it out, and I like-like several people, but you’re only supposed to choose to mate with one person. And when you do decide who you want to be your mate, then how do you show everyone you’ve chosen? In my old pack, you had to claim them by biting them and stuff in front of the rest of the pack—”

Aizawa grit his teeth and clenched his hands. He managed to keep any other expression from entering his face, which he counted as a win, but Mr. Midoriya’s muttering just kept coming.

“—but Tenya made it sound like that wasn’t normal? And his brother asked if I wanted a book on courtship rituals. Are there different courtship rituals here? But I thought all that stuff wasn’t supposed to happen until your majority, and I’m still a couple years from my majority—”

“Midoriya.”

His student stopped talking, his babble tumbling to a halt. He looked up at his teacher with wide eyes, and Aizawa could feel the thought behind them as though it was being projected directly into his brain.

Help me. Help me, I’m so confused. Help me, I can’t figure this out.

But Aizawa didn’t have anything to offer. This sort of question, it wasn’t one you discussed with your teacher. This was a question for your peers or your family or your…

Pack.

Pack leader.

Oh, shit.

Was Mr. Midoriya coming to Aizawa about this because he’d agreed to be his student’s pack leader and that meant he was the guiding authority on how his pack should behave?

…this was definitely Aizawa’s fault for accepting the position.

Aizawa sighed and clenched at the marker tray on the board behind him.
This was not in his job description.

This was so clearly *not* in his job description that Aizawa didn’t know what to do. He’d never had a student ask him for relationship advice before. What was he supposed to say? To any other student, Aizawa would have just told them to figure it out and sent them on their way… but could Mr. Midoriya figure this out? Was he capable of that? Did he have the necessary social and cultural background to determine how he should best navigate his feelings for his peers?

Damn it, where was Hizashi when Aizawa needed him? This was definitely more his area of expertise. Aizawa didn’t typically do attraction or relationships. He liked to go home and pet his cats and not have to worry about pleasing someone else with their own life and their own aspirations and their own anxieties. He just wanted silence and sleep and something fluffy and soft. So sue him.

Aizawa was really out of his depth, here, yet Mr. Midoriya was looking at him as though Aizawa could solve all his student’s problems.

But that wasn’t his job.

…although he was the pack leader, so it might actually be his *responsibility*.

Aizawa tried to think of how best to respond to his student. How to help, even though Aizawa had no idea how to help or what advice to give. He couldn’t even imagine being in his student’s shoes, because that wasn’t how Aizawa was built. He wouldn’t have started developing hormonal attractions to his friends in high school. Aizawa was too much of a cynic and a pessimist for that to have ever occurred.

Aizawa rested the back of his head against the board and crossed his arms, leveling his gaze at his student’s hopeful and nervous expression. “Take the weekend.”

Mr. Midoriya blinked back at him, confused. “What?”

Aizawa cleared his throat and ground his teeth. This was painful. Inside. His insides were in pain. “Take the weekend. Go and spend time with each person you are… thinking about this for. See which one makes you feel the best. Whoever makes you… happiest… then tell them how you… feel. If they like you back, then that’s who you choose. If they don’t, then they’re not someone to worry about.”

“Oh, okay. Yeah, that sounds like a smart thing to do.” A pensive expression settled over Mr. Midoriya’s face for a few more seconds before eventually brightening into an excited smile. “Thank you, Mr. Aizawa!”

His student darted in to quickly nuzzle Aizawa’s arm (resulting in Aizawa stiffening his posture and suffering a brief moment of *oh wait, oh shit—*) before Mr. Midoriya sprang away with a skip and headed toward the classroom door. And then he was gone. He was gone and temporarily out of Aizawa’s life, and Aizawa had somehow managed to survive the conversation intact. He only hoped he had given his student the best advice.

And although Aizawa was very glad to be done with the conversation, he had a niggling desire to ask Hizashi how his friend would have responded in this circumstance. What advice he would have given.

Aizawa just dreaded how Hizashi would act when Aizawa tried to paint the picture behind his question.

*How do you advise a not-wolf-child on matters of the heart, and how to parse ‘heart’ from
‘hormones’?

Ignoring, of course, the fact that Aizawa would prefer for none of his students to date until he was done teaching them and he was out of their lives altogether. Several years. He would prefer his students did not date for several years. And if they were going to date each other or other people, Aizawa definitely didn’t want to hear about it. Or be asked for advice. Ever again.

He really wished his day could just be over, now. Taking the bus home seemed much more difficult than Aizawa’s exhaustion wanted to put up with.

“Shota?”

Aizawa sighed. Speaking of Hizashi…

Aizawa peeked one eye open, only for Hizashi’s bright grin to cause him to immediately shut his eye again. He didn’t have the patience to deal with the rest of the day. Maybe patrol tonight would be good for him.

On the other hand, patrolling meant he wouldn’t be sleeping, and that’s about all Aizawa wanted to be doing right now. But such were the choices of pro-heroes.

Aizawa sighed again. “Ramen. Lounge.”

Hizashi only laughed in response. “Long day?”

Aizawa pressed off of the board behind him, before raising a hand to massage his eyebrows, eyes still firmly closed. Maybe he should keep his eyes shut on his way to the faculty lounge, to test whether he could still navigate the school hallways blind. And then he could drag Hizashi into the crazy business that occurred today.

Aizawa only missed one step on his way to the faculty lounge, during the exact second that he made the connection between All Might’s earlier gossip and Mr. Midoriya’s question.

Well, shit. All that talk of attraction, could it have been between Bakugou and Sero and Midoriya? And hadn’t there been talk of Iida? Or was it Kirishima?

If it was Iida… well, Aizawa might be able to get behind that, after all. Mr. Iida had a stabilizing presence on his peers, and Mr. Midoriya surely needed more of that in his life.

Chapter End Notes

Hey everyone!

This chapter took a while to cobble together. That Bakugou/Sero conversation was a bitch. I was trying to balance Sero's growing understanding of Bakugou as a person (as well as helping readers understand Bakugou) while Sero also getting fed up with Bakugou's ridiculousness. Plus, I needed those two to come to an accord. Which they kind of did. We'll see how that pans out.

Let me know if you liked it or if the balance between thoughts/actual conversation was too confusing! I'm hoping Sero and Bakugou seem like fuller-fledged characters now. Todoroki keeps getting too much attention. (Kirishima and Tokoyami, I'm coming for
Next chapter will either be Izuku following Aizawa's advice or Izuku getting kidnapped by Uraraka and running across Tokoyami, to hilarious end. Let me know which you would prefer! I might be able to fit both in one chapter... but this chapter was technically only like six scenes, and you see how long it got. I've already got some of the Tokoyami bit written, and it's just... so wonderful, my friends. So wonderful.

As a side note, I need to stop shipping everyone with Midoriya. It's causing him problems.
I Dream a Dream of Who

Chapter Summary

Izuku's a poor emotional boy, Bakugou tries to help, and Kirishima flounders.

Featuring: Izuku spending the weekend with the Bakugous, having messed up dreams, serious personal space/possessions issues, keeping 1 more magical object on him than he should be, and offering a friend a confession. Meanwhile, Bakugou tries to be good alpha, and Kirishima is a good beta until he isn't. Add some BakuDeku, KiriDeku, and TodoDeku for the win.

Keep an eye out for hints about the nature of the TodoDeku soul-bond.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You promised we were going to become heroes together. You promised we’d fight them side-by-side. We’re pack, aren’t we?

Izuku shifted over in his sleep, his hands clenching.

Stupid Deku. Why are you always hurting yourself? You can’t take care of anything.

Izuku clenched his teeth and ground them together, his nose scrunching up.

Do you remember your promise?

Popsicle whined and nuzzled Izuku’s hipbone.

How can you keep that promise if you’re so weak?

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed.

I thought you said heroes don’t put other people in danger, so what the fuck do you think you’re doing, huh Deku? They almost died because of you. All these pro-heroes are fucking morons, and you let them get slaughtered. What’d you fucking think was gonna happen?

Izuku’s hand clenched tighter at his pillow.

Fucking stop apologizing and do something about it. You can’t keep your promise if you're too busy getting people dead.

Popsicle shifted closer.

If you left me once, you’ll leave me again.

Izuku’s eyes shot open, and he flung himself halfway out of his bed pallet, only to realize that the room was dark and Kacchan wasn’t anywhere around. There was his mother on her pallet, a couple of string lights glowing above her bed, an opened journal on the ground, the vague grey form of his trunk at his feet. Izuku looked around, confused, and Popsicle shifted against him with another
whine. Izuku reached out his hand to stroke Popsicle’s fur, his eyes still searching the corners of the room for answers.

To what, he didn’t know.

When Izuku woke up next, it was to his mother stroking his bangs away from his forehead.

“Hello, sleepy one…”

Izuku hummed and closed his eyes again, rolling onto his back with a yawn.

“Izuku, I have to go somewhere.” His mother’s voice was soft and kind. Izuku had missed talking to her; he’d missed her stabilizing presence. “And I don’t think you should come with me.”

Izuku made a noise resembling a question, and his mother laughed. The sound was warm and carried the memory of a crackling fire, Izuku giggling with one of the pups, his mother’s teasing, the blue light of the moon. When she laughed, Izuku could sometimes feel the dirt beneath his feet without being reminded of the trees that were set ablaze.

His mother’s hand stroked through his hair again. “Don’t worry, it’s just to check some wards. I’ll be back for my Monday shift.” A pause. “Just to be safe, you could stay with a friend… how about Kacchan?”

Izuku’s eyes stayed closed as a smile lifted on his face. He sleepily murmured, “Kacchan,” and his mother laughed a second time.

“I’ll call Mitsuki, then.” Another caress. “You boys have fun.”

And then the smell of her was gone. Cinnamon cookies and autumn leaves. Warmth. The moon.

Izuku rolled over and blinked his eyes, trying to wake up. Where was his mom going again?

Izuku yawned wide with his eyes scrunched shut. And why couldn’t he come with her?

By the time that Izuku was conscious and shuffling his feet toward the bathroom, his mother was gone. She had left a note next to Izuku’s toothbrush telling him that she had called Mitsuki and that he should head over to the Bakugou’s house whenever he was ready.

Izuku was used to an empty apartment, by now. His mother often came back after he had already gone to bed, and his only times with her were in the mornings, anymore. But there was something about his mother being gone-gone and out of town that made the apartment feel colder than before. The creaking floorboards, the cracks in the walls, the stains on the ceilings… every surface Izuku touched felt somehow forgotten.

Shivers broke out over Izuku’s arms as he sat on the edge of the bathtub and brushed his teeth, the tub’s cool surface reminding him of the concrete outside Kacchan’s house two nights before, which in turn reminded him of that bridge many years ago where he’d waited for Kacchan to appear, hours before the demon attacked. Cold surfaces always made Izuku feel alone and abandoned. Every echo sounded bigger than it was, and it made Izuku’s body still. It made him feel nonexistent.
The kitchen cabinets were stocked with the limited basics: oil, rice, flour, dried seaweed, a couple seasonings, green tea. The fridge held milk and a half-empty carton of eggs. Izuku boiled some water and measured out the rice. The apartment was silent except for the distant sounds of cars and the occasional bark of a dog, with an occasional humming noise that Izuku had begun to associate with a train not far away.

Izuku ran his fingertips over the cheap countertops as he waited for his breakfast rice to cook. It was just him, here. Just Izuku. Izuku alone. He folded his arms on the countertop and rested his forehead against them. He took a deep breath, in and out.

He’d never noticed how long it took for water to boil.

… his mom was right. He should definitely stay with Kacchan if she was going to be gone the whole weekend. He didn’t want to be in an apartment with only echoes to accompany him and this frozen feeling in his chest.

On the other hand, Izuku wasn’t certain what he should be doing. Hero Internships would begin a week from Monday, and it was Saturday morning right now. A large part of him wanted to follow Mr. Aizawa’s advice and try to get together with all of his friends to determine if they were actually, possibly, more-than-friends. That could take up a whole weekend on its own. However, Izuku also needed to do more research about his bond with Popsicle and come up with a definitive spell or ritual for binding Popsicle to him even further, so that no villain’s quirk (or classmate’s quirk) could sever his bond with Popsicle or turn Popsicle against him.

Popsicle trotted into the room, and Izuku peered over his arms to look at his familiar. One of the best things about having a familiar was that you were never supposed to feel alone… so then what was wrong with Izuku? Why did he feel like this? A deep-set loneliness, even with his familiar beside him. It made a strange part of him ache.

Izuku sat down on the kitchen floor with his back to the sink cabinet. Popsicle padded over toward him and whined.

Izuku managed a half smile at his familiar. “I know, I can’t shake it.”

Popsicle huffed and stuffed his nose between Izuku’s folded arms. He was firmly of the opinion that Izuku should choose pack, not rituals. Popsicle never learned from lessons.

Izuku pressed his head against Popsicle’s and smiled slightly wider. “Yeah, yeah, I’ll go after breakfast.”

And maybe, since it was Kacchan, Izuku could take his journal and some of the materials he was using to plan the ritual, and then he could kill two birds with one stone.

It wasn’t until Izuku got to the Bakugou household that he remembered the strangeness with Kacchan the day before. Izuku nuzzling him. Both of them stiffening. How uncertain Izuku had felt. How he couldn’t seem to choose which table to sit at, Kacchan’s or Sero’s.

Izuku gulped and clenched at the strap of his overnight bag. He hadn’t brought much—two changes of clothes, something to wear at night, his toothbrush. He couldn’t figure out a way to transport his soap, so he was planning on just using Kacchan’s. *Or was that something he was supposed to ask*
before using? Izuku hadn’t showered the last times he had spent the night with Kacchan. Was there a different protocol for staying multiple nights with someone? Oh no, he wasn’t supposed to bring a gift or some food with him or something, was he?

Izuku must have paced toward and away from the Bakugou’s front door at least ten times, before he heard Bakugou’s voice yell out from one story up and two windows over. “Just come the fuck inside already, shit nerd!”

Izuku flushed and turned around. He shifted the strap on his shoulder and knocked on the door. The Bakugou’s generally locked their door when they were home, ever since an incident in the area when Izuku and Kacchan were still kids. Izuku supposed he could try the door to see if it was unlocked, but Tenya had told him always to knock on the door first even if he thought that he could get inside on his own because—

The door opened. Kacchan stood behind it, with one arm raised to prop open the frame. Izuku’s mouth began to dry up as he looked at Kacchan, who was dressed in a black tank top and shorts, showing so much more skin than his outfits at school. Bakugou’s chest was covered in sweat, and he had a towel around his neck. Izuku wondered if he’d been working out. Which then made Izuku wonder how Kacchan worked out. What did he do? Pushups and sit-ups, or did he lift weights, or muscle-toning via stretching? Izuku kind of wanted to sit and watch Bakugou exercise, but he also had the urge to be next to him, training their bodies side-by-side.

Izuku’s mouth definitely felt dry. He raised a hand to hide his cough and looked up with a smile at Kacchan. The strangeness of the day before didn’t seem as pronounced, now, although that uncertain feeling in his chest remained. He wanted to hug Kacchan. He wanted to go to Kacchan’s bed and lie down together and never let go. He wanted to race Kacchan through the forest, like the pups used to do, to wrestle together and laugh. Desires twisted and tangled inside of Izuku as he stared distractedly at the outline of Kacchan’s pectorals and the sweat dripping down his neck to the top of his shirt.

Izuku wondered what Kacchan would want to do. Did he even want to do anything with Izuku?

Bakugou sneered, and his red eyes filled with blood and promises. They were so very familiar, and it made that ache inside Izuku grow. He wished he knew how to name it. “Tch, are you just gonna fucking stand there all day? Come inside.”

He growled the last two words, and Izuku couldn’t help but obey, his legs and feet jerking forward as though Bakugou controlled their strings.

Popsicle slithered around his shoulder as Izuku stepped out of his shoes and followed Kacchan first into the kitchen for a glass of water and then up to Kacchan’s bedroom. Izuku eyed Kacchan’s bed, where they’d worked on homework once before, where Kacchan had allowed him to nuzzle him, where they’d spent the night in Kacchan’s bed and Izuku had the strangest dream about Kacchan—kissing… him…

Izuku’s cheeks tinted red as he tried to recall the dream further. He’d nearly forgotten about that dream. It involved something with trash piles and saving Kacchan from being buried beneath it? Izuku nibbled on his lip as he focused on what sensations he could recall, the sounds of the ocean, the heat of Kacchan’s explosions. (The tengu’s dream stone hummed in his pocket, activating and making the memory of the dream sharper and more distinct, sensations trailing like feathers across his skin.) Technically speaking, that might have been the first time Izuku had ever dreamed about kissing; and now that he’d actually done it with Sero, he had something to compare the dream to. Kacchan’s dream kiss had felt so much softer, like warmth and home. But then the dream had changed, and suddenly it was Kirishima grazing his sharp teeth over Izuku’s lips and he was asking
Izuku, *Why didn’t you tell me?* And he had looked so betrayed…

Bakugou eyed him strangely and sneered. “You’re a fucking space cadet today, aren’t you?”

Izuku’s eyes were glazed over, his head turned toward Bakugou’s bed but his eyes staring straight through. *Izuku had another dream after that one, didn’t he? That same night, before the USJ attack. He’d dreamed that Mr. Aizawa had gotten killed, and there were all these villains with strange abilities. Then there had been severed hands covering Izuku everywhere, destroying him, and a tengu that begged him to kill it. And then… Kurogiri’s mist? But Izuku hadn’t met Kurogiri yet, so why had he dreamt about his mist?* Shivers broke out on Izuku’s arm as he shook his head and attempted to push away the memory of those hands, the tengu’s exposed brain, the destruction. That hadn’t been the dream he’d meant to focus on.

Kacchan’s voice called out to him, as though through several feet of muddy water. Echoes from dreams clogged Izuku’s ears as he squinted his eyes and tried to come back to the present. Back to Bakugou’s bed and Bakugou’s comforter and Bakugou’s pillows. Izuku raised blinking eyes toward where Bakugou was only a foot away, a hand outstretched toward at Izuku as though to drag him out of the waters himself.

Izuku curled his fingernails into his palms, the sharp pinpricks of pain helping him focus back to the present. *Maybe he shouldn’t have kept the tengu’s stone in his pocket. He’d never tried to use it outside of meditation before, but it must only require focused thought because Izuku doubted a dream that old could seem that real without the help of an artifact or amplifier.*

Izuku tried to clear his head of those thoughts as he took deep breaths. Popsicle slithered around his neck, grounding him and bringing his mind back to focus. The room smelled like Kacchan—like gasoline, burning, and that hint of sweetness. Izuku could never figure out what caused that sweet scent; it wasn’t cloying, but warm, a sharp sweetness that always had Izuku wanting to sniff Kacchan more. Izuku tilted his head to nuzzle Popsicle’s scales, and Popsicle hissed in confusion. Izuku tried to pass his reassurances back through their bond. He was okay, just… maybe a bit too introspective to be using the meditation stone, today. Izuku told himself to just focus on the first dream, the positive feelings and warmth that had surrounded him at the end. Izuku looked up to find Bakugou staring at him with a furrow in his brow.

Izuku blinked back. There was a pause, and Izuku looked around the room to figure out why Bakugou might be looking at him so strangely. “… what?”

Bakugou ground his teeth, his gaze fluctuating between worried and ready to snarl at Izuku and shove him into a wall. He looked away with a huff. “Tch, nothing.” He walked toward a pair of weights on the ground and lifted one up, making sure to stare anywhere but back at Izuku. “You interrupted my set.”

Izuku shrugged in innocence and sat down on Bakugou’s bed, his bag still over his shoulder. He tried to look around the room more, but he couldn’t stop his eyes from trailing over Bakugou’s figure as the other teen started in on his reps. With each lift, his biceps would bulge and his abs would tighten and flex. Bakugou’s shirt was really tight, rising and falling with each motion. Izuku’s mind flashed back to the dream with Kacchan on the beach, Kacchan falling on top of him, that kiss… Izuku wondered if real-life kisses would be as warm as dream kisses. He wondered if Kacchan would ever be interested in kissing…

Izuku shook his head and tried to stop thinking that. He’d just been telling Uraraka and everyone that he and Kacchan weren’t like that, hadn’t he? They were friends. They’d been friends all their life, and they’d be friends until they’d die. But that didn’t mean they like-liked each other or were going to end up as mates… right? He’d told the girls how he felt about Kacchan, and they’d… oh yeah,
they had thought he like-liked Kacchan. They just hadn’t thought Kacchan would be interested. Izuku wondered if that was better or worse than not like-liking him at all.

Izuku watched Bakugou’s arm flex, his head leaning back as he panted for his next breath.

Something inside Izuku was growing warm, but he didn’t have the knowledge by which to understand it. To Izuku, it felt like that moment right before you cry, when you’re not quite certain whether you should allow yourself. Something tickling, moving, burning, coiling around his insides…

Did this mean he liked Kacchan?

If it did, how would that ever be something that Kacchan would accept?

Part of Izuku wished he had never had the lunchtime conversation with Uraraka and the other girls. It was making what had once been so simple, complicated.

At the end of his set, Bakugou swiveled his head to glare at Izuku. “You gonna train or not?”

“… we’re training together?” Izuku stared back at him, a light flush on his cheeks. He shook his head to rid it of abstract thoughts and got up to drop his bag beside Bakugou’s bed. He fished out a different pair of shorts. He had meant to use them to sleep in, but they were definitely flexible enough to work out in. Izuku unbuttoned his cargo shorts and began pushing them down, only for Bakugou to make a noise behind him.

“Deku, what the fuck are you doing?!”

Izuku turned around to see Kacchan’s cheeks were red and his eyes were blazing. Izuku tilted his head, his thoughts still distracted. “Putting shorts on to train?”

Bakugou stalked over and grabbed Izuku’s shorts off the bed and pushed them and Izuku toward the doorway. “You change in the bathroom, you stupid Deku.”

Izuku blinked innocently back. “But we change in the locker room together all the time…?”

Bakugou growled at him and gave him a final shove out of his bedroom door. His eyes flashed down to Izuku’s cargo shorts, which were unbuttoned and hanging low on his hips. Bakugou licked his lips and looked away with a huff and a glare. The flush on his cheeks deepened. “That’s only because it’s a locker room, idiot. That’s what they’re fucking for.”

Izuku nodded. He hadn’t known that. He leaned down to grab his sleep/work-out shorts, which had fallen onto the floor during Bakugou’s effort to shove him out of the room. Izuku straightened back up and called over his shoulder that he would be right back, before jogging toward the bathroom.

Bakugou tried not to watch as Izuku grabbed the bathroom doorway and pivoted his body around it, his cargo shorts riding even lower on his hips. Bakugou's face felt like it was on fire as he ground his teeth and tried to clear the image of Izuku bending over from his brain. Bakugou wasn’t into that sort of thing, so he didn’t know why he was watching or why the image wouldn’t seem to go away. But he was. And it wouldn’t. So he started in on another fifty push-ups to clear his head.
Somehow, after Bakugou finished his morning routine, Izuku convinced Bakugou that the old forest in the mountains would be a great place to train their powers for the rest of the day. Izuku hadn’t been there since Bakugou had tried to use enough sweat and explosion to explode a small hole in the mountain, but it used to be the place where Izuku watched Bakugou train his new quirk. Even as a four-year-old, Bakugou had the ambition to be the greatest hero, and he wasn’t afraid to shy away from the hard work that it would take to train his quirk to become stronger.

Four-year-old Izuku had been in awe.

As they left the house together (with Izuku’s cargo shorts back on), Izuku wondered what Kacchan thought of him, now. Izuku very rarely focused on training his ability. His mom always told him that, unlike quirks, a witch’s abilities grew stronger over time. It didn’t matter how many explosions he tried to create; the explosions wouldn’t get any bigger until he got older. Izuku’s focus, therefore, had always been on the more passive parts of a witch’s craft, which all witches could learn. Scrying became easier and more accurate with practice, and ward creation involved a lot of memorizing from his ancestor’s journals and experimentation with his mother. Meditation helped build Izuku’s ability to focus and visualize, which aided both his active power and any spells that Izuku tried to cast; but once again, the radius in which his ability could speed up or slow down molecules never got any stronger from this. It just helped Izuku have better control over whatever size of explosion he could create already.

Something about speeding up the molecules of an object had always been easier for Izuku than slowing them down. Despite years of meditation, Izuku had never gotten any better at choosing to only pause a single person in time, rather than a whole room. That may have had something to do with lack of areas to practice, though. Izuku could practice his explosions within a circle of stones practically anywhere, but freezing time required Izuku to ward the entire area that he might unintentionally affect with his power.

(Izuku nearly stumbled on a tree root, and Bakugou glared at Izuku over his shoulder.)

Still, Izuku felt like he wasn’t trying hard enough, and he was afraid that Kacchan would be upset at him for slacking off. But Izuku just had… other things to do. And anyway, he wanted to be more of a physical fighter rather than a hero who always relied on his power or quirk.

Although he was slacking on his judo training, as well.

The tengu elders would probably be disappointed in him. And Kacchan would definitely be disappointed… but Izuku couldn’t help it!

He didn’t have a normal life where all he had to focus on was school and homework and training to be a hero. Izuku also had the occasional weekend where he and his mom had to go create some wards or visit a mountain village, and he had a familiar to worry about, and then there were the disappearances going on among the tengu tribes, and demons were always on the hunt for Izuku and waiting for him to slip up and use his powers openly so they could find him.

And on top of all that, Izuku was trying to figure out how to act like a normal teenager, when he hadn’t grown up in a normal city surrounded by normal humans (who okay, yeah, had quirks—but they were still normal). He felt like he didn’t know what he was doing half of the time, and he kept screwing up, and then someone had to step in to tell him that what he was doing was wrong. And Izuku didn’t want to be doing things wrong. He wanted to know how to act, what was appropriate, and what his choices were. He wanted to know where you went when you wanted to see someone, and when it was alright that you showed up at their house versus asking to meet them somewhere. He was still learning how to greet people! That seemed like an obvious thing to others, but all of this seemed new to him, and it just… how did you tell friends from mates? And when was it alright to
nuzzle someone or touch them or lick their neck, and why did Present Mic yell at him for trying to sit on Kacchan during class, and Tenya had seemed so nervous about them just lying together on his bed, even though Izuku just wanted to run his feet against Tenya’s ankles and cuddle up to his warmth, Tenya’s long, lean body stretched out beside him…

(Izuku stumbled on a rock in the path, his body automatically righting itself. Bakugou’s glare this time looked more concerned.)

There were so many things that confused Izuku in his everyday life that his physical training just fell by the wayside, and he only got around to it a couple days of the week. Izuku needed to be practicing more, true, but he also needed to focus on fixing his bond with Popsicle, and he also really needed to figure out this whole “liking people” situation and how it fit in with the new pack he was forming with his classmates. There was a lot to do on top of homework and studying for tests and figuring out whatever was happening with Todoroki…

Which Izuku still hadn’t been able to wrap his mind around.

He didn’t even know where to start, with that one. And where he’d ended last (maybe they were soulmates or they had a soul connection…?) was frightening and worrisome enough, when he thought about it, that Izuku would really like to have another explanation that didn’t involve a potential other “like-like” mate situation, since Izuku really had enough of those going on to confuse him already. But then he would start thinking about Todoroki for one second, and then Todoroki would be all he could think about, the divide of his hair, his heterochromatic eyes, how he was warmth and cold all bundled into one crying combination that couldn’t seem to hold the shards of itself together, and Izuku just wanted to grasp all the pieces and mold them back together and hold onto whatever form they transformed into and never let go—

Bakugou’s face appeared out of nowhere, and Izuku felt his back explode in pain as it hit something rough and uneven, breath being pushed out of him after Bakugou’s fists curled in his shirt and shoved. Izuku gasped for breath, his arms flailing.

What was…? Kacchan?

Izuku blinked, disoriented, as his senses tried to crawl back into his consciousness. Bakugou’s warmth against his front, pressing against him from shoulder to hip. Popsicle’s concerned hissing from around his neck. The call of birds from far away, the sound of rushing water (a creek?), the wind murmuring through the trees.

“Deku, what the fuck is wrong with you today?” Bakugou’s face was inches away, his eyes blazing. He shoved Izuku once more for good measure, his fingers curling in Izuku’s shirt as his fists pressed against Izuku’s chest. Solid. Steady. “You don’t fucking get this distracted. Are you an idiot?”

Izuku hadn’t been paying attention to their surroundings since… he didn’t know when. But he couldn’t seem to place the area they were currently in. Were they still on the path to the mountain?

“Focus, goddammit!” An explosion rang off a foot from Izuku’s head, startling him. Popsicle’s snake form lunged toward Bakugou, his tail still curled around Izuku’s neck. Bakugou reared back and glared at Popsicle.

“Something’s wrong, and you know it! You’ve been fucking hissing, too!”

Popsicle slowly pulled back onto Izuku’s shoulders, eyeing Bakugou carefully. Izuku tried to control his breathing, adrenaline surging through his veins from the jarring sound of the explosion, only for
the adrenaline to be followed by a torrent of dizziness and a tidal wave of disorientation, Izuku's inner mind attempting to realign and connect with his body. But something was off, misaligned and adrift, cast out on a broken string.

“Deku, come the fuck back to me.” Bakugou’s face was close to Izuku, once more. He leaned even further, resting his forehead against Izuku’s. The anger in his voice weakened to something that could almost be considered soft. “Come back.”

Izuku hadn’t even been aware that he’d gone somewhere to come back from.

On the other hand, his mouth felt strange—thick and dry, like it was filled with too much of that sorghum taffy that one of the betas used to make. Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed. Was something wrong with him?

“Damnit, I don’t know what your hissing means!”

As if from a distance, Izuku felt something move around his shoulders, down his arms, and then he was released. No, not released. Abandoned? Was that… where was Popsicle?

Izuku heard a more canine growl close by, but he couldn’t place where from. As if through a veil, he heard Todoroki’s voice calling to him. *Midoriya? Midoriya, is that you?* And there was a pain in his thigh, and it was burning—

“Get the fuck off him! I’ll fucking get it, you idiot bird!”

And then there were hands on his hips, hands on his thigh, pressure, then a release—

Izuku’s senses rushed back to him through the tunnel of his consciousness. The sights around him, everything so much brighter than before. The sounds of the surrounding forest hurt his ears.

*Midoriya, please tell me that’s you… I’m beginning to think I’m insane—*

The voice faded into the cadence of Bakugou’s growl as the other teen shoved Izuku into a tree for what might have been a second time. Or a third?

“Your damn stone is on the ground already, so come the fuck back to me! Come back.” Bakugou was panting into Izuku’s face, his features screwed up into something that vaguely resembled despair.

But why would Kacchan be sad?

“Kacchan, what’s wrong?” Izuku barely got through the question before he was coughing, hacking, something caught in his lungs that shouldn’t be there. His eyes filled with tears as he tried to get it out.

“Damnit, what now? Deku, fucking breathe, just breathe.”

But there was nothing there. His lungs were fine, his airway empty. Yet Izuku felt like he was choking on air, something burning in the stench of an alleyway, the smell of blood in his nose, the sharp tang of metal, the cloying smoke of engine exhaust, Popsicle’s wet fur—

Wait… Popsicle?

“Fucking fuck, you’re not allowed to die on me in the middle of a goddamned forest! Come on…”

*Midoriya, is something wrong?*
His head felt torn around, pulled in multiple directions backward and forward and beside, tears still obscuring his vision as his knees fumbled toward the ground, his body curling forward, his fingers grasping for dirt, trying to ground himself, trying to breathe.

“Deku—”

Midoriya—

Popsicle’s voice, next to him. *Soulbond stop, soulbond come back, soulbond stay stay stay*

But where was he going to?

“I don’t know what this thing is, but get it the *fuck* away from him!”

*Are you in trouble? Should I call—*

“Fucking breathe already, damnit — Deku, *godfucking damnit!***

And then Izuku could breathe.

He stared at the ground, unable to comprehend what was happening. What had happened… was happening? He shook his head and made fists of dirt with his hands.

*Soulbond come back come back come back*

Izuku coughed again and tried to breathe. He stumbled over his words, but he managed them. “I’m sorry, Popsicle. I’m fine.”

“Fucking seriously?!” In the next second, Izuku was airborne, his body limply following the trajectory that Bakugou had pulled him in. Then his back hit the ground, and Bakugou was hovering over him, shoving him into the ground, and snarling. “I thought you were fucking dying, and the first thing you do is apologize to your snake?!”

Izuku blinked up at him, his vision swimming, disorienting, then reorienting on Bakugou’s face. Like Bakugou was the center of Izuku’s gravity. Everything pointing toward him. Izuku’s whole life. His future. His past.

Bakugou huffed above him, and then he shook Izuku. And shook him and shook him and shook him, until the dizziness was back and Izuku didn’t know where he was. Somewhere in a forest. Somewhere in Kacchan’s arms. Somewhere with pack.

“How dare you fucking scare me like that. Damnit, Deku, *fucking damnit.*”

Izuku’s vision was swimming, but he grasped with weak hands at Bakugou’s arms. Solid. Warm. Strong.

“I’m here,” he murmured.

“*Shut up.*”

Izuku smiled weakly, his body relaxing into the dirt, head rolling to the side. The world had stopped spinning, and he was grounded once more, Kacchan above and Popsicle beside him. “I’m here…”

Several seconds passed, filled with the bright light of the sun, bristling in the bushes, Popsicle whining next to him after having apparently transformed into a wolf at some point. Bakugou’s face kept switching between concerned and pissed off.
He settled for pissed off. He loomed over Izuku and grabbed a fistful of his hair, pulling upward and back to expose Izuku’s neck. Bakugou bared his teeth at Izuku, asserting his dominance.

“You’re gonna tell me what the fuck that thing was, and then you’re never gonna touch it again. Got it?”

But Izuku had no idea what he was talking about. He tried to cast his eyes about for whatever Bakugou was referring to, but Bakugou wouldn’t allow his head to move. Instead, Bakugou went one step further and straddled Izuku, pinning him in place and not allowing his body to turn.

Izuku tried to push away the thought of how good Kacchan’s warmth felt, settled on top of him, holding him down. He looked up the line of Kacchan’s body, from hips to chest to head. He was haloed by the sun. Izuku’s sun. His own personal gravity.

Izuku tried to find the words. “What thing?”

Bakugou growled at him and pulled on his hair, stretching Izuku’s neck out further. “That fucking stone thing, you dumbass. You didn’t stop freaking out until your stupid wolf got it far enough away.”

… a stone? Was he talking about the tengu’s meditation stone? But why would that be connected with what happened? And what had happened exactly, or had been happening, or was happening in the after sense of now? Izuku had just… he’d been thinking about something. And then that one thought had lead to another and then to another, and then he and Kacchan were deep in the woods somehow? Izuku had just been thinking about normal things, hadn’t he? Life, responsibilities, goals, Todoroki—

Wait, hadn’t he heard Todoroki’s voice? Where had that come from? Todoroki wasn’t here, was he?

Another growl from above. “Deku…”

Izuku flushed and tried to focus his eyes on Bakugou’s burning gaze, but his red eyes were too much, too strong, like looking straight into the midday sun, and Izuku had to look away. “S-sorry! I don’t, uh… I mean, the stone? It’s for meditating. It helps me, uh, recall dreams? I don’t think it does anything else, other than amplifying my… uh…” Izuku couldn’t say precognition ability, the words too close to mentioning witchcraft, the curse still active. He cast about for another explanation. “Maybe it was just making me think more deeply or something?”

The hand in his hair tightened with another threat, Bakugou’s teeth baring in a snarl. “Deku.”

“I don’t understand why it would cause me to lose time, though. That’s not part of its—” Izuku paused and tried to turn his head to see Popsicle, who was nosing at his arm with a huff, his opinion clear. “What do you mean, because I was sad? I wasn’t sad. I was just thinking about things—”

A whine.

“… but why would that make me get stuck in my head?”

Another huff.

Izuku gave his familiar a Look. “I’m just saying, there has to be another explanation. The stone shouldn’t cause that…”

Popsicle gnashed his teeth together.
Izuku’s hands clenched on Bakugou’s thighs. “No, I need that stone back. I don’t—if you don’t think it’s safe, Kacchan can carry it; but that stone really helps me with remembering the dreams, and it’s important to m—”

Bakugou lifted Izuku’s shoulders off the ground by his hair before shoving him back into the dirt. Red eyes flashing, Bakugou leaned down and pulled Izuku’s hair backward, forcing Izuku to look him in the eye. Bakugou’s growl caused Izuku’s heart to race, his hands clenching weakly at Bakugou’s thighs. “Stop fucking talking to your familiar, and talk to me.”

Izuku flushed a deeper red. “I don’t know…”

“Eh?!” Bakugou definitely sounded pissed.

Izuku looked into Bakugou’s eyes and tried to stay present, tried not to tumble down the gradient of his irises. Without Popsicle to distract him, Bakugou felt so warm on top of him. Izuku swallowed and cast about for an explanation, but his head was empty and nothing made sense. It felt like something strange had happened to him for no reason, and he couldn’t explain it. He didn’t know where it had come from or what it had been about; he hadn’t even realized it had been happening.

Izuku tried to shrug his shoulders as best he could with Bakugou’s hand in his hair, Bakugou’s weight on his thighs, Bakugou’s hand pressing against his heart. Izuku licked his lips to wet his mouth. “I don’t know what happened or why… it shouldn’t have happened at all.”

A minute passed in silence, Bakugou’s gaze capturing his in a noose, causing Izuku to nearly stop breathing with how intense it was. Had Kacchan always been this intense? A mere look enough to make Izuku stop in place and hollow and fold. Bakugou shook his head and shoved off of Izuku, before walking away. Izuku rolled over and slowly pushed himself to his feet. Popsicle peered balefully up at him with the stone in his mouth, but Izuku didn’t know what he should say. He was caught up in his confusion, and the loss of Bakugou’s focus on him had caused the world to teeter back and forth.

Popsicle huffed and shook his head before trotting forward to walk alongside Bakugou.

Izuku followed behind, wondering what had happened and whether it was going to happen again and whether Kacchan wasn’t talking to him anymore.

Bakugou didn’t say a word until they made it to the mountain. As if on autopilot, they both found their way to the spot where a small hole had been taken out of the rock. Kacchan’s explosion. Little five-year-old Kacchan trying so hard to be great. Izuku found himself smiling at the hole and crouching down to clear away the brush in front of it, all thoughts of what happened before disappearing into the back of his mind. He ran his fingers over the edges of the hole and tried to remember the feelings they’d had, before Bakugou made the hole too big, when they’d thought Bakugou’s power might not have a limit at all.

But all powers have limits. That was the sort of world they lived in.

And all gifts apparently came with a price.

“Oy, Deku, are we training or not?”

Izuku looked blankly over at Bakugou, before his face transformed into a smile. Kacchan still wanted to train with him! Izuku tried to think about what sort of training they should do—something he’d learned from the wolves or the tengu? Then his expression slackened as he thought back to the silent walk from that moment on the forest path to here, how Kacchan seemed to be shifting from
one foot to another even now, looking anywhere but at Izuku.

Izuku might be a bit out of it, but he knew something was wrong, and Izuku could either ignore it or try to figure out what it was. And Izuku was getting tired of silence. First Tenya, now Kacchan. He couldn’t stand all of his pack shutting him out. He couldn’t…

Izuku lowered his head and pretended to focus on one of the rocks on the ground. “Hey Kacchan?”

There was a growl above him. “What.”

Izuku nibbled on his lip and kept his eyes down. His thoughts felt like molasses. “Are you upset with me?”

There was a huffing sound above Izuku, and Bakugou’s shoes walked closer and into his cone of vision. “… I thought we were here to train.”

Izuku’s other hand clenched in his shorts as his eyes sought for other focal points on the ground. “W-we are, I just… you didn’t talk on our way here. And yesterday…”

A pause. Bakugou’s voice, softer and less likely to explode. “What about yesterday?”

Izuku picked at some of the blades of grass as he moved from crouching to kneeling on the ground. His voice was quiet. “You clenched up when I said hello.”

“Yeah, that’s what y’do when someone puts their fucking face in your neck.”

Izuku worried at his lip. “But you haven’t done that for a while now, and I thought…”

Bakugou interrupted him. “I left a seat for you, didn’t I?”

Which was true, and Izuku smiled at the memory of it. He took a breath, then let it out. “Okay.”

Bakugou’s feet shuffled in front of Izuku. “… that’s it?”

Izuku smiled and looked up, his kneecaps almost touching Bakugou’s shoes and his shoulders level with the other teen’s thighs. Bakugou’s spiky hair was framed by the sun, and his red eyes shone like crimson stars guiding the way home. “As long as you’re not upset with me, I’m happy.”

Bakugou grew silent again as he stared at Izuku, Sero’s words haunting him. *I want Midoriya to be happy. I don’t have to be part of that. I just want to be.*

A moment passed, then another. Then Bakugou’s hand was reaching out to settle on the mop of Izuku’s hair. As his fingers clenched in Izuku’s curls, Bakugou’s eyebrows twitched downward, his gaze filled with dark thoughts. His lips parted, and he took a breath, but he didn’t say a word. Another breath. Two. Izuku didn’t move. He remained kneeling at Kacchan’s feet, asking forgiveness for things he couldn’t comprehend.

And then the moment was over, and Kacchan was telling him to get his ass up already, and Izuku was standing, and Kacchan was brushing his arm against Izuku’s, and everything was golden once more.

*Kacchan.*

*His sun.*

Izuku was smiling. He wouldn’t stop smiling for the rest of the day.
“Hey, have you ever played tree chase?”

A scowl. “You’re making that up.”

“No, I’m not! I used to play it with the pups all the time! It’s where you chase each other, but you can’t touch the ground, so you have to jump from tree branch to tree branch, and it’s really good for your reflexes because—”

They got home much later that day than they expected to, and Auntie Mitsuki leveled a judgemental eyebrow at both of them before ordering them to shower and change before supper. Bakugou took the first shower while Izuku chatted with Popsicle about what small animals his familiar had gotten to chase down in the woods. They had been testing how far apart Popsicle could run from Izuku before the bond felt too stretched, and they seemed to have increased their possible distance since the Sports Festival. Izuku was glad. Popsicle had enjoyed himself, as well, although Popsicle was sad they didn’t decide to camp outside. He missed sleeping beneath the stars.

Izuku took his shower after Kacchan, and he used Kacchan’s soap to clean off all the dirt and sweat from a day spent outdoors. The soap smelled good, clean, and somewhat sweet. Maybe a spice, like clove? Maybe some pepper? Something heady was underneath the clove scent… Kacchan always smelled like gasoline and electrical burning, with something sweet beneath all of that. Maybe it was from this soap? Izuku smiled and lathered himself up with more, trying to cover himself with the smell. _Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan_. He couldn’t seem to get enough; he wanted to surround himself in it, to slather it all over and burrow deep.

When Izuku walked into Kacchan’s bedroom still drying his hair with a towel, Bakugou sneered at him. He grumbled that Deku took long enough and it was time for dinner. He brushed roughly past Izuku’s shoulder before stopping mid-stride. His face slowly turned and leaned down, so that his nose was practically in Izuku’s neck. Then Bakugou sniffed him.

Izuku probably would have missed it if it weren’t for years spent living with werewolves, but Kacchan definitely sniffed him. Then the other teen smirked, his eyes raising up to meet Izuku’s. Izuku’s heart stopped for what felt like the tenth time that day.

“You’re supposed to ask, Deku.”

And Izuku was willing to swear on his father’s grave that Kacchan had never said Izuku’s name in that tone of voice before. It sent shivers down his back and made his tongue instantly stick to the roof of his mouth. His toes curled in the rough texture of Kacchan’s rug, something flipping over in his chest… and then Bakugou was gone, out the door, down the hallway, and on his way downstairs toward supper.

Izuku took a few more confused seconds to compose himself, and then he followed.

(Later, as they were lying in bed next to each other, a half-asleep Bakugou threw an arm over Izuku. “You smell good,” he murmured, his nose shifting to sniff again at Izuku’s neck.

Izuku’s heart began racing, and a hot flush settled over his body that had him grasping at the comforter and staring with wide eyes at the wall. He gulped and tried to measure his breaths, in and out, before he turned as slowly as possible so that he could see Kacchan out of the corner of his vision. Izuku felt dizzy and confused, as though the whole world was rotating around them and he had no idea what to do.

Bakugou mumbled and told Izuku to go the fuck to sleep already.
So Izuku did.)

That night, Izuku dreamt that he was sitting on the doorstep to the Iida family home, waiting for Tenya to allow him in, but Tenya never did. The seasons changed, the weather turning from spring to winter. Flowers sprouted next to Izuku, bloomed, then died. Snow fell from the skies, but when it landed on his shoulders, it was suddenly ash, and the trees on the front lawn were burning. Izuku huddled on the doorsteps waiting, even as the trees fell in front of him, hoping for Tenya to appear.

Then Todoroki arose from the body of a fallen tree, half his body covered in fire as he gestured for Izuku to follow him. Izuku walked over and took his hand and was engulfed in flames, which flickered and danced around him, blinding in their intensity. Izuku squinted as hard as he could, but he couldn’t see past them. All he was, was fire. All he could feel was his skin burning. Todoroki’s face hovered above Izuku, but the flames never seemed to burn him, his expression cold and impassive and used to the pain. Eventually, the flames disintegrated, and Izuku was standing unharmed in Tensei’s hospital room with Todoroki to one side and Tenya to another. Izuku sobbed and ran toward Tenya, but before he could reach him, the scene changed, and they were in the alleyway. They were in the nightmare, that place of ruin, the one that kept haunting him. There was Popsicle, bloody and unmoving in a puddle. And there was Tenya, his eyes wide open and begging Izuku to run. Izuku knew that he should run (he should he should), but how could he? How could he leave him? You don’t abandon pack.

And there was a lullaby humming somewhere, but Izuku couldn’t place the tune. It sounded familiar and old, like something that was once his. Izuku turned around and reached for Tenya, trying to pull his friend to safety, but the alleyway was gone and all that was left was a couch and a room and All Might on the television. Izuku’s hand fell as he took in the two figures on the couch.

“It’s okay, Shouto. You don’t have to be a prisoner of your blood.”

Izuku walked toward the couch, hoping to catch a glimpse of their faces; but all he saw was a mop of red and white hair, kind eyes, and then he was drowning, drowning in boiling water and he couldn’t swim, he couldn’t move, she hated him, how could she ever forgive him, it was all his father's fault, look what he had done to them, he had ruined them all—

And what sounded like Todoroki’s voice, calling out to him. Midoriya? Midoriya…?

Soulbond heartbrother come back come back come back—

Izuku woke up to tears streaming down his face. He couldn’t seem to make them stop. He tried to wipe at his eyes with his shirt sleeves, to slow his breathing down. He rubbed at his eyes with wrists, palms, and fingers, anything that was still dry. Izuku took a deep breath and rolled over onto his back. He turned his head away from the wall, trying to orient himself and figure out where he was… only Bakugou was there and he was awake and he was staring straight at Izuku, his expression indiscernible.

Izuku opened his mouth, searching for the words to explain… what? That he had a bad dream? That certain things kept haunting him whenever he slept? That he missed Tenya and wanted to save Todoroki and had no idea when things would feel normal again? Izuku closed his mouth, feeling much too tired to ask forgiveness for dreams or salvation from nightmares.
Bakugou leaned forward, his breath so close to Izuku’s own. Izuku only had to flex his back, and their lips would be touching. “Do you remember your promise?”

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. Of course he did. They were going to fight side-by-side as heroes, together, destined for the top.

Bakugou’s eyebrows furrowed, his eyes like cold red suns. “If you left me once, you’ll leave me again.”

*Soulbond soulbond SOULBOND*

This time when Izuku awoke, he was gasping for air, and the bed was moving around him. Izuku swung his head around, trying to brace himself as he prepared for an oncoming attack, only to find Bakugou and Popsicle in some sort of pillow fight. Bakugou was trying to pin Popsicle to the bed, while Popsicle thrashed around with Bakugou’s pillow in his mouth. Popsicle growled and snarled playfully at Bakugou while Bakugou made angry shushing noises at Izuku’s familiar. The sight was enough to make Izuku let out a giggle, which made both boy and wolf pause and turn toward Izuku with wide eyes. Then Izuku wasn’t giggling, but laughing and then guffawing and he couldn’t breathe.

Bakugou growled at Izuku, ripped his pillow out of Popsicle’s teeth, and hit Izuku in the face with it, causing Izuku to fall back onto the bed.

Popsicle yipped in delight. Popsicle wiggled his tail before pouncing on Izuku, his head burrowing in Izuku’s neck, causing Izuku to laugh and try to pet him while also trying to remove the pillow from his face. But Bakugou kept moving the pillow back in place and Izuku couldn’t get out. Izuku turned his face to the side and gasped for breath, his limbs flailing in an attempt to get at Bakugou; but the other teen wouldn’t have it. He grabbed at Izuku’s wrists and pinned them above his head, before moving to trap Izuku’s legs with his own.

Izuku laughed a few more times, his humor settling down to a lull and a thrum, a smile stretched across his face, hidden from Bakugou’s view by the pillow.

Bakugou huffed from a foot away and slammed Izuku’s wrists into the mattress. “You’re both fuckin’ insane. I’m goin’ back to bed.”

Izuku pulled the pillow off his face and turned over to look at Bakugou, Popsicle sneaking forward to curl up in the position between Izuku and the wall. There really wasn’t enough room for the three of them to lie side-by-side on Bakugou’s small bed, but Izuku didn’t need room. He needed comfort. He needed warmth.

Izuku rolled to rest on his right side, facing Bakugou who had one arm thrown over his head and his legs splayed to take up the whole bottom half of the bed. Izuku curled his knees up toward Bakugou’s thighs and burrowed his face into Bakugou’s side with a smile. He reached a hand out to rest on Bakugou’s sternum, causing the other teen to stiffen and turn his head to glare at Izuku. Izuku only smiled in return, something soft and meant only for Bakugou.

“I’ll never leave you, Kacchan,” he whispered.

Bakugou stiffened, uncertain how to respond, still upset from the wolf’s nighttime shenanigans and wanting to get back to sleep. But Izuku was staring at him in that way he used to, back when they were kids; and he was promising things that Bakugou hadn’t known he was worried about until Sero tried to assuage his fears.
I'm not trying to take him away from you.

Bakugou frowned, his eyes trailing over Izuku’s messy mop of hair, his warm eyes, and that smile. As if Bakugou would let him leave. As if Izuku even had a choice.

Bakugou closed his eyes and pretended to be asleep. He didn’t open his eyes once, no matter the sweet promises that Izuku murmured into his side or the soft touches to his sternum. No matter the stinging behind his eyelids or the clench in his gut. That wasn’t anyone’s business but his own.

When Izuku woke up, Bakugou was already doing his morning routine: sit-ups, push-ups, pull-ups, handstand pushups… Izuku blinked himself awake to the image of Bakugou’s shirt falling toward the ground, his abs flexing. It was a good way to wake up.

Izuku only took about fifteen minutes to join Bakugou, and then they worked out in silence together. Bakugou only had furniture on the edges of his room, so there was plenty of space in the middle for both of them to exercise at the same time. Izuku stretched first and then went through his warm-up exercises, each one meant to build stability and focus.

Izuku felt surprisingly centered today, especially compared to yesterday. The world seemed sharper around him, and his mind moved quickly, zinging from one thought to the next. Izuku wondered if his strange feeling yesterday really did have something to do with the meditation stone distracting him. Popsicle thought that Izuku’s melancholy from yesterday morning just combined with the stone’s properties to make him more introspective and attuned to his mind-thoughts. Izuku was willing to concede to Popsicle’s point, but honestly he had been feeling introspective a lot recently.

Izuku stifled a laugh as Popsicle yawned from the bed that pack cuddles helped. Izuku couldn’t help but agree with that one.

After taking a shower, Bakugou ordered Izuku to follow him downstairs for breakfast. Uncle Masaru cooked them both up a meal of ham, eggs, and rice—which Bakugou of course doused in hot sauce while Izuku snickered at how the color of Kacchan’s meal began to match his eyes. Bakugou told Deku to shut up.

Auntie Mitsuki teased them both in that affectionate way of hers (lots of insults, a good amount of cursing, and some physical tussling with her son at the kitchen table). Bakugou’s face ended up covered in a bit of eggs and hot sauce, which caused a short food war that Popsicle took full advantage of. Uncle Masaru laughed at the three of them and pulled some ham out of his wife’s hair, even while she cursed at him.

It was a good morning.

Which is why Izuku was a bit surprised to answer the Bakugou’s front door after breakfast and find Kirishima waiting.

“Hey, Bakugou said you needed to talk?”

Izuku blinked back at him. Izuku needed to talk? About what? He tilted his head and leaned on the door, taking in Kirishima’s friendly grin and relaxed stance. Even though Izuku hadn’t been expecting him, Izuku was never un-happy to see Kirishima. The other teen brightened any room he entered.
“What do I need to talk about?” Izuku asked.

Kirishima looked a bit dumbfounded. “Wait… you didn’t tell Bakugou to text me?”

Izuku smiled and shrugged. “Uh, no? But I’m glad you’re here. Kacchan’s got hot sauce on his face.”

Which was of course the second that Bakugou appeared behind Izuku, his figure looming over Izuku like a threat, a kitchen towel across one shoulder that had very obviously (from the stains) been used to wipe his face of evidence. “You sure don’t know when to keep quiet, do ya?”

Izuku wasn’t certain whether Bakugou was speaking to himself or Kirishima, but Izuku tilted his head in recognition and acceptance either way.

Kirishima looked back and forth between Izuku and Bakugou, both of their postures relaxed and comfortable. Bakugou was standing much closer to Izuku than he allowed himself to be with anyone else. Even Kirishima. A large hole of want opened up in Kirishima's stomach at the way Bakugou leaned on the doorway with his upper arm, fingers dangling near Izuku’s shoulder, close enough to touch. Kirishima tried to look Bakugou in the eyes, but his vision kept sliding back to those fingers and Izuku’s shoulder, waiting for them to make contact, the finger almost there…

“Well? You coming up or not?”

Kirishima looked up and waited for the question to continue; he waited for Bakugou to call him one of those nicknames he cooked up special for everyone. Kirishima often got called ‘hair for brains’ or ‘shitty hair’. Kirishima’s favorite was when Bakugou called him ‘punk’, because that one seemed more affectionate than the others. But for some reason, today, Bakugou didn’t call him anything. He just looked down at Izuku, frowned, and pushed off the doorway. He turned his back and headed up the stairs toward his bedroom, both Izuku and Kirishima following behind like magnets. Kirishima almost forgot to turn around and shut the front door, thankfully only having to retrace a few of his steps.

When they made it to Bakugou’s room, Kirishima was hoping for some big reveal. Some obvious explanation as to why Bakugou texted him to come over 'because Izuku needed to talk to him'. However, Izuku didn’t need to talk to him? Apparently.

Maybe Bakugou just thought he needed to talk to Kirishima?

But let it never be said that Kirishima wasn’t a forthright and honest sort of dude. He prided himself on it. He even had a mantra written out beside his bed. Speaking of beds… Kirishima stole a seat on Bakugou’s bed near the foot of the mattress. Izuku curled up cross-legged beside him while Bakugou took the swivel chair at his desk, eyes hooded. Kirishima cleared his throat and smiled.

“So… what’s this about Midoriya needing to talk to me?”

Bakugou looked back and forth between Kirishima and Izuku with a raised eyebrow.

Izuku looked back in confusion, not about to start the conversation for them.

Kirishima scratched at his head and leaned against the bedframe. “Or does no talking need to be going on?”

Bakugou rolled his eyes and scowled, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees. “Deku keeps letting his emotions control him, and it’s affecting his powers. I want you to get him to stop.”
Kirishima tried to prevent his mouth from dropping open, but it happened for at least a second. He swallowed and tried to parse out what it meant for Bakugou to ask Kirishima for help. And for that help to require conversing with Midoriya. “And you think that, uh, me talking with him will make him stop?”

Bakugou huffed. “Better than me.”

Kirishima smiled. “I’m pretty sure he listens to whatever you tell him to do, Bakugou.”

“Look, are ya gonna do it or not? Because you can leave.”

That made Kirishima flinch. He suddenly wondered what sort of dynamic he had actually walked into. At the front door, it had seemed like both Bakugou and Izuku were calm and relaxed and friendly. And now… what? Bakugou was twitchy? Kirishima wondered how carefully he would have to navigate the Bakugou minefield today. “Hey, I didn’t say I wouldn’t talk to him. I just, I don’t have the background with this that you do. When did he let his emotions control him?”

Izuku’s head swung back and forth between Bakugou and Kirishima, willing to talk but confused about what was happening.

Bakugou growled before sighing, rough and quick. One hand lifted to pull at his own hair, and he looked away from the bed which held Kirishima and Izuku on it. “He fucked up yesterday, let his emotions get the better of him, and his power went crazy. I thought he was fucking dying. Then there was the Sports Festival, with fucking rock-face. And he keeps dicking around with emotions during class instead of going plus fucking ultra.” Bakugou lifted his head and stared straight at Kirishima. “He can’t be a fucking pro if he’s allowing his emotions to affect him like that.”

Izuku hung his head, embarrassed. His gut curdled and felt cold. So Kacchan was upset with him about his training.

Kirishima looked taken aback. “I mean, I don’t know what happened yesterday… but I thought the Sports Festival was a one-off. Anyone would freak out if part of their quirk was separated from them.”

Bakugou sneered at him with a glare. “Just talk to him. I’m done.” And then he turned around, shoved headphones into his ears, and began clicking around on his computer. It looked like some sort of website.

With the loss of Bakugou’s explanations, Kirishima turned to Izuku, whose head was still lowered. Kirishima rolled his eyes and took a second to sigh and bemoan his choice in friends, before he scooted over toward the other end of the bed where Izuku was huddled. He nudged Izuku’s arm with his own as he settled down next to him. “So… you wanna talk about it?”

Izuku shrugged, his lips forming a vague pout. “I’m not sure what I’m supposed to talk about. I didn’t mean to let my emotions control me.”

Kirishima stared at Izuku’s hands as they fidgeted. “Have you, uh, ever had to control your emotions before?”

Izuku shrugged his shoulders helplessly, deciding to skip that part of the conversation. “But the thing that happened yesterday, I
don’t think it was me, not really. I think something was affecting me. I just don’t understand why.”

“And what about during school?”

Izuku looked up at Kirishima helplessly. “I don’t really know what he’s talking about, there.”

Kirishima felt like he had an inkling. “I mean… you do get distracted a lot? Not that that’s a bad thing! But it can be hard to focus on class and try your best if you’re, you know, distracted.” Izuku looked confused, so Kirishima figured he would need to elaborate. “Like with Iida. Mr. Aizawa said his brother was attacked, so it’s understandable that he’s a bit withdrawn; but you seem to be taking it really personally and always staring at him sadly and stuff. It would probably help to just give him some space, and let him figure out him, you know? Sometimes, it’s best not to interfere with things like that.”

Izuku nodded his head slowly, as if considering.

Kirishima continued. “And I know that Bakubro has a problem with Sero distracting you.”

“… he doesn’t like Sero?”

Kirishima laughed. “You know Bakugou. Since when does he like anything? I’m still not sure why he tolerates me half the time.”

Izuku had a quick answer for Kirishima's self-deprecation, though. “Because you’re his friend.”

The assurance in Izuku’s voice nearly made Kirishima break down into tears. If anyone understood Bakugou’s emotions, it was Midoriya. To hear Izuku claim that Bakugou thought of Kirishima as his friend… well, it did certain things to Kirishima. Certain emotional things. Like making him feel proud and happy, like he wanted to jump for joy and throw his fist in the air and scream off the top of a mountain that the manly Bakugou had accepted him. Instead, Kirishima was pretty certain that he just ended up blushing. But, you know, in a manly way. “Aw, thanks Midoriya…”

“Izuku.”

Kirishima felt his gut clench, his pulse slowing to a crawl. “Uh, what?”

Izuku smiled up at him, sweet and simple. “You should call me Izuku. We’re pack, aren’t we?”

You promised we’d fight them side-by-side. We’re pack, aren’t we?

Izuku’s smile fell, the memory of a dream catching up with him, Bakugou’s voice, a hand holding Izuku’s and then letting go… at least, Izuku hoped it was a dream. It could be difficult to tell, sometimes; and Izuku wasn’t certain whether Popsicle was in wolf-form or raven-form when he dreamt it.

Kirishima’s returning smile was soft and heartfelt, making his features warm from something playful to something… Izuku wasn’t certain how to describe it. Round? Settled? Whatever expression that was, Izuku wished he could keep it with him forever, a little bubble forming around just the two of them.

“Call me Eijirou.”

In that bubble, it felt like a pact was struck without either of them even shaking hands. An energy between them settled into place, and Izuku forgot for a second that he was in Kacchan’s room in Kacchan’s house on Kacchan’s bed. Instead, it was just him and Kirishima, the world unfurling in
their little bubble, and anything could happen.

Kirishima shifted, somewhat embarrassed at the length of silence between them. “So… uh… Sero, huh? Do you… um, are you really interested in dating him?”

Izuku smiled and looked away toward the foot of the bed. “I think so. He makes me feel different.” Izuku paused. “But I was talking to Uraraka, and apparently maybe it’s not usual to feel the way I do toward multiple people?”

Kirishima stilled. “Multiple people?”

Izuku nodded his head. “Yeah, like you and Kacchan and Tenya.”

There was a pause, during which time Kirishima tried to process what he was hearing.

“Oh! And Todoroki!” Izuku added noncommittedly.

Kirishima definitely had to be hearing things.

“Mr. Aizawa said I should try to hang out with everyone that I feel like this for and try to figure out who feels best? And then talk to them about how I feel. But it’s all really confusing, because everyone feels different, and I just… I don’t know, I don’t really know how to define things or know what’s one thing versus another.”

Kirishima swallowed hard, heat prickling at his cheeks and down his neck. Izuku might like… Kirishima?

Wait, and he might like Bakugou?!

Kirishima’s thoughts raced as his mouth gathered flies.

Izuku turned toward him, looking up with long eyelashed innocence, his green bangs falling into his eyes. “Hey, Eijirou…”

His name on Izuku’s lips did something to Kirishima, and it wasn’t something he’d ever want to talk to his mother about.

“… how would you go about telling if you liked someone as more than a friend? Because it’s hard to tell a difference, sometimes.”

Kirishima licked his lips and tried to focus on Izuku’s eyes and not his cheekbones. “I, uh, I’d probably just come out and say it. That’s the manly way of approaching it.”

Izuku hummed, his gaze falling to Kirishima’s collarbone.

The following pause was five seconds too long.

“Hey, Eijirou…”

Kirishima gulped, his heart picking up its pace and beginning a sudden slide downhill. “Yeah?”

Izuku looked up at him, green eyes swallowing him whole. “I’m pretty sure I might like you.”

Kirishima tried to remember how to breathe, the flush spreading down his arms and across his cheeks. Was he a man or wasn’t he? Kirishima took another breath and let it out through his nose, the puff of air making Izuku’s bangs curl sideways. “I’m pretty sure I might like you, too.”
He was in heaven. He was in hell. He had no idea what he was expecting from Izuku, who had come into the school year nuzzling friends and groping strangers. He never knew what to expect out of Izuku, and Kirishima couldn’t start now.

He watched as a smile bloomed on Izuku’s face, growing larger and larger until his eyes themselves seemed to dance. And then Izuku was in Kirishima’s lap, straddling him, and wrapping his arms around Kirishima’s shoulders. His head was in the crook of Kirishima’s neck, his nose nuzzling against Kirishima’s pulse, and Kirishima really needed to turn his libido down to a zero like right the hell now because he was on Bakugou’s bed with a lapful of Izuku and he needed to stop thinking about that like right now right now.

There was a humming sound next to Kirishima’s ear. “Mmmhmm… this feels different.”

Kirishima swallowed, his hands hesitating near Izuku’s hips. “Uh, different good?”

Izuku pulled back from Kirishima’s neck, his smile blinding and wide. “Perfect,” he purred, leaning his forehead against Kirishima’s.

And Kirishima was definitely in heaven, or that heaven part of hell, which felt so good yet indescribable. A feeling rushed through him, starting in his chest and ending at his fingertips, and he grasped at Izuku’s hips, his fingers automatically activating his quirk and hardening. A ripping sound was heard, coming from the bottom of Izuku’s shirt.

“What the fuck? I leave you two alone to talk for ten minutes, and you’re… on my bed? What the fuck, Kirishima?!”

Kirishima smiled dopily. Not hair-for-brains? Not shitty hair? No nicknames? Today was apparently Kirishima’s lucky day. Izuku used his first name, and Bakugou used his last name, and Izuku was actually interested in Kirishima just like Kirishima was interested in—

Kirishima fell with a yelp on the other side of the bed, Bakugou having apparently shoved Izuku off Kirishima’s lap and thrown Kirishima to the foot of the bed.

Kirishima flushed, half in embarrassment at being caught and half in anticipation of what was to come. Shit…

Bakugou was panting from the effort of lifting two boys his age using only his upper body. “Seriously? Fuck…”

Kirishima tried to swallow, but his tongue felt stuck in place.

Bakugou turned away from Kirishima and covered his eyes with his hands. “Fuck!” He took a couple of deep breaths, let out a scream, and then collapsed backward on the bed, lifting his head and slamming it back down on his mattress several times for good measure.

“Uh, Kacchan?!”

Bakugou growled. “No.”

“No, what?”

Bakugou was probably glaring at Izuku from behind his fingers, but no one could see it. “No, you can’t fuck with people like this, Deku. I thought you… and Sero! That’s why Thursday happened!”

Izuku blinked. Thursday? Did he mean the pack hang-out? Izuku following Sero out of Bakugou’s
room? Izuku attempted to smile, uncertain what the problem was. “Is that… wrong?”

Bakugou muffled his next scream into his hands.

Kirishima looked between the two of them, torn between whether he should say something. And if he did say something, what could he say? Yes, he wished Izuku only liked him and not Sero? Izuku said he liked more than just the two of them, and it sounded like that might include Bakugou as well. Or ‘possibly liked’ or whatever. But Kirishima would take what he could get. He’d never had someone like him back. It was a first for him. And this was Izuku… he didn’t have a devious bone in his body. He wasn’t going to lead both Kirishima and Sero on without there being some sort of discussion at some point.

Kirishima cleared his throat. “Bakugou, it’s oka—”

“Shut up.”

Kirishima automatically closed his mouth at the same time as Izuku.

“Just… fucking shut up for a second… godfuckingdamnit!”

His father took that second to knock on the doorway. “Are you boys doing alright? Does anyone need a snack? Kirishima, I didn’t know if you ate yet…” Masaru took in the sight of Izuku, Katsuki, and Eijirou all sprawled out on the bed, his son’s head in his hands. “Uh… Katsuki?”

Bakugou lifted his hands off his face and glared at his dad. He lifted a finger and pointed at Izuku. “Tell Deku he can’t fucking date multiple people at once.”

Masaru just nodded his head. “As long as everything is consensual, I’m sure it’s fine, son.” He paused, a stern look overtaking his face as he looked at both Kirishima, Katsuki, and Izuku in turn. “Although I’m sure you’re all aware that you are underage and should not be doing certain acts until certain ages?”

Bakugou’s mouth dropped open in horror as he stared at his dad. “Seriously?!”

Izuku tilted his head and looked toward Kirishima, mouthing ‘Certain acts?’ in a confused sort of innocence that had Kirishima flushing in further embarrassment.

Masaru smiled at his son in understanding. “It’s all perfectly normal feelings, Katsuki.”

Bakugou glared at him. “Fuck you!” He shoved himself off the bed and stormed toward the doorway, exploding a bit of sweat in his palms to get his father to move out of the way before Katsuki broke something. Probably the door. Or a chair. Or Kirishima’s nose, he wasn’t really picky at the moment.

Masaru gazed after his son in sympathy. He turned back toward the boys on the bed. “I apologize for my son’s behavior. He’s never been comfortable with that sort of thing.” There was a pause. Masaru seemed to regroup. “So, Kirishima, a snack?”

Kirishima nodded wordlessly, embarrassed and afraid to speak.

Izuku looked over at Kirishima with a nervous smile before standing up and heading toward the door. “I’ll help you with the snack!”

Masaru shook his head slowly. “Actually, I would be better off if you helped me with Katsuki. Whatever’s going on, even though he won’t like it, it’s probably best to talk it through with him. You
know how he can be when he gets something in his head.”

Izuku nodded slowly, sagely.

But something about it seemed odd to Kirishima.

Kirishima tried to catch Izuku’s eye. “Do you need any help?”

Izuku shook his head and offered a quick glance toward Bakugou’s bedroom window. “No, I’ll, uh, I’ll be fine. I know where he probably went.”

And then Izuku was gone, Masaru following at his heels, and Kirishima was alone.

Kirishima sucked in a deep breath and let it out. “Well… that happened,” he said to himself. “I hope Bakugou’s okay.” He paused. “I hope he’s okay with this.”

Kirishima’s eyebrows furrowed as he considered the fact that he was talking to himself, and he was talking to himself about the possibility of something that he hadn’t really had the time to confirm because he was too busy being thrown to the foot of the bed. Kirishima looked over at the head of the bed, where he’d been moments before. The pillows were tousled from all their movement a few minutes before. The thought made Kirishima smile.

Izuku…

Izuku liked him.

Izuku liked him. Eijirou. The one that no one ever chose. The one who was never enough, who was always fighting to be better than he actually was, who was always striving to achieve some goal he saw in a video long ago. Eijirou lived by a code of manliness, which no one else seemed to ascribe to or appreciate. It was always Eijirou, alone, working toward something even his parents didn’t understand.

And Izuku liked him?

Izuku, with the back scars and the awesome pet wolf (familiar, whatever). Izuku, who liked Eijirou’s sharp teeth and wasn’t afraid to touch them (and Eijirou had serious body image issues around those teeth since he’d been made fun of in school ever since kissing was a thing that was gossiped about, because who would want to kiss someone who could scar up their mouth?). Izuku, who always felt so good whenever he climbed onto Eijirou’s lap, who was always grasping and touching and moving in closer…

Would that happen more often, if Izuku liking him became more? Would Izuku keep climbing onto his lap? Eijiro hoped so. It had only happened twice. (Three times? Four? Did Bakugou dropping Izuku into his lap count?) But however-many-times wasn’t enough.

Kirishima sighed and moved over to fix the pillows.

Izuku…

A smile stretched across his face as he tried to tidy up his friend’s bed.

Izuku liked him…

His hand encountered a book beneath the last pillow by the wall, causing Kirishima to halt his compulsion to clean. Kirishima pulled it out and looked at the cover, but it felt like a flexible
rectangle covered in a soft brown suede. There was no title or anything.

Was this a book? Didn’t books usually say something on the front? Maybe it just felt like a book, but it was actually a collection of pictures or something?

Kirishima hesitated, the promise of pictures beckoning. *Maybe... baby Bakugou pictures? Oh man, Kirishima had to look now...*

An hour later, he will wish he hadn’t looked. That he hadn’t read. That he hadn’t thought the cover seemed soft enough to trail his fingers over, the cord around the book easy to unwind and reveal what was hidden beneath. His friend's secrets... that’s what this had to be. The book was far too detailed, with snippets of research and cuttings from plants and shards of metal and feather, to be a work of fiction alone. Eijirou would bet his life on it.

And honestly, the first page left little to doubt.

“*My name is Izuku Midoriya, and I am a witch.*

*I don’t know why I always start out my journals that way. I just finished up my last journal, and I needed to start this one today to figure out this new protection ward. The spells around the apartment work well enough for home, but I want to be able to use my abilities at school without being afraid that demons will appear. I don’t want anyone to be endangered because of me. That’s not what a hero does. A hero protects. He doesn’t endanger.*

*There was an attack on the school a few days ago, and mom and I have decided to put up wards around the school. If the wards are strong enough, it will protect the school from this one villain that can create portals. And if we use the right combination, the wards can also hide my powers, so I can use magic whenever I want to without demons or warlocks begin able to sense it. It seems a bit like a dream... being able to use magic outside of home? I have only ever had wards where I lived. Not somewhere else. Definitely not at a school. I’m actually kind of nervous...*

*But that’s why I created you, new journal. You are going to help me create the best wards of protection that have ever existed, and none of my classmates are going to get hurt because of me. No one is going to be in danger. No villains are going to surprise us at school again. I’m going to make that my promise to them. And my hope. Because why would they want to be friends with someone as dangerous as me?”*

Kirishima's heart stretched and pulled, a gap opening in his chest. Sadness. Understanding. Concern. And maybe a good bit of fear as well, because the further on he read, the more these 'demons' sounded more deadly than villains, and Kirishima wasn't certain how he could help Izuku fight against something that he couldn't understand.

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Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I've been in a big writing mood lately. This may or may not mean chapters will be coming to you readers biweekly once again (biweekly = every 14 days).

The good news is: I think I have the next week of school planned out (Chapter 19), and then the following week is Hero Internships and Hero Killer Stain (also roughly planned
The bad news is: I've only got 3-4 humorous snippets planned. I'm trying to keep a balance in this story of humor, introspection, hinted-at romance, and drama (where by drama, I actually mean angst). The plot happens in its own time, but I try to focus on the more normal-life aspects since that's what Izuku struggles the most with. That having been said... I really need some more humor and/or crack plotbunnies if you've got them, because otherwise the next several chapters are going to be plot-heavy. Any suggestions you have will be greatly appreciated (by both you and me)... unless you want a whole chapter of plot and drama, which can totally be done.

The next chapter will have more Alpha!Bakugou, some BakuDeku hang-out times, the Uraraka/Tokoyami playdate we've been waiting for (I'm so excited and am currently writing this), and then some plot set-up. Unless it ends up in the following chapter, we will also get to see a lot more of Aizawa and Present Mic.

Quick question for everyone: Do you get confused when a BNHA story uses first vs last names for the main characters (like the students)? I know I sometimes stumble when reading "Eijirou" instead of Kirishima. What about the teachers, do you understand "Hizashi" or "Yamada" refer to Present Mic? I'm never used to reading "Yamada", so I don't write that myself... but then I realize I'm almost always calling Aizawa by his last name and Hizashi by his first name, which is inconsistent from a writing-perspective. Just wondered what your preferences were and what made it easier to read the story. :(
Another One Bites the Dust

Chapter Summary

This chapter grew tentacles, and we still have one more chapter to go before Hero Internships. So, sorry about that.

Featuring: a glimpse into Bakugou's past and thought process, fall-out from Kirishima's snooping skills, boys who go camping and emote, and more bad dreams. Also: melodramatic Izuku needs to learn to deal with emotions, Uraraka needs to stop revealing things, Tokoyami is into his goth phase way too deep, and one more Bakugou/Sero conversation to close the loop.

Brace yourselves for Bakugou being a tool who isn't quite wrong. But Sero's not wrong, either. *sigh* How to choose between these two.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

All his life, Katsuki Bakugou had been told how great his quirk was and what an amazing hero he was bound to be. It was enough to turn a kid’s head around, being faced daily with hangers-on and sycophants that oohed and ahhed at each explosion that got larger than the previous one. Not only that, his body grew along with his power, tough arm muscles able to withstand his explosions’ recoil, skin that didn't seem to blister or burn from contact with short bouts of extreme heat. Katsuki would catch his own smirk in the mirror every time he left his bedroom, invincible, unapproachable, waiting for his chance to stand at the top.

Katsuki Bakugou was a powerhouse. He had such potential. When he grew up, he was going to be the strongest person around, and he wasn’t going to need anyone.

And in another life where all he had to worry about was his quirk and hero society and stupid Deku following him around, his weakness a sharp contrast to Katsuki’s strength... yeah, maybe Katsuki would have believed what they said. Maybe he would have believed he was awesome. Maybe he would have thought that he could beat anyone. That he was in control.

But in this world, Katsuki had been faced with his own weakness and inadequacy since he was nine years old and a demon appeared that Deku fought off with ease, while Katsuki... he couldn’t do anything. He was worthless and useless in that fight, his explosions about as effective as throwing a New Years’ firecracker at the side of a mountain: he may have been able to leave a scorch mark on the demon’s skin, but he hadn’t done any lasting damage. Deku hadn’t hurt the demon either, but he had made the fucker disappear. Just… poof. Gone. Or inside an All Might figurine or something, Katsuki wasn’t clear on the details.

But Katsuki had to rely on someone else in a fight. Him. Katsuki Bakugou. The one who never needed anyone.

And then Deku himself had disappeared (or “moved away” or whatever the hell Auntie Inko asked him to call it), and Katsuki’s pride (and fear) had driven him to train harder, so he’d pushed away all the sycophants that called him a friend. Because they weren’t friends, not really. They just hung
around to watch him use his quirk. They thought hanging around him made them powerful.

Fucking idiots. Fucking useless turds.

But Deku…

Katsuki had something to prove to Deku. Something he had to prove to himself.

Because he hadn’t been able to protect them. Because he hadn’t been able to turn the situation to his advantage. Because Deku (*useless fucking no-quirk Deku*) had saved his life and proved Katsuki wrong.

Deku wasn’t useless.

Katsuki was.

And what was nine year old Katsuki supposed to do with that?

So Deku disappeared because he drew demons to him or some bullshit, and he sent Katsuki letters while he stayed with some werewolves, and then some bird fuckers, and then a ghost or a vampire or something ridiculous like that. Katsuki started to lose track. But Deku talked most often in his letters about the wolves and the pack and having an alpha and the betas and the pups. And Katsuki… he didn’t… it wasn’t that he had become *unimportant* to Deku or been replaced or any of that stupid emotion bullshit. Deku had just… he had destroyed Katsuki’s entire fucking world and flipped it upside down and bashed a demon with it, and now Katsuki didn’t want to be nothing to Deku, and he wouldn’t settle for just being “something” to the idiot either. Katsuki wanted to be Deku’s *everything*, his entire fucking goddamn world.

Because Katsuki? Who cared about the suck-ups and the extras and that girl who could only make her eyebrows change color? Who the fuck cared if you had wings or wiggly elbow joints or whatever other weird quirks existed at his primary school? What mattered was Deku pausing time and putting demons inside All Might figurines. What mattered was that there were things out there that Katsuki trained and trained and trained to be strong enough to defeat. What mattered was that he didn’t even know if he *could*. And it scared him. It scared the fuck out of him, and it had been scaring the fuck out of him since he was nine years old, waking in his bed from night terrors that he refused to ever admit to or name. What mattered was push-ups and ankle weights and running long distance and appropriate strength-training routines for young bodies that wouldn’t set back your growth. What mattered was building up his stamina, endurance, and strength, even though his muscles only seemed to build up a certain way, stuck in this lithe form that he couldn’t force to get bulkier any faster. The image of All Might’s strong physique hovered on the horizon, and Katsuki couldn’t get there quick enough.

But if the USJ had proved anything, it was that Katsuki still wasn’t prepared to fight against Deku’s demons. And buried beneath his pride and his ego and his absolute determination to be more than he was, Katsuki feared he never would be.

How could Katsuki be Deku’s *everything* if he couldn’t protect him? Katsuki wouldn’t be a liability. He couldn’t… he refused… he was going to become strong enough. He was going to be the strongest goddamn hero there was, and nothing and no one would be able to stand up to him, he would beat them all down, he would blast them into motherfucking smithereens like the loose pockets of trash that they were. Because what Katsuki was now… what he was now… it still couldn’t beat Deku if Deku were being serious. What Katsuki was now couldn’t defeat a single goddamn demon.

But Katsuki would be damned if he let anyone else be Deku’s alpha. They could fucking stand in
line and try all they want, but Katsuki was gonna be at the top because he was the only one who knew how to do it right. He had practiced for years in the mirror, flexing his muscles, baring his test, growling mean and soft and everywhere in between. *(He used to not be able to growl that well, and his mother had thought his attempts at the dinner table were adorable, which resulted in the shouting match to end all shouting matches, two busted doors, and a significant kitchen remodeling project that Katsuki was forced to help out with.)* Katsuki had practiced ordering around all the extras at school and getting really good at pitching his voice this way or that way to get them to do stuff.

He had practiced... he had trained his own vocal cords... all to be Deku’s goddamned alpha one day.

And he wasn’t about to let Sero or Todoroki or any of those other extras take that away from him. Katsuki was glad that Kirishima knew his fucking place. Katsuki was at the top, the alpha. Kirishima was below him, a beta. And betas followed what the alpha said, they got in line and obeyed and didn’t question.

Only Kirishima…

Katsuki hadn’t expected this of him.

Kirishima had gone through Deku’s secret notebook, which put them all at risk.

*Rule #1 of the Pack: Don’t question Deku’s weird shit. Don’t look into it, don’t read about it, don’t mention it. Katsuki had that fact ingrained into him for the past ten years.*

Katsuki didn’t know how to feel about that rule being broken.

A large part of him settled for horrified.

“You shitty fuck…”

Eijirou’s heart stopped in his chest. He’d been caught. He had known he would be caught, after reading the first page of the journal. He had known he should stop, but he hadn’t been able to. The drawings had reeled him in like a fish out of water, discovering that air existed for the first time. Eijirou had played video games before with symbols that looked vaguely like the diagrams on various pages, and he had read enough fantasy stories as a kid to get the basic idea of magic and demons. He even remembered one movie about a witch and her familiar going off on their own. But he hadn’t… Eijirou didn’t expect… all of that stuff couldn’t be based on reality. Sure, quirks were strange, but they were a scientific phenomenon, there was research, hard evidence, and all that other stuff Eijirou had learned about in quirk biology class back in seventh grade.

Yet apparently, magic was real. It was really, really real. And that was… well, it was kind of a shock, to be honest. It also looked pretty cool when Eijirou wasn’t busy being terrified and entranced by the drawing of this one demon. Eijirou thought it vaguely resembled one of the villains from the USJ attack, and he skimmed Izuku’s notes about its biology and possible ways to defeat it or distract it.

Still, even though magic was apparently real and demons were apparently difficult as hell to fight against… why did Bakugou’s voice sound so alarmed when he saw Eijirou reading the journal?

“What are you doing?”

Kirishima hesitated. He had no idea what to say, his fingers still caught in the middle of turning to the
next page.

Bakugou took a step closer from the doorway. “Deku was writing in that this morning.” Another step, Bakugou’s voice sounding strangled.

Seriously, Bakubro, what was wrong?

“You shouldn’t be fucking reading other people’s shit.” His voice was now a deep baritone filled with danger, and Eijirou didn’t know whether to be scared or to trust that his friend wouldn’t actually hurt him.

Eijirou’s skin could harden. He could protect himself from physical blows.

It was the emotional ones he was worried about.

Another step.

Another.

Bakugou’s feet came near enough that Eijirou could see them over the head of the journal. Eijirou’s hands clutched protectively over the soft, secret pages. Secrets… didn’t Izuku choose the name ‘the Secret Hero: Black Maverick’?

Secrets, for sure.

Instead of punching him in the face or blasting him toward the other side of the bed, Bakugou sat down next to Kirishima, his thighs inches away from Kirishima’s own. A dark sort of energy seemed to simmer around him that Kirishima didn’t have the words to name.

Katsuki’s eyes scanned the journal, quickly picking out the words ‘blood’ and ‘magic’ and ‘familiar’. Katsuki grit his teeth when the word ‘werewolves’ jumped out at him. There was a symbol on the page, carefully drawn. A sketch of Popsicle in wolf form, with symbols drawn inside circles at different points on Popsicle’s body. A vaguely human-like figure was sketched next to him, with more circles and more symbols, and Katsuki had the feeling he knew what this page was about.

Deku had been muttering something about a ritual and Popsicle this morning, after he finished his stretches but before Katsuki had finished his weight-lifting. This was probably what Izuku had been working on. And if Deku was half as much an idiot when writing in journals as he was in person...

Fuck.

Katsuki grit his teeth and glared at the far wall. “So.” He paused, his words heavy, everything he couldn’t say tied up behind the few things that he could. “You know.”

Kirishima’s body was still next to him. A few seconds passed before he spoke, his eyes tracing the journal’s pages. “You’re always saying that no one understands Izuku…”

Katsuki stiffened at the name change. Shitty Hair was on first-name basis with Deku, now?

“…is this what you meant? Did you know? About all this.” Kirishima’s voice was soft, treating the silence between them like glass.

Katsuki turned his glare on Kirishima and stole the journal out of his hands before Kirishima could scramble to take it back from him. Katsuki slammed the journal shut and stuffed it beneath a pillow, hidden from view. Katsuki leaned close into Kirishima’s face, his red, red eyes a warning. “Forget
what you read. And never talk about it again. *Got it?*

Kirishima looked lost and confused, a pleading expression on his face as he glanced quickly at the door and then back to Katsuki, his voice a whisper. “But he has a whole world that’s different from ours… a whole world of things we don’t learn in school. How are we supposed to protect him from them or fight by his side, if we don’t talk to him about it?”

Part of Katsuki wanted to answer, ‘*Deku will be the one to protect us.*’ Another part of him just wanted to punch Kirishima in the face. Another part wanted to rage that Katsuki was going to be the strongest hero ever, and it didn’t matter if he learned about something in school. If you were strong enough to beat something, you beat it. And Katsuki wasn’t going to settle for anything less than equals with Deku. They were going to take both the hero world and the supernatural world by storm. So help him *god.*

But that was too much truth that Shitty Hair didn’t have the right to hear. Not yet. Maybe not ever.

Katsuki would have to see how the other teen dealt with the truth he’d already learned.

Kirishima’s voice was soft and watered down with concern. “Bakugou… at least *you* can talk to him about this stuff, right?”

Katsuki’s eyes fell to Kirishima’s lap, then back up again to stare Kirishima down.

The truth was… he couldn’t. *Rule #1 of the Pack. Don’t question Deku’s weird shit.* Katsuki hadn’t needed Deku to spell that one out for him. It had been clear enough for years. All those letters, each and every one telling Katsuki to burn it, burn the evidence, these words were for Kacchan alone. *Don’t tell Auntie Mitsuki, you can’t tell her, you can’t tell anyone.* Katsuki had been the holder of Deku’s secrets for the past decade of his life, and he wasn’t about to go against the code and talk to Deku about it, not to his face, not unless Deku brought it up first and said it was okay.

Katsuki wasn’t an idiot. His mom didn’t remember an entire year of Katsuki’s childhood, from when he was about three and half years old until he was about four and half. She didn’t remember a goddamn thing, and Deku always warned him that these people existed that would erase your memories if you found out about magic. And there was no other way she could have lost her memories; memory-erasing quirks didn’t *exist.* His mom had researched it. And yet, despite the danger, despite the overarching threat that Deku would hint about in his letters… Deku never stopped writing about his world, the exceptional world that only he knew. And Katsuki had always felt so special, because Deku trusted him with forbidden knowledge, Deku trusted that Katsuki wouldn’t get caught, that he was smart enough, powerful enough, to defend himself against those people.

But Katsuki wasn’t confident that Kirishima could do the same.

Katsuki raised a hand and fisted it in Kirishima shirt, dragging the other boy into Katsuki’s space so that his next snarled words were against the other teen’s jaw. Katsuki used his years of practice in ordering around the extras at his old school, pitching his voice just-so, to make Kirishima fall in line. Kirishima was his beta. *His* beta. And he was going to fucking submit when Katsuki told him to. “I said, *forget about it.*”

And when he said it that time, Katsuki was laying down the law.
Kirishima left before Izuku made it back upstairs. Izuku was a bit confused at first, cocking his head to the side as he gazed at Kacchan’s frigid stance by the bed. The bed which was empty. The room which didn’t contain Kirishima. Bakugou was standing and staring out the window, his stillness jarring eerily with his typical explosive personality.

“Kacchan? Where’s Kirishima?”

An energy surrounded Bakugou that Izuku could feel halfway across the room.

“Kacchan?”

Bakugou didn’t move his body, but his head turned to the side. “You got your stupid familiar?”

“What? Popsicle? Yeah…”

Bakugou turned back toward the window and was quiet for a few seconds more. Then he turned around and looked away from Izuku almost disinterestedly. “Get your shit. We’re going camping.”

“Camping?”

Bakugou paused, his voice low. “Your shitty pet wanted to go camping, right?”

A hesitant smile bloomed across Izuku’s face. “Yeah?”

Bakugou glared at Izuku over his shoulder. “Then we’re going camping.”

The smile on Izuku’s face grew as he rushed to gather his things. Halfway through stuffing his bag, he paused, looking over his shoulder to where Bakugou had begun to slowly gather his own bag, his movements a mix between hesitant and determined. “Do you have a tent?”

Bakugou paused and stared at the floor, his reluctance to answer practically rolling off him in waves. “No…”

Izuku nodded. He hadn’t thought Kacchan would have one. Still, Izuku’s old camping gear had been sold off during the move to this city, so he couldn’t exactly recommend picking up camping supplies from his apartment.

Bakugou grabbed a flashlight off his bedside table and flicked it on, testing that it worked. He shoved the working flashlight in his bag. “But I know someone who does.”

…which is how they ended up standing outside Sero’s apartment with one bag each and an excited wolf in tow.

Bakugou was the one to knock on the door.

Sero was the one to answer, his triangle smile blinding. “Hey Bakugou!” His smile dimmed in confusion. “Wait… school’s tomorrow, right?”

Bakugou shifted with a huff, unintentionally allowing Sero to see Izuku’s happy and hopeful form behind him. “We need your camping shit.”

Sero switched his gaze back to Bakugou. “My… what?”

Bakugou glared at him. “Your shit. You fucking camp with your dad a lot, right?”

Sero looked gobsmacked. “You… actually listened to that conversation I had with Midoriya?”
Bakugou seemed to take that as an insult. “I fucking listen!”

“I didn’t mean…” Sero stopped halfway through his apology and shook his head. “Never mind. Yeah, I’ve got a tent. Do you need anything else?”

Bakugou bristled, his shoulders puffing out as though to make his physical frame seem bigger. He was still shorter than Sero. “Just that.”

“Okay.” Sero stood for a few seconds longer, showcasing the fact that he didn’t have to follow Bakugou’s orders because he wasn’t part of his pack yet. Then he took another second to gaze at the cheerful smile Izuku was sending his way, which caused Sero to smile softly in turn. He sighed, and then chuckled with a shake of his head. “Alright, alright, I’ll be back. Just a minute. Feel free to come in.”

Sero stepped away from the door to let both teenagers through, gesturing with his arm for them to follow.

Izuku moved to head inside, but Bakugou’s arm against his chest held Izuku back. “We’ll wait.”

Sero shot a hesitant, searching look towards Midoriya. The other teen shrugged, his green bangs flopping in front of his eyes. Sero nodded his head in acquiescence. If Midoriya thought he was okay…

Five minutes later, Sero returned with a collapsable tent-in-a-bag that he and his dad always used whenever they went camping together. “Try to bring it back in one piece, yeah?” he asked Bakugou. (He made sure to word the question as a challenge. That way, the tent was more likely to actually come back in one piece.)

Bakugou scowled and grabbed the bag from Sero, swinging it over his shoulder. “Sure. Whatever.”

Izuku smiled. “Thanks, Sero!”

Bakugou hesitated for a moment and gave Izuku a strange look. Sero switched his focus between the two boys, trying to get a read on their behavior. Izuku seemed innocent and clueless to whatever was happening. Sero hoped whatever they were about to do wouldn’t turn out badly. Still, it couldn’t hurt to offer…

“Midoriya, you have my number if you need it, right?”

Izuku’s head practically bounced in happiness. “Of course!”

And then they were gone, walking down the steps and away from Sero’s apartment. He had a vague feeling that he wouldn’t be seeing them the next day… but that was stupid. Bakugou was a crazy hard worker, and he was always getting onto the rest of them for not studying enough or training enough or doing as much as they could to become pro-heroes. Bakugou wouldn’t miss a day of school. And tomorrow was Monday, so he would definitely see the both of them tomorrow.

… right?

Izuku and Bakugou ended up camping against the mountainside where Kacchan used to practice
using his quirk when they were younger. The whole trip out there seemed symbolic, but Izuku wasn’t certain what it could be symbolic for.

It had been months since Izuku last camped in the woods with his mother, but casting the routine protection wards came as naturally to him as breathing. A circle thrice the diameter of the tent outlined in salt (Auntie Mitsuki hadn’t questioned when Izuku asked if he could borrow her biggest container of salt). Izuku made sure to drop three pricks of blood on top of one of his ward stones at five consecutive points, with Popsicle patrolling beside him to sniff out any inconsistencies in the barrier. It was the same general type of ward that Izuku set up whenever he used his powers, but the salt added a layer of protection that warded off evil while the blood amplified the effect of the stones in order to help contain any signs of his magic.

With protection wards, you were always better off safe than sorry.

Popsicle laid down to nap outside after scouting out the area for any potential dangers. (He scared away two foxes and seven squirrels before finding a cave about half a mile away. Izuku was pretty certain Popsicle had eaten some other animal, as well, but he was afraid to question which fuzzy friend resulted in the tangy taste of blood in Izuku's mouth.)

Bakugou pulled out four cans of now-lukewarm udon soup in a can, which he bought from a vending machine at their last train station. The blankets had kept the cans warm enough that they didn’t bother setting up a fire to heat them further, settling down instead to enjoy their meal. Or rather, ‘enjoy’ was a nice way of saying that Bakugou had been frustratingly laconic since the train station (in his own unique ‘bristling anger is how I do silence’ sort of way). He seemed stalled in his own thoughts, and Izuku was afraid to ask what they were. Earlier, Bakugou had demanded that Eijirou come over to talk to Izuku about emotions, instead of Bakugou talking to Izuku himself. So he could be thinking about that conversation. However, he could also be thinking about Eijirou’s sudden disappearance after Izuku cuddled with him on Kacchan’s bed; or he could be thinking about Uncle Masaru’s assertion that dating multiple people was acceptable behavior.

It took Izuku two cans of soup, a quick and dirty brushing of his teeth with bottled water, and three different tusslings with a hyper Popsicle (see above: squirrels), before Izuku felt that Bakugou might be up to further conversation. They were both settled into the tent and lying on their sides, the sound of crickets drowning out the wind in the trees, when Izuku finally broached the subject.

“Hey Kacchan?”

Bakugou grunted in response.

Izuku nibbled on his lip, hesitant about whether to start with the departure of Eijirou or the dating of multiple people. Izuku figured he might as well start with one and lead into the other. “Your dad said I should talk to you… about dating other people.”

Another grunt. Which meant he still wasn’t feeling communicative.

Izuku sighed and rolled onto his back, throwing an arm above his head. His hand hit a pillow as his dark green curls framed his head. “Eijirou said you might not like Sero, or me liking Sero, or something…”

No response.

Izuku’s gaze bored a hole into the top of the tent as he barreled through. “And then you got really mad after I told Eijirou that I was pretty sure I liked him, and he told me that he liked me…”
Still no response.

“Is that… are you…” Izuku turned over on his side, still uncertain how to phrase the appropriate question.

The silence stretched.

Izuku kept pulling at his lip with his canines. “Even if he’s right, and you don’t like Sero… what about Eijirou?”

Bakugou finally made a sound, a twitch of his jaw indicating a reaction. “Eh?”

Izuku found himself smiling at the response. He peered over at Bakugou, studying the other teen’s profile as he continued. “You like Eijirou, right? You trust him.”

Two feet away, Bakugou could hear Kirishima’s voice echoing in his ears, stuck in his head even after the sun had peaked and fallen low on the horizon. *But he has a whole world that’s different from ours… how are we supposed to protect him from them or fight by his side, if we don’t talk to him about it?*

Bakugou had used to think that way, too.

Used to. Back when he was younger and thought his quirk much stronger than he could ever physically get it to be.

“…I guess.”

Izuku hummed. “And we’re really good together, aren’t we?”

Bakugou turned his head to glare at Izuku.

“You, me, and Kirishima…”

The glare turned to confusion.

“…we’re pack.”

Bakugou’s face flushed, and he leaned up on one elbow to hiss in frustration at Izuku. “Pack doesn’t mean we fucking have sex together!”

Izuku’s eyebrows scrunched up. “Who said anything about that? I just wanted to get closer with him.” (Sex was intense exercise-cuddling, according to Tensei, and Izuku had promised to ask Tenya before he tried to have sex with someone, after all.) Izuku shrugged and leaned over on his stomach with his face still turned toward Bakugou. He pushed around a pebble between them on the tent floor, moving it in circles toward and away from him. “I don’t know… maybe we could date.”

Bakugou settled down on his back with a huff and stared at the opposite side of the tent with squinted eyes. “…you wanna kiss him?”

Izuku blinked innocently at Bakugou’s averted gaze. “Do you think he’d wanna kiss me?”

“Didn’t you fucking see him when you were on his lap?” Bakugou sneered back.

Izuku’s free shoulder lifted in a shrug, his bangs falling to obscure his eyes. “I was too close.”

“Tch. Whatever.”
There was a lull in the conversation.

Izuku didn’t know what to say in order to bring Bakugou’s mind out of whatever he thought was going to be wrong with Izuku dating Eijirou and into Izuku’s sudden wonderful idea about pack cuddles with a side of kissing. Izuku had never realized he wanted something like that, until now. The image danced around in his brain, of Izuku kissing Eijirou like he’d kissed Sero. Crimson hair and sharp teeth, skin hardening beneath his touch. Kind red eyes and soft smiles. Turning back around to curl against Kacchan and nuzzle his neck. Popsicle at their feet. Warmth. Pack. A world for only them.

Bakugou was the first to speak, his tone curt and rough. “I don’t want you dating him.”

His word sounded final, a judgement call and a demand all wrapped into one.

Izuku shivered. Something about that statement broke the bubble that had formed earlier around Izuku’s heart, when it was just him and Eijirou on Kacchan’s bed; it made the blooming emotions in his chest feel suddenly stifled of air and caged away from the sun, certain to wither and die. His chest felt cold, and his eyes stung, tears appearing unbidden on his cheeks. Izuku sniffed to prevent his nose from running and tried to look away from Bakugou to hide the outpouring of emotion. Kacchan wasn’t comfortable with stuff like that, but Izuku couldn’t help it. Something inside him felt curdled and broken, all of a sudden, and his couldn’t shove the feeling away.

“Fucking… Deku, seriously? Are you fucking crying?” Bakugou shifted his head, looking like he was ready to bolt. He growled and rubbed a hand over his face. “Alright, alright, you goddamned…” He sighed and gave Izuku a Look.

“Why are you crying?”

Izuku shrugged and wiped at his tear-trails with the front of his wrist. His voice shook. “I d-don’t know… I just…” Izuku paused, trying to figure out what was happening in his chest.

It felt like earlier, when he was alone on the bathtub. It felt like the bridge. It felt like the concrete outside Kacchan’s house. Separated and alone. It hurt. It hurt it hurt it hurt. Even if Izuku couldn’t understand why, or why the reaction was so visceral, stealing inside his chest and wringing the emotion out of him. It shouldn’t feel this bad, right? Kacchan was just telling him not to date Eijirou. That didn’t mean they couldn’t all remain friends. But still… that bubble around him and Eijirou had felt so nice, so warm and content, buzzing with potential. Why wouldn’t Kacchan want something like that? Why would he tell Izuku he couldn’t have it?

And Izuku couldn’t make his voice stop shaking or make the tears stop rushing out of him, the emotion outpouring from nothing. “Kacchan… I just… that idea hurts me.”

Izuku didn’t have any other word for it.

Bakugou stared at Izuku incredulously. “The fuck? What idea?”

Izuku’s eyes were wobbly blobs of green, his cheekbones flushed pink. Bakugou watched as Izuku bit his lip and hesitated before answering. “Not dating Eijirou.”

Bakugou growled, his back impacting the tent floor with a thump as he threw himself down on the ground. “Seriously?!”

“I don’t… I don’t know why it hurts…” Izuku sounded embarrassed.

Bakugou hadn’t even known Deku could get embarrassed. It was a day of revelations, a-fucking-apparently.
If Bakugou were fifty percent less pissed off right now, he might have rolled his eyes. Instead, he picked up Izuku’s pillow that lay abandoned above the crying boy’s head and hit Izuku in the face with it. “Fine, you fuckin’… you can date hair-for-brains.”

The cold, decaying feeling in Izuku’s chest disappeared, to be replaced once more with warmth; the sun seemed to shine, allowing his emotions to bloom once more. It left Izuku reeling, wondering how something inside him could switch so quickly from that feeling of sitting abandoned and alone to this surge of hope and giddiness flooding through him. A smile spread across Izuku’s cheeks, unavoidable, unstoppable, his eyes still crying even though the emotions behind the tears had changed.

Bakugou snorted. He paused before whipping his head around to stare at Izuku. “But you can’t fucking date Sero!” His shout turned to grumbling. “I don’t like him.”

Izuku waited for that feeling in his chest to come back, the barren garden, the empty loneliness, the frigid desolation.

It didn’t appear.

Izuku wondered whether that meant something about his feelings for Sero, or whether Izuku was happy enough to be allowed to have Eijirou.

Izuku smiled hesitantly and wiped again at his cheeks, this time with his arm. “Okay.”

Bakugou peered over at him with squinted eyes. “That’s it? You’re not fucking with me, are you Deku?”

Izuku shook his head, his hair getting tousled by the tent floor. “N-no. I mean… I… I like Sero. He makes me feel funny. An-and nervous. And I liked to, uh, well to… um… but Eijirou…” Izuku looked tied for words. He huffed and fell silent, raising a hand to pull at his hair. Thinking through his emotions, contemplating Mr. Aizawa’s advice. Whoever makes you happiest. Happiest, not most nervous, not made-your-heart-race-the-most-iest. “I guess I just didn’t know I wanted this so much until you said I couldn’t have it. And I… I didn’t feel that way when you said I couldn’t date Sero. So I guess, yeah, okay. Okay to no Sero.”

It took a second for Bakugou to start laughing, but once he started, it took awhile for him to stop. “God, you’re such a fucking nerd.”

A silence accompanied the soft smile on Bakugou’s face. Izuku stared at him, entranced. He remembered that smile. He’d seen it once, in a dream. He hadn’t ever seen it on Bakugou in person. It was nice. Izuku relaxed onto his arms, thinking that he could stare at that smile all day. He would do crazy things for that smile to happen more often. Something in Izuku’s chest seemed to glow as he grabbed his pillow from above his head and nuzzled his face into the pillowcase (it was actually Kacchan’s pillow, and it smelled like him, smoky and sharp and sweet). The silence that followed was more comfortable, the crickets chirping, Popsicle whining from outside the tent, probably dreaming about something fun. Izuku’s eyes traced the outline of Kacchan’s closed eyes, across his jaw, and down to his chin. Izuku found himself staring at Kacchan’s lips and thinking of that dream.

Izuku wet his bottom lip with his tongue and lifted his eyes to stare at the other teen’s eyelashes. “Hey, Kacchan?”

Bakugou growled but didn’t open his eyes. “What now.”

Izuku internally debated whether to broach the subject. Mr. Aizawa’s words echoed in his head,
Whoever makes you happiest.

But that decision wasn’t difficult at all, was it?

Kacchan. The answer was Kacchan.

“Would you ever be interested in kissing?” Izuku wasn’t certain whether the look Bakugou gave him in response was filled with rage or incredulity, but the explosive teen didn’t have to yell expletives in Izuku’s face for him to get the jist of Bakugou’s opinions on the matter. Izuku flushed, feeling nervous all of a sudden. “Not like now, but… um, someday maybe?”

Bakugou clenched his jaw and ground his teeth, murderous eyes closing as he took deep breaths and attempted to reel in his reaction.

Izuku hadn’t known he was capable of doing that.

Bakugou finished sighing and huffed again to relax himself, his posture still tense. He lifted his head and slammed it back onto his pillow with a gnashing of his teeth. “We’ll see.”

Which wasn’t an obstinate ‘no,’ so Izuku would take it.

Mr. Aizawa’s mission was over halfway accomplished. It was a no on Sero (because Kacchan hated that idea for some reason), but a yes on Eijirou and a big old maybe on Kacchan. Now, Izuku just needed to talk with Tenya and Todoroki.

Izuku had the sense that maybe, possibly, he should ask Kacchan about whether his alpha would be alright with Izuku dating either Tenya or Todoroki… but that could wait for another time. Izuku was still too happy with the weird possibility that had settled on the horizon of him, Kacchan, and Eijirou all cuddling on a bed together and maybe even kissing. The thought warmed him to sleep like a lullaby, soothing the burn of loneliness in his chest that had haunted Izuku yesterday morning at his apartment. He shuffled closer to Bakugou and used his friend’s arm as a pillow, curling his arms around it and refusing to let go.

Bakugou grumbled in annoyance but didn’t push him off, throwing out one of his legs to take up more space beneath their blankets.

Izuku counted that as another win.

Izuku could feel Popsicle’s murmurs of happiness in his chest, which Izuku had a difficult time separating from his own happiness at getting to cuddle in a tent with Kacchan.

Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan.

Despite that one sad moment during their conversation, it was the best night Izuku had experienced in a long, long time. And it would have been perfect—the cold night, the warm blankets, Kacchan’s legs tangled up in his, one of Izuku’s hands grasping tight at Kacchan’s shirt while the other clutched desperately at his arm—if it weren’t for one small thing.

Izuku had the worst nightmare he could remember having in years.

It started out as a dream, or a memory really. Izuku dreamt that he and his mother went to live in their
old hut near the ocean. But in the dream, Izuku’s bed was right next to the water, and the waves were lapping at his blankets. Izuku crawled into his bed to sleep, but just as he was drifting away, hands appeared out of the ocean, the fingers calling to him like voices. The hands trailed over his skin, light and soft, promising he could trust them. But then he turned over on his side to gaze at where the hands were coming out of the water, their arms covered in scales. One hand had been grasping Izuku’s arm this entire time, not just caressing, and it started to sting. *They were mermaids.* Izuku’s eyes watered from the pain as he looked down at his arm; where scales had begun appearing on his skin as well. Izuku had a moment of confusion before he began screaming. He tried to sit up and get away, but the other hands held him down, trailing fingers turning to grasping clutches. Izuku screamed again, his body flailing, trying to escape, before someone else’s hand appeared and gripped his shirt and pulled him up and out of the bed through a rip in the sky, causing him to land on a couch in a bar somewhere.

Izuku looked around in confusion as his savior held him from behind, one hand grasping at his shirt and the other going to cradle his neck with four fingers. Izuku tilted his head up to see who saved him… except it was Shigaraki. It was that villain from the USJ with the white hair and all of the hands. And Shigaraki was whispering against Izuku’s jawline, “I won’t let them hurt you.”

But that couldn’t be true, it couldn’t, he was a villain, he had wanted to kill Izuku’s whole class at the USJ, he couldn’t be trusted. Even though he had just saved Izuku from the hands, from the pain, from the knowledge that he was going to be turned into a mermaid and dragged down to the depths of the ocean where he would never see his mother again, never see his pack, never see Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan.

Izuku began to struggle, torn between trusting and terrified, as Shigaraki laughed and said, “Haven’t you heard of fighting fire with fire?”

And then another man appeared, with black hair and stitches on his face, purple skin, and piercings—in his hands full of blue flames. His voice drawled mockingly, “So you’re the one that Stain chose to save? A true hero.”

But Izuku didn’t know what he was talking about, he had never met Stain, and he wasn’t a hero yet; he might never be able to become one, not unless he could stop the demons from appearing, not until he wasn’t a danger to others. Izuku shook his head and answered, “I’m no hero. I just know what it’s like to want to be saved, and I have the power to save others.”

And the guy sat on the couch, his blue flames rising from his shoulder, as he reached out to hold Izuku’s hand. Izuku was reminded of Todoroki, the man’s vivid blue eyes searing Izuku to his core, haunted and forgotten and abandoned and alone, his voice a stoic taunt. “Oh? Then will you try to save us?”

And Izuku was confused, he didn’t know what was happening, he didn’t know why he was here or where the ocean had gone to, and the mermaids—

Then that villain who could create portals walked up, and he looked down his tall shadowed form at where Izuku was huddled on the couch between what seemed to be one confusing villain and the next. His voice was deep, much deeper than Izuku remembered it being back at the USJ. “I’m glad you didn’t ward the place. You were waiting for us to come, weren’t you?”

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion (*but they had warded the school, they had they had*) before widening in fear as he heard the far-off voice of that woman from Izuku’s nightmares, the one from the forest that tried to force a choice. “*Do you know your part in all this, Izuku-kun?*” And he could feel the white roses beside him, he could see them covered in blood, snow beginning to fall inside the room and settling on the couch around him. Izuku wanted to thrash and scream and rage, but he
knew he knew he knew, he just didn’t know how to escape it, there had to be another way, there wasn't another way, this was what he deserved, it was all he had done and it was all his fault.

Ropes appeared around his wrists, and the guy with the stitched-up face was stroking Izuku’s cheekbones in apology, and Shigaraki was lifting Izuku’s chin up and turning him around to look into Shigaraki’s cold blue eyes, his whispered words both a threat and a promise, dried lips inches away from his jawline. “Wait for me, little green. I’ll see you soon.”

And then the dream ended, and Izuku woke up screaming and crying and shaking, and it took Kacchan twenty minutes to calm him down. The memory of that couch and that forest echoed in his head as Izuku tried to huddle into Kacchan’s warmth and calm his heart rate down.

Do you know your part in all this, Izuku-kun?

Izuku closed his eyes tighter and cried out, as he ran grasping fingers up Kacchan’s back and dragged the other teen closer to him. Bakugou didn’t resist. He let Izuku take and take and take as he tried his best to figure out how to fix this, how to make Izuku stop shaking.

“I’m here,” Bakugou growled, shoving Izuku’s head into the juncture between Bakugou’s jaw and his neck.

He hoped the smell of pack could soothe Deku into a lull.

He wondered if that was even a thing, or just some stupid story he had read while attempting to research werewolf behavior.

It didn’t matter. It was the best he had. Bakugou cradled Izuku closer, his next breath a growl. “I’m right here…”

When Izuku and Bakugou made it to school on time the next day, Sero let out a breath of relief. He hadn’t really expected something terrible to happen, but at the same time… last night had been strange. None of his middle school friends had ever showed up at his apartment and demanded his camping supplies. First of all, most people didn’t even go camping. Second, who shows up at someone’s apartment and just demands things? Seriously, Bakugou, dude, manners. And third, it was already late in the afternoon when they showed up. There wasn’t much time left to find a camping ground and actually set up the tent before heading to bed, so why even bother going camping at all? And on a school night!

He supposed Bakugou had his reasons. Sero just wished he knew what they were. He also didn’t feel comfortable actually asking Bakugou for those reasons, at least not until he was more certain where they both stood. Last he’d left the conversation, Sero had told Bakugou to figure out where the other teen stood with Midoriya, what they were to each other, and whether whatever they were had any room in the apparently-not-an-actual-relationship for someone else. And the two teenagers seemed to have talked about something, at least, since Midoriya was hanging all over Bakugou again today—brushing up against him, smiling over at him, nuzzling Bakugou’s shoulder blades with his nose.

Bakugou didn’t shove him off, so… there was some sort of progress and communication happening. Sero just wished that Bakugou would explain the verdict to him rather than keeping Sero out of the loop.
Of course, Sero could confront Midoriya, but the freckled teen hadn’t been aware (or at least vocally aware) that a problem existed in the first place; so Sero wasn’t certain that Midoriya would be capable of answering whether the problem was solved, now, or even know where he stood with Bakugou.

Sero casually glanced over to his side, where Midoriya was sitting behind Bakugou with one hand outstretched to trail his fingers over Bakugou’s shoulder muscles while softly humming a song beneath his breath. Sero couldn’t place the tune. Bakugou’s face was turned slightly enough toward his shoulder that Sero had a prime time view of the, dare he say, pensive expression that Bakugou wore. Sero wondered what that was about. Midoriya-touching wasn’t exactly out of the norm, but Bakugou not shoving him off or growling at him was a first.

Sero glanced over to his other side to raise an eyebrow at Kirishima, only to find their eyes meeting as Kirishima raised his eyes suspiciously quickly. Had he… been staring at Midoriya? Sero turned his head back toward the pair, considering. Or had Kirishima been looking at Bakugou?

Sero cocked an eyebrow back at his friend, but Kirishima quickly blushed and shook his head. Seriously, what was with today?

Before Sero could decide whether to question Kirishima before or after class, he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, a slow pace of red and white headed toward Bakugou. Sero could count on one hand the number of times that Todoroki deigned to come over to their side of the room, usually too busy studying his notes and looking regally handsome and giving off an aura of ‘stay away from me, peasants’. Sero wondered what the other teen was interested in. As Todoroki came closer and it became more obvious that his eyes were solely on Midoriya, and not Bakugou, Sero got even more curious.

Other than class exercises, the two of them never really talked. Was Todoroki coming to challenge Midoriya again? He’d done that out of nowhere at the Sports Festival, and Sero had honestly expected (but never received) some sort of follow-up remark or comment between the two teenagers. Instead, both of them kept a far distance from each other. So what was Todoroki doing?

“Midoriya…”

Yeah, he was definitely talking to Midoriya.

“… what happened Saturday?”

Which… uh, what?

Sero moved his head back and forth, trying to memorize every detail. Bakugou tensing, glaring up Todoroki with a pale face and clenched fists. Midoriya’s eyes widening, his hand grasping at Bakugou’s shirt as though in an effort to hold the other teen down. Midoriya stood up slowly, his hand still on Bakugou’s shoulder, and Sero couldn’t for the life of him figure out what the look he was sending Todoroki meant, but it made the hairs on Sero’s arm stand up and goosebumps shiver down his back.

Midoriya reached for Todoroki’s hand—

Which… what?!

—before hesitating, his hand falling back toward the ground even as he smiled weakly and gestured toward the classroom door with his eyes.
Sero didn’t know how to process the fact that Midoriya had actually chosen not to touch someone. Always-inappropriately-touching-people was kind of a thing that Midoriya did, and often. So why wasn’t he touching Todoroki? And since when was Midoriya actually aware enough of social norms to feel like he should have a conversation in a separate room away from his peers? Sure, the whole class would have listened in, but Midoriya never seemed to care about that before, whenever he discussed strange things or asked weird questions.

Todoroki (and anyone else who was watching, let’s be honest) got the message, and Midoriya followed Todoroki out into the hallway with a solemn pace and a quiet click of the door shutting in place.

Bakugou slumped in his seat and glared at the front board. Meanwhile, at least half the class gazed at each other with gaping mouths, because dramaaaa.

Popsicle sat up from where he’d been laying on the floor, head cocked as he gazed toward the doorway and listened to something only he could hear.

Well, something only he and Shouji could hear. But Shouji was the kind of guy that respected his friends’ privacy, his ear-shaped tentacle hands immediately transforming to eyeballs and innocently whistling mouths.

Sero had the distinct not-heroic thought that he really wished Shouji was more willing to listen in and share the details. Because what could the smartest member of their class have to say to innocent, possibly-not-so-oblivious Midoriya? And if camping had happened on Sunday… what the hell happened on Saturday?

Midoriya was fine.

Objectively, Shouto Todoroki realized that.

Midoriya was breathing. He was smiling. He was nuzzling Bakugou and humming a tune. It wasn't like Saturday. He wasn’t fading in and out of Shouto’s consciousness, an image of his distracted form standing near the doorway, eyes unfocused as he walked toward nothing in particular. Appearing and disappearing, until Shouto wasn’t sure what was real, the feel of Midoriya’s presence hovering over Shouto’s shoulder and haunting him with phantom thoughts and sensations.

Shouto had felt, two days ago, like he was going insane. Midoriya made him feel like that frustratingly often.

And then it had gotten worse. Midoriya’s figure had disappeared completely, but Todoroki had been able to feel that something was wrong. A sensation like the world was closing in, and he couldn’t breathe. But it wasn’t him, he knew it wasn’t him, because he could shake his head and push the feeling far enough away that it stopped clouding his vision and blocking off his airway. But his mind kept catching on the thought of Midoriya, and what was happening to him, and whether or not he was okay. He’d wondered if he should call the authorities or Mr. Aizawa or someone, some person that could find Midoriya, some other person that could verify whether or not he was still breathing.

Midoriya wasn’t there in Shouto’s room, his figure wasn’t lying next to Shouto’s bed or whispering about secrets into the night. Midoriya wasn’t there. And yet it seemed like some part of him was. What on earth was happening to Shouto? And how could he make it stop? He hadn’t appreciated
that feeling of being out of control, part of him affected by something that may or may not even exist.

He didn’t know. He wasn’t certain of anything. Well, he was certain of one thing: all the strange hallucinations and sensations began and ended with Midoriya. If Shouto were going to have any chance of gaining control over them, then Midoriya was where he needed to start. And a not so small part of Shouto’s soul needed to sequester Midoriya to make sure that the other boy was alright, that he was breathing, and that he wasn’t about to disappear. But Shouto couldn’t for the life of him understand why any of that was important, at all, or why he couldn’t stop himself from walking over to Midoriya to verify his health and sanity with his own eyes, or why he acquiesced to Midoriya’s unspoken request to discuss Saturday’s events out in the hallway even though the request was bound to end in their classmates’ bothersome curiosity and interference.

But here they were. And Shouto couldn’t, for the life of him, figure out what he wanted to say.

Thankfully, Midoriya was the one to speak first, but the following conversation ended up fragmented, bits and pieces of previous thoughts and worries strung together into sentences that an outsider would never understand. Perhaps it was better that way. You could never be certain who was listening. And the worst potential scenario, for Shouto, was the possibility of Endeavor finding out that his son had a connection like this to another student. His father would only want to use it for his own gain, and then it wouldn’t be Shouto’s any longer. It wouldn’t be something for him alone. It would become just one more thing that his father tried to put his hands on and corrupt.

Shouto couldn’t let that happen. Whatever was between them… for now, it had to remain a secret.

By Midoriya’s hesitant questions, Shouto wondered if the other teen felt the same.

“Did you… on Saturday… were you there?”

Shouto shook his head. He didn’t know where ‘there’ was, but it certainly wasn’t where he had been. “I was at home.”

Midoriya nibbled at his lips, his expression uncertain. “So you weren’t… did you feel like… I felt like I heard you? Maybe not.”

Shouto narrowed his eyes, wondering how much the other teen had sensed on his end. “What did I say?”

Midoriya shrugged. “I think you were asking if it was me? Or something like that.”

“Are you certain you weren’t at my house?” Shouto paused. Was he revealing too much? Was anyone listening? Still, it needed to be said, and Shouto knew how to be vague enough that Midoriya would still be likely to understand his meaning. The conversation from the Sports Festival sprung to mind. “It… felt like you were.”

A smile slowly bloomed on Midoriya’s face, the uncertainty fading away to a strange and sudden acceptance and understanding, puzzle pieces locking into place, a picture being made whole. “Wait, so you felt it, too? It wasn’t just me?”

This picture still wasn’t whole, for Shouto. He had yet to understand. Why was Midoriya okay with this? What did he know?

Shouto shifted his head to the side, his eyes measuring up and down the corridors searching for anyone who could be listening in. They were getting too close to speaking about it. They shouldn’t speak about it, here. Reputations were a fickle thing, in the hero world. You had to be careful about what other people saw. Todoroki switched his gaze to refocus on Midoriya, with his bright eyes and
hopeful smile. Shouto didn’t understand him. He wondered, if he were able to understand Midoriya, if that would help him figure out what was between them. “Whatever this thing is between us, I would prefer to understand its causes and limitations. We should not keep leaving it to chance.”

Midoriya nodded his head with a blush, his hand coming up to scratch at the curls atop his head. “Yeah, it’s always out of nowhere. I kind of just, uh, roll with the flow whenever it happens, but I guess… heh, I guess everyone’s not like that?”

Shouto offered a short shake of his head, his eyes taking in the relaxation of Midoriya’s shoulders and the way the flush on his cheeks overrode the appearance of freckles. “I am definitely not like that. I would prefer to be more… prepared.”

Midoriya’s expression fell, his eyebrows furrowing in apology. He tilted his head to the side, baring his neck, and Shouto wondered what that was about. Midoriya’s gaze was sincere. “I’m sorry. I don’t know how to control it, or what it is.”

Shouto wondered whether he was lying, the freckled teen’s expression from moments before having indicated that he understood more than he was letting on. Midoriya knew something. Shouto was certain of it. Still, that didn’t necessarily mean he was lying. Just because you understood the reason behind a thing didn’t necessarily mean you knew how to fix it or control your response to it. Emotions, physical reactions, subconscious connections… there were many things out of any person’s control.

Even then, even if that was true, Shouto knew they couldn’t leave things as they were. He looked into Midoriya’s eyes, hoping to get his point across in as few words as possible. “Then we need to work together to understand it, before it causes a detriment to our careers.”

Midoriya cocked his head. “A detriment?”

“If it had kept occurring only at night, when we were on our way to sleep… but now it is affecting our weekends. I was lucky not to be visiting my mother, when it…” Shouto trailed off. He didn’t know how to say more.

Thankfully, Izuku got the point loud and clear. It was all well and good when it was something just between them, but if other people saw… if they asked questions… this thing between them could cause problems. Izuku nibbled at his lips as he looked up at Todoroki’s inscrutable expression. “So what should we do? Should we… do you want to come over to my place, and we could test it out? Try to figure out how it works?”

Todoroki looked away from Izuku, then back toward him, consequences considered and decisions made in the span of two seconds. “I am free tomorrow.”

Before Izuku could answer, the classroom door opened, and Sero stepped out. His eyes were concerned, but he held his normal friendly smile as he looked between the two teens in the hallway. “Uh, is everything okay out here?”

Todoroki shook his head impassively, dismissing Sero’s concerns. “Midoriya left me a message. I just wanted to confirm he was alright.”

Sero’s smile stretched across his face as he turned to Midoriya, picking up on Todoroki’s insinuation that Midoriya had called him over the weekend. “Hey, you’re getting better at using your phone!”

Todoroki’s gaze settled back on Izuku. “Yes, he still has a lot to learn. About not dropping the call before he explains what is happening.”
Izuku flushed. He hadn’t meant to contact Todoroki, or whatever had actually happened. But they could definitely get together and, er, work on it later. Preferably before the Hero Internships started.

Izuku reached his hand out, just as slowly as he had earlier in the classroom; but this time, instead of hesitating and dropping his hand, Izuku lifted it higher and higher up to rest on Todoroki’s chest, his palm against Todoroki’s solar plexus. Where his center was. The core of his energy. Izuku looked up into his eyes and smiled, trying to convey an apology and a promise and a question all at once. *I’m sorry for worrying you. I promise I’ll do better. Are you going to be okay?*

Todoroki’s face shuffled through an abortion of various emotions—surprise, hesitance, confusion, acceptance. Then the other teen stepped back toward the wall and away from Izuku’s hand, his typical impassive expression once more masking his face as he pivoted and returned to the classroom.

Sero and Izuku were left in the hallway to stare at each other.

Izuku’s eyes were sad, his arm still outstretched from where he had been reaching for Todoroki. Izuku stared down at his hand as he lowered it, trying to push away the sudden feeling of abandonment that rushed through him. The feeling didn’t make any sense. He blamed it on their strange connection.

Sero stepped closer to Izuku and raised his hand to cradle Izuku’s cheek. “Hey, I’m being serious here… are you okay?”

Izuku let his eyes fall shut as the warmth of Sero’s hand seeped into him from cheek to neck. Sero’s hand was large enough that the whole of his palm covered Izuku’s cheek while the tips of his fingers pressed against the pulse of his neck. The gesture made him feel safe, chasing away the strange static connection that stretched and thinned out, between him and Todoroki.

Izuku sighed and nuzzled Sero’s hand with his cheek, his nose sliding against Sero’s wrist. Izuku wished he understood why Kacchan was so against him dating anyone, but specifically against him dating Sero. Sero was nice and friendly and warm, and he was so good at taking care of Izuku.

Maybe that was the problem? Maybe Kacchan wanted to be the only one to take care of Izuku because he was the alpha?

Izuku didn’t know. But he supposed it didn’t matter. Until he could convince Kacchan that dating anyone other than Kirishima was fine… then he would probably have to put these feelings on hold. Suppressing and ignoring feelings didn’t come naturally to Izuku, though, so he had his work cut out for him.

Thankfully, Iida opened the door before Izuku could open his mouth and say too much.

But because it was Tenya opening the door—Tenya, who Izuku hadn’t gotten to speak normally to for almost a week, who he missed dearly, who was probably the only person in the classroom who could distract Izuku from his Aizawa-given mission to figure out his relationships with his peers because Tenya was here and he was opening his mouth to speak and Izuku had missed him so badly it hurt from his eyes to his fingertips to his toes—Izuku lost all of his ability to speak.

His mouth hung open, his breath punched out of him, as he stared at his once-friend. Still-friend? Could-possibly-be-more-than-friend? Never-again-friend?

*Heartbrother, soulbond!*

Popsicle came bounding out of the classroom from between Iida’s legs, causing the other teen to
stumble before righting himself against the doorway. Iida shifted an abortive gaze between the two teens, Sero’s hand still warm against Izuku’s cheek as they both stared with wide eyes at Iida’s interruption.

*Tenya Tenya Tenya.*

Izu felt emotions flood through him too fast to discern, a maelstrom of want tearing through his chest and causing his throat to close up.

*Tenya Tenya Tenya.*

He had missed him so much.

Iida cleared his throat. “Ahem, I am here to warn you that class is about to start. You should take your seats before announcements begin.”

And then he was gone.

Izuku’s legs crumbled beneath him, Tenya’s departure having stolen all his strength. Sero barely caught him in time, but he managed to shift his arm around Izuku’s back as he lowered the other teen to the ground.

“Hey, Midoriya, are you okay?”

But Izuku didn’t know how to answer. Kacchan was right. Izuku let his emotions control him. But how was he supposed to stop? It seemed like all he could focus on, right now, was keeping his magic inside of him and under his control. Something in his chest felt so bad, and he couldn’t make it go away. Izuku’s eyes teared up, and he tried to close his eyes and stifle the sob that was threatening to build up and fall out and spill out everywhere.

Sero’s brown and silver eyes were wide and concerned in front of him (*he was always so concerned and so kind and why didn’t Kacchan approve of someone so good?*), and Izuku had no idea what he was doing or wanted to do or was going to do, until he’d done it. The door had clicked shut behind Iida, and Izuku had reached his hand out to drag Sero’s face close to his, and then he was chasing that feeling from the alleyway. He was chasing that warmth from against the wall, the moon behind Sero’s head, cooling and calm and peaceful. He was kissing Sero in the hallway on the floor, and it was definitely a bad idea, and Kacchan was going to be upset with him, but didn’t he deserve a goodbye? Wasn’t everything that was going on crazy enough that Izuku deserved a second on the floor to have his emotions and not have to control them?

Tenya kept abandoning him, Todoroki kept turning away from him, Kirishima had left without talking to him, Kacchan never explained anything, and Sero’s hands were so large and so warm—

*Explosion-growling-scared boy!*

Izuku knew, Popsicle, he knew. Kacchan wouldn’t like this. Izuku was going to stop, he was. Izuku would fall in line. That’s what betas did. Kacchan probably knew better than him; he probably sensed something about Sero that wasn’t right for Izuku. But still… just for one more second…

Sero pulled back from the kiss, a blush staining his cheeks as he quirked one of trademark rakish grins that Izuku really wanted to trace with his fingertips. Sero looked happy. “What was that for?”

Izuku pulled his hand away from the back of Sero’s hand and used his fingertips to trail down Sero’s cheek, ending at the edge of his smile. Sero was always smiling. Just like All Might. He made Izuku feel like it was going to be okay.
Izuku gulped down a breath to calm his racing heart and tried to put a lid on his emotions as he blurted out the verdict. “Kacchan said he didn’t want me to date you.”

Sero narrowed his eyes and reared back his head. “What?”

“But he’ll allow me to date Kirishima?” Izuku phrased the last bit as a question, trying to show that Kacchan wasn’t being completely territorial. He just didn’t like Sero. For some reason.

Sero grit his teeth and glanced swiftly at the closed door of Class 1-A. “I see.”

“And I was thinking…” Izuku continued.

Sero slowly shifted his head back toward Izuku, taking in the hesitant expression and the sad smile that took over his face as he tried to grin brightly, the expression not meeting his eyes. “I was thinking, since you’re so good at taking care of me, but Kacchan doesn’t want… well, maybe you could take care of Todoroki instead!”

Sero wasn’t sure whether to be upset at Bakugou or very, very confused about whatever Midoriya was trying to propose.

“Todoroki, he needs someone, just like me. He’s sad, and I don’t know how to make him any better… but I was thinking, if maybe you got to know him, you might like him, too. And then you could take care of him, instead. And it would be kind of like… Todoroki and I, we’ve got this connection, and maybe if you dated him, it would be kind of like you were dating me, too?”

Sero had zero clues about what Midoriya was talking about. Except he seemed to know Todoroki somehow? And had some sort of connection? And wanted Sero to, what, take care of Todoroki? Or date him or something? Sero tried to prevent his head from spinning as Izuku stood up on wobbling legs and held a hand out to Sero.

His smile was still sad. “I’m not going to stop liking you. But I don’t think I’m allowed to kiss you anymore. Not until Kacchan says I can.”

Sero took the hand proffered him and used its weight to anchor him as he stood up.

Bakugou really had no right to tell Izuku who he could and could not date. But at the same time… Bakugou and Midoriya had a strong bond between them, and Sero himself had told Bakugou that he was willing to go along with whatever decision Bakugou made. So Sero couldn’t really say the decision was unfair, when he’d already agreed to abide by it, could he?

Sero swore to himself that he would approach Bakugou later and settle this confusion once and for all. And if Bakugou decided to still be a dick about the whole thing, then Sero would settle for just being Midoriya’s friend… for now.

And he’d think about Midoriya’s advice if the opportunity presented itself. But he couldn’t imagine the silent, studious, and handsome Shouto ‘why are you approaching me?’ Todoroki to ever accept help from plain old Hanta Sero. That just wasn’t the way the world worked.
That day during lunch, Bakugou and Sero were nowhere to be found, so Izuku ended up sitting next to Tokoyami, Shouji, Kirishima, and Kaminari while Popsicle promised he would fetch them both food since Izuku hadn’t been able to bring lunch (or money) from home today.

Izuku hadn’t gotten to spend much time with Tokoyami, lately, and he’d never really gotten to talk to Shouji for an appreciable amount of time. Apparently, Shouji was really stacked, and he and Kirishima ended up spending half the lunch period discussing strength training regimes and how they differed based on quirks. Kaminari inserted occasional jokes, while Izuku asked Tokoyami borderline-invasive questions about his home life and where he lived.

It turned out, Tokoyami lived in a tree house. His parents had literally built their house between three trees, and they all slept elevated far above the earth.

Izuku was madly jealous. He hadn’t gotten to sleep in any treehouses since he’d stayed with one of the tengu tribes in the mountains.

Izuku shared with Tokoyami the story of his last stay with the tengu, which then kind of devolved into him talking about how his mom went away over the weekend and hadn’t texted him that she was back home yet. He wondered if he should be worried about her.

Tokoyami offered that, if Izuku hadn’t heard from his mother by the end of the school day, then Izuku could spend the night with him. Izuku readily took him up on the offer, and they ended up making tentative plans together.

Bakugou and Sero never appeared during lunch.

Izuku kept waiting for one of them to appear, even as Kirishima sent him soft smiles and confused glances and Tokoyami began snarking at Dark Shadow. Izuku didn’t know what to say to Kirishima, or whether he should say anything at all. He had caught a glance of Tenya out of the corner of his eye, as the other teen brushed his hair back, straightened his glasses, and nodded at something Koda said. Izuku’s sad feelings from earlier returned, much tamer than before but no less distinct. He tried to swallow, but his mouth didn’t feel right. He shouldn’t be letting these emotions throw him off. He shouldn’t be allowing them to distract him. But how was he supposed to get rid of them? How did you extinguish something once it was already there inside your gut, slithering around?

Kirishima asked if he was okay.

A lull in the conversation had all five students staring at each other, waiting for someone to say the next word. Kaminari had his mouth full with udon, Kirishima was waiting for an answer, and Tokoyami was never one to diffuse tension, so Shouji ended up breaking the silence and siding with Kirishima.

“You have seemed more distracted lately, and quieter.” Shouji spoke with the hand tentacle closest to Izuku. Two of his other hands paused to blink eyeballs at Izuku.

Apparently Kacchan and Kirishima hadn’t been the only ones to notice. Izuku flushed and looked down at the table rather than answering.

“Is this still about Iida?” Kirishima ventured.

Izuku’s flush deepened.

Kirishima sighed. “Man, I wish you could let it go. You can’t help him. He wants some space. It’s only been a week, right?”
Izuku traced symbols into the table with his fingertips, but the rune for ‘peace’ didn’t bring him any peace.

Tokoyami nodded his head in agreement. “It is the right of every man to revel in their misery.”

Kirishima covered his face with his hand. “… dude, not helping.”

Tokoyami blushed and looked off to the side. “I also know several good meditation techniques for dealing with the depths of one’s dark emotions.”

Izuku nodded along, finally hearing some advice he could make use of. “That does sound helpful, actually. What kind of techniques?”

“I…” Tokoyami began to say something else (likely melodramatic) before pausing, his head cocking at an angle. “Have you ever meditated before?”

Izuku’s head bobbed. “Yeah, at least several times a week.”

“Long meditations, or short?” Shouji’s bottom left hand leaned over to clarify, while Shouji eyed Izuku from beneath his white bangs.

Izuku nibbled at his lip, something in his chest lightening as he felt the presence of Popsicle nearby. “Uh, typically long ones, I guess? I’ve never really used them to deal with emotions, though.”

Izuku’s mind blanked. He couldn’t exactly say that it was typically to get in touch with his magic or check on his bond with his familiar, and he couldn’t think of any other reason that someone might meditate. To remember his dreams? But that used the tengu’s meditation stone. Izuku floundered for an explanation, but gave up after an uncomfortable amount of time seemed to have passed. “Uh… stuff?”

Tokoyami swatted at Dark Shadow as his familiar began to lean too close to the lunch table (and his food). “Do you ever use mediators? Stones, herbs…”

Shouji’s tall form leaned over on the table, his body resting on one-third of his right arms as he gazed over at Tokoyami and Izuku. “I find incense helpful.”

This conversation was so surreal. Izuku was talking to his classmates about not-magic techniques of magic practices.

Izuku kept nibbling at his lip. “Uh, stones, I guess? I haven’t gotten to use herbs in a while for anything other than, uh… for meditating.” Izuku figured he was being about as subtle as a bag of bricks, but he was struggling with how to continue the discussion without revealing what he actually used meditation for.

Tokoyami hummed. “I was considering stopping at a shop on my way home that sells herbs, incense, and stones… if you would be interested in joining me?”

The return of Popsicle buoyed Izuku’s spirits even further, and he found himself nodding along and agreeing to Tokoyami’s offer while he took the apple from Popsicle’s mouth and chomped on it. Kirishima made a slightly disgusted face at him, and Dark Shadow began cackling madly.

Uraraka leaned over from her discussion with Asui a couple seats away. “Oooh, can I come with you? I’ve been wanting to get a bigger turquoise stone ever since you blessed my earrings!”
Silence overtook the table as Izuku blushed and Tokoyami leaned forward in interest. “Blessed, you say?”

“Yeah, and they felt really warm and, like, hopeful afterward! I wear them every day now. Wanna see?”

Tokoyami nodded his head very seriously as Izuku buried his head in his hands. This was going to end badly, he just knew it.

Uraraka took off one of her earrings and passed it over to Tokoyami, who handled it with care. He closed his eyes and tilted his head as he tried to focus on the earrings. “This stone carries within it a light to calm the soul.” He opened his eyes and tilted his head at Izuku. “You blessed this?”

Izuku gulped, his flush spreading further on his cheeks. “Uh, yeah?”

Next to Izuku’s side, Kirishima’s eyes were wide and slightly panicked. However, Izuku was too distracted by trying to find a way to explain himself to notice.

Tokoyami handed the earring back to Uraraka and leaned forward on the table very seriously, Dark Shadow popping up behind him to cock his head and stare at Izuku. “Would you be interested in doing some stone work with me, later?”

Izuku had no idea what he could be talking about. Or rather, he knew what stone work meant to a witch, but he had no idea what it meant to a bird-human/quirk-user and his shadow familiar. Maybe he could just roll with the flow? Magic wasn’t generally flashy, so even if Izuku accidentally did something (or chose to do something on purpose), then Tokoyami wasn’t very likely to notice. Right?

“I guess, uh, yeah, sure. I like working with… stones.” Izuku felt like he was fumbling through the conversation, but honestly… what was he supposed to be saying?

His mom was going to kill him.

Tokoyami offered him a brief smile before having a silent conversation with Dark Shadow.

Uraraka cheered softly next to Izuku. “I can’t wait! I’ll see you after school, yeah?”

And that, as they say, was that.

Meanwhile, in the boys’ restroom at the beginning of the lunch period, Sero had decided to follow Bakugou and confront him about why Bakugou wouldn’t allow Midoriya to date Sero (but was somehow fine with the thought of Midoriya dating Kirishima).

The confrontation didn’t go as planned.

First of all, Sero had somehow chosen the exact same bathroom that Bakugou had dragged him into a couple weeks before, when he’d pushed Sero against the wall and warned him to read books about wolf pack behavior. Sero still had some rather, er, sexual dreams about that encounter. So sue him, he was a teenager. But the memory definitely hung over him as he stiffened his back and marched up behind Bakugou.
Sero wouldn’t describe himself as an unfriendly person, but his voice could definitely take a cold edge when he needed it to. And goddamn, did he need it to right now. “Bakugou.”

The explosive teen turned to him with a frown and one eyebrow raised, as he finished washing and drying his hands. (Explosive sweat wasn’t necessarily good when eating finger food.) “What do you want?”

“Midoriya told me that you made your decision.”

Bakugou scoffed. “Good.”

He went to move past Sero toward the door, but Sero wasn’t having any of that. He shoved a hand out to stop Bakugou in his tracks, his fingers only just grazing the bottom of Bakugou’s barely-buttoned blazer before Bakugou shoved him back.

Bakugou glared at him. “What the fuck?”

Sero crossed his arms, blocking Bakugou from exiting the bathroom. “I want to know why.”

Bakugou looked him up and down, as though assessing him as a threat. A second later, Sero must have been deemed lacking, because Bakugou relaxed backward and leaned his hip against the bathroom counter, his posture cocky and certain. “Why what?”

Sero took a step forward and steeled his voice. “Why it’s okay for Midoriya to date Kirishima, but not okay for him to date me.”

Bakugou leveled a deadpan stare at Sero, his dry tone slightly mocking. “There’s a difference.”

That only served to rile Sero up more. “A difference. Seriously?! What difference?”

Bakugou leaned forward, leering as he sneered at Sero. “Kirishima’s not gonna fuck up.”

Sero ground his teeth together. So there were back to this, were they? Bakugou always saying that Sero didn’t know what he was doing, that he didn’t understand. All these secrets that Kirishima was apparently now in on, but no one would reveal to Sero. Sero wasn’t used to going more than five minutes without smiling, but every time he discussed this crap with Bakugou, Sero's mouth seemed stick in a permanent frown. Bakugou was such a tool, sometimes.

Sero looked up from where his gaze had fallen to the ground, only to stare Bakugou down, the desire to stand up for his friend thrumming through him. “You don’t get to control who Midoriya dates.”

Bakugou actually laughed at him, and something happened with his face that Sero could only suspect was an expression of confusion or disgust. Maybe both. “Someone has to. Otherwise he’ll be dating the whole goddamn class.”

The whole class…? Sero wondered what Bakugou was talking about. He looked Bakugou up and down, searching for a hint. “Are you jealous or something?”

Bakugou glared at him but didn’t deign to respond.

Sero felt his hands clenching with the urge to grab Bakugou’s blazer and shove him into a wall. Repeatedly. “He... Midoriya said he liked me. He deserves to make his own choices about whether to date me. Did you even give him that choice?”

“Why should I? Kirishima says he likes a lot of people.” Bakugou was definitely taunting him, now.
Sero shot him a confused look. “A lot...?”

Bakugou smirked and pushed off of the counter. His hands were in his pockets as he leaned into Sero’s space. “Including fuckin’ four eyes and half-and-half. So why would I let Deku choose you over them? You’re fuckin’ weak compared to them. And Deku needs strong people by his side.”

Something inside of Sero wanted to rage at the comparison to Iida and Todoroki, of all people. Earlier this morning, Midoriya had been telling Sero that Todoroki needed someone to take care of him. And now Bakugou was suggesting that Todoroki would be better for Midoriya than Sero was? Whatever metric Bakugou was using to measure potential suitors for someone that he should seriously have no control over their dating life… it was gravely flawed.

Sero took a deep breath before attempting to stare Bakugou down once again. “Strong? Seriously? Todoroki might have a powerful quirk, but he wouldn’t know how to handle Midoriya.”

Bakugou’s eyes narrowed into slits, red embers burning behind the grate of his eyelashes. His voice was mocking. “Handle him? That’s why you’re fucking wrong for him.”

Sero narrowed his eyes in return. “Like you don’t handle him?”

“I’m his fucking alpha,” Bakugou sneered, taking a step closer.

“Alphas don’t exist!” Sero threw his hands up in exasperation; all their conversations seemed to loop back around to previous ones.

Bakugou took another step closer, attempting to use his smaller form to loom over Sero through sheer presence. His accent thickened. “You always think you know what he needs, but you don’t have a fuckin’ clue, do ya? Always guessing and coming up with the wrong answer. Should I fight for him? Should I bend over? Making the wrong choice each time. Shoulda just left it alone and seen how it played out. I mighta been okay with you then.”

Sero felt like he was being pinned in place, Bakugou’s words crawling through his brain like an infection. When was it best to fight, versus standing down? When should you back down rather than alienating someone? Sero was trying to toe the appropriate line that Bakugou and Midoriya had drawn invisibly into sand. Asserting his own desires while respecting Midoriya’s. Sero grit his teeth and jutted out his chin, refusing to give any ground. “I’m still fighting for him.”

Bakugou laughed, a short small thing full of disbelief and disrespect. “No, you backed down. And you’ll keep backing down. Because even though you don’t know why... you know I know what’s best for him.”

Sero had a brief second where he almost fell into Bakugou’s trap, where he almost started thinking that Bakugou could be right. By backing down, by letting Bakugou choose where he stood with Midoriya... had Sero forfeited his spot in the race? No, Sero refused to believe that. Wanting everyone to get along and for everyone’s feelings to be considered wasn’t a submission. It wasn’t expecting defeat. It was called caring for other people, and Bakugou was the weak one if he couldn’t see that.

After a few seconds, Sero shook his head in refusal. His tone was final, drawing his own line in the sand. You don’t own him. “I don’t believe that.”

Bakugou squinted his eyes as he stared a few seconds too long at Sero, before another smirk appeared on his face and he leaned in, red eyes gleaming as he mocked Sero yet again. “Then why haven’t you gone on another date? Or have you even had a date? You can’t even call him by his first
name, so why the fuck would you be ready to date him.”

Sero crossed his arms once more, standing tall and using his height to his advantage to look down his
nose at Bakugou. “Because he wants me to.”

Bakugou growled up at him like an aggressive dog that wouldn’t back down, or a wolf in some
butchered-up sheep's clothing. “No he thinks you’re attractive or some shit. Doesn’t mean he likes
you or wants to date you. He doesn’t understand the fucking difference.” Bakugou paused, a light
entering his eyes before he continued. “And you didn’t even try to explain it to him, did you? Just
went along with it and tried to slide right in. Well fuck you and fuck your imaginary goddamn future
relationship. He doesn’t need you. If he did, he would have fought me for you.”

Bakugou shoved past Sero and headed for the door, one hand sparking with the threat of exploding
Sero if the other teen tried to stop him. Bakugou had one last rejoinder before he left the room, red
eyes burning and searing into Sero’s heart as Bakugou stared Sero down before shutting the door in
his face. “But the only one he fights for is me.”

And what’s more, Sero couldn’t even prove Bakugou wrong. If Midoriya had wanted to fight, he
could have. Instead, Midoriya had told Sero to go after someone else and take care of them, instead.
And sure, there was something hidden in his suggestion, as though Midoriya had two parts of his
soul and one of them was inside Todoroki… but that was crazy, right?

Sero sighed and walked over toward the sink, splashing water on his face as he leaned over the
counter and stared at himself in the mirror.

Respecting someone else’s boundaries had never felt so wrong.

And he had no idea how to make it right.

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks!

Sorry about the wait on this chapter. My bf’s been going through some things, so I’ve
been helping him instead of writing. But the ideas for this fic won’t leave me, and so I’ve
talked his ear off about planning for future chapters. If anything dark and terrible
happens, just uh... blame him. :)

The Tokoyami/Uraraka/pagan shop fun stop almost happened in this chapter, but it felt
wrong to place it right after the Sero/Bakugou conversation... so it's going into next
chapter. Along with: a sleepover at Tokoyami's place, possible Todoroki/Izuku
conversations (which may or may not take place at Izuku's dilapidated apartment), Izuku
making terrible wonderful mistakes that cause him to end up under Aizawa's care, and a
look into Aizawa's homelife.

I hope those plans make up for the long wait between chapters? Also, I apologize to
everyone that I tricked into shipping Sero/Deku. That's gonna be on the backburner for
a long while, possibly cooking with a little Sero/Todoroki because the manga made me ship it (#Seroroki, anyone?) and this story’s apparently careening toward polyamory anyway. Alternately, there’s potential background Todoroki/Iida coming up, but I’m just saying... Sero seems to be crazy good at instigating things, and everyone else is terrible at romancing. Feel free to weigh in your thoughts!
Family Dynamics

Chapter Summary

Alternatively titled, "Most Definitely Not Abandonment Issues"

Featuring: The Uraraka/Tokoyami pagan-shop play date, Izuku spending the night with Tokoyami and learning about family dynamics, and Todoroki and Izuku talking about their connection.

Also, Izuku gets to see a peek of Aizawa's home life and vice versa.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It might have been because of that moment earlier in the hallway, with Sero’s hand warm around his cheek and neck… or it might have had something to do with spending more time with Shoji and his ability to sprout eyes and mouths and ears from his hands… or it might have been this feeling of loneliness that seemed to pervade Izuku’s bones even as much as he tried to ignore it… but Izuku spent a worrisome percentage of his classtime after lunch staring at his classmates’ hands and wondering what they felt like.

Bakugou gripping his notebook, clenching a pencil tightly between thumb and forefinger. Would his hands be soft? Izuku had gotten to feel his hand in Kacchan’s, once, but the other teen was too busy dragging Izuku somewhere for him to figure out whether it felt good.

Jirou rolling her ear jacks from one finger to the next. Would her hands feel thin and frail? Did she have calluses on her fingertips from playing all those instruments she’d learned?

Sero’s hand lying large and open and waiting on the desk next to Izuku. Izuku’s fingers itched to touch. Warm. Sero’s hands would be so warm, and they were big enough to envelop Izuku’s hand like a sleeping bag. He knew the feel of those hands, and they were wonderful. Could he touch them again, or would that be going against Kacchan’s demands?

Izuku’s eyes meandered over to where Shoji was sitting in front of Jirou. He wondered what it would feel like to run his fingers over one of Shoji’s hands. And what if Shoji turned his hand into a mouth? And then Izuku would be able to touch both a mouth and a hand at the same time, and would that be—

Spirits, Izuku was severely distracted.

Shoji’s hands were even larger than Sero’s, so what would that even feel like? Would it be weird to ask? Would Kacchan say that Izuku had to ask permission before grabbing one of Shoji’s hands and trying to wrap it around the back of his neck? And what if Shoji’s hand was on his neck, and then it turned into a mouth, and—

Izuku shivered.

He was definitely distracted.
Shoji had so many hands, too, so if Izuku could get him to put one hand on his neck, then another hand could rest against Izuku’s back, and then another on Izuku’s hip. And all those hands could hold him from both sides of his body. Everywhere that Sero had touched Izuku in that alleyway, Shoji could press his hands there all at once. And if Izuku thought Tokoyami was warm during that fateful lunch period when Dark Shadow cradled Izuku from behind and his front was pressed up against Tokoyami… then how warm would Shoji be with all his hands?

*Spirits,* Izuku did not understand emotions. His stomach and chest kept doing weird things, even while his thoughts trailed from one deliberation to the next. It was confusing.

And hadn’t Sero mentioned something about holding hands? It was a thing people did, apparently. But was it only when people were dating? Could you do it if you weren’t dating? Did you have to ask someone before holding their hand, or was it something you just did? Izuku hadn’t used to ask, but then Sero had said—

Mr. Aizawa cleared his throat, and Izuku flushed. He shook his head and refocused on the board.

He wanted to know what someone else’s hand would feel like, against his.

It used to just be a quick comfort thing. Izuku would want to connect with someone, so he would hold their hand. But it had been a week since the Sports Festival, since Izuku walked hand in hand with Shinsou, and then Kacchan had stolen Izuku’s hand from Shinsou to replace the Gen Ed student’s smell on Izuku with his own scent and sweat. It had been a week since casual touches and not second-guessing his desire to jump on another student and hug them. A week since he’d felt more freedom to just—

**Touch.**

Sleeping next to Bakugou the last couple of nights had only made Izuku crave the feeling more.

… maybe Tokoyami wouldn’t mind if Izuku tried to cuddle with him tonight? Or hold his hand?

Uraraka had said she was here for Izuku, as well, as long as it didn’t involve bathing. Maybe he could hold her hand? Was he allowed to touch girls? None of the other boys seemed to be doing it. What were the rules, there?

Izuku was meant to be focusing proper evacuation safety protocol for when a fire broke out that was big enough to impact a whole block of the city.

Instead, all he could think of were hands.

The walk to Tokoyami’s recommended store was more silent than Izuku was used to, compared to his walks with other classmates. Usually, everyone tended to talk for the first few minutes about something small and insignificant, and then the silence would trail off into nothing as they tried to figure out what they had in common. Bits and pieces of conversation tended to float around, depending on their surroundings, as they tried to learn more about each other and find common ground.

Uraraka, it turned out, had very little in common with Tokoyami. Uraraka was bubbly and bright, always looking for the positive in any situation while she persevered on. Tokoyami favored
melodramatic pauses and serious, depressing phrases; he didn’t seem to know how to respond to lighthearted optimism.

It was interesting trying to navigate the conversation between them.

Izuku debated acting on his desires for half a second, but he eventually decided to just follow his gut and slip his hand quietly into Uraraka’s hand as they walked.

She didn’t seem to mind. She squeezed his hand back with a friendly smile and a blush.

Izuku hummed the same tune from earlier, the one from his dream. Holding hands was definitely nice. And apparently not only meant to be done when you were dating?

Dark Shadow stared at them with a tilted head.

The walk to Tokoyami’s recommended store took one bus ride and four extra blocks, and Uraraka spent much of that time pointing out stores and talking about things that she would never dream of buying. Tokoyami pointed out the dark alleyways where he wished to hide from the world in his own cocoon of darkness, or something.

Izuku smiled.

They were silent once again.

Dark Shadow mimicked rolling his eyes and draping himself over Tokoyami’s shoulder.

Popsicle snickered. It came out as a hiss, scaring Uraraka just enough to make her hand leave Izuku’s.

Which made Izuku feel cold.

The shop they were heading to was down an alleyway, two sections behind an icecream shop that Uraraka stared at with hearts in her eyes. Popsicle slithered around Izuku’s neck, wanting to taste some vanilla icecream with sprinkles, as Izuku passed the bright colors with a curious gaze.

Popsicle was obsessed with sprinkles.

Whatever shop Tokoyami took them into, it felt a bit like home. A weak layer of protection wards hummed around Izuku as he entered. He looked around the bright interior, wondering who had cast them, whether it had been an all-out ritual or something accidental over time. Protection wards could be erected naturally, fed purely by faith and belief. Izuku hadn’t run into wards like that in years, though. Although when he closed his eyes and focused, the wards seemed relatively weak; they would probably have been barely noticeable to anyone who didn’t work with protection wards on a regular basis. But they were definitely there, buzzing between the raised hairs on Izuku’s arms.

Izuku walked into the store, more curious than before. His eyes flitted from shelf to shelf from afar, trying to get a sense of what was on sale. There were a variety of stones placed around the room in various sizes, some as big as Izuku’s head while others were smaller than a yuzu. The range of colors and feelings distracted Izuku as he wandered from one case to the next, running his hands over glass or wood and trying to get a feel for what was on offer.

At the back of the room, there were a range of dried herbs and spices, supposedly for use in meditation. When Izuku got to them, he couldn’t help his confusion. Why were herbs useful? He’d never studied potions or alchemy or anything of that like, so he had no idea to what extent each of the herbs had a specific utility. Tokoyami came to stand beside him and pointed out a couple of the
herbs he used himself—peppermint, sandalwood, cinnamon, myrrh. Each had different uses, he said, and there were certain times of the month that certain herbs were more useful. Tokoyami liked bay leaves; he said they gave him slightly precognitive dreams.

Izuku stayed away from those.

Then he turned back around, to run his hands over a couple of the leaves. They didn’t feel precognitive. They didn’t feel like anything at all.

Izuku wandered back toward the middle of the shop, where Uraraka was perched in front of a display case with various necklaces. There were four cases, two with rough stones shaped into jewelry, one with polished stones, and a third that held stones shaped into animals of varying breeds and sizes. Izuku’s eyes caught on the figure of a wolf’s head, and he found it hard to look away. The pendant was made of tiger’s eye and had the visage of a wolf looking down at the ground in deliberation. Izuku instantly thought of Bakugou, and his fingers reached out to run their pads over the grooves in the stone. It was surprisingly detailed, smooth with gliding edges, scowling in its own fragile sort of way.

Uraraka came up next to him, her brown eyes wide and curious. “See something you like?”

Izuku nodded his head. He let his thumb run over the stone wolf’s jaw. “This feels like Kacchan.”

Uraraka giggled. She leaned over to look more closely at the stone and hummed. “It kinda does! Like when he’s all upset and looks away from you, but doesn’t actually yell or anything.”

Izuku agreed, a slight smile edging at the corner of his lips. The longer he looked at the necklace, the more fond he grew of it.

Uraraka bumped his shoulder with hers. “You should get it!”

“What?” Izuku brief a glance over at Uraraka before gazing back at the pendant. A flush spread over his cheeks. “I, uh, can’t.” He paused, sheepish. “I don’t have any money.”

Uraraka frowned next to him, but before she could say anything, the shopkeeper walked over. “Are you looking at any specific necklace?”

Izuku pouted at the display case. He pointed toward the tiger’s eye wolf. “That one.”

“Ah yes, tiger’s eye. A good stone. It used to be carried to ward off curses or ill-intentions. Of course, others used it to signify their strength of will and dominance over a situation.”

Just like Bakugou.

“It is 2500 yen.”

Izuku paled. He looked down at his bag, but he knew he didn’t have any money. He wondered if the shopkeeper would be willing to trade for something else… Izuku had to have something in his bag, didn’t he?

The shopkeeper watched, Uraraka peering over worriedly, as Izuku dug through his bag. All he could find that might be tradeable were some of his extra protection stones (he always kept at least twenty in his bag, in case of emergencies) or his last All Might figurine. But Izuku needed that figurine for even more serious emergencies… he wondered if the shopkeeper would take one of his stones instead.
Izuku pulled out one of his most charged protection stones. It was jet black and had a rune for protection engraved into it. The stone hummed in his hand as he offered it up the shopkeeper. “I’ll trade you for this.”

The shopkeeper stared at him incredulously, as though wondering what he was supposed to do with a single stone and why it would be worth 2500 yen. Or maybe he just wasn’t used to trades as financial transactions, in general. Did people do that at normal human shops? Was trading just for informal agreements?

Izuku lifted his hand up in offering. “It’s a, uh, protection stone, and it’s been heavily blessed. It should keep the area directly surrounding it from harm.”

The shopkeeper raised his eyebrows, dubious, but he offered forth his hand, wanting to test the stone himself. Izuku handed the stone over, confident that any person who could sense energy would know the stone’s value. And why else would a shopkeeper work at a place like this if he couldn’t sense energy?

The shopkeeper paled within seconds of handling it. “This… where did you get this stone?”

Izuku smiled, his heart full of hope. “I made it.”

“You… you made this?” The shopkeeper clarified. At Izuku’s nod, the man’s mouth dropped open. It remained open for a few more seconds, until the shopkeeper realized he was gaping at a customer. He closed his mouth and nodded his head. “Yes, yes this is perfectly acceptable payment. Please… take the necklace. Let me know if there are any future trades you wish to offer.”

Izuku smiled back in agreement and took the necklace off the stand. “Thank you!” he answered cheerfully, turning around to find where Tokoyami had gotten off to.

Uraraka stared after him with wide eyes, switching her gaze between the protection stone and Izuku’s retreating form, before following him. “What was that?”

Izuku turned toward her. “Hmm? Oh, we made a trade!”

“I know that, but… why was he willing to make the trade? That was 2500 yen!”

Izuku shrugged, his head turning to seek out Tokoyami. He hummed non-committedly. “He must actually know a lot about stones.” Izuku smiled back at her as he eyed Dark Shadow and Tokoyami arguing under their breaths in a corner of the room. He walked toward them, wondering what the fuss was about.

“Hey, Tokoyami!”

Dark Shadow was the first to turn towards him, and the shadow seemed to be complaining as Tokoyami stared at a bin of labradorite.

Izuku read the label and found a smile appearing on his face. “Labradorite is awesome!” It was a personal favorite of his, but it wasn’t very often found amongst nature. Izuku had lucked out and run across an amethyst or two when walking through a forest, sometimes a section of quartz or jet. But labradorite mostly sourced from North America or Russia. It wasn’t anywhere to be found in Japan, so he only had one stone amidst his collection at home.

Tokoyami glowered at the bin. “Dark Shadow does not think the stone ‘reverberates with his soul,’” Tokoyami (essentially) pouted.
Izuku furrowed his eyebrows. “But labradorite is good for everything! It’s one of the most powerful stones that exist. It just… hums at you and calls you in…” Izuku’s voice trailed off as he stared at the veritable hoard of labradorite in front of him. He’d never seen so much of it before.

Dark Shadow peered over his shoulder as Izuku leaned forward, letting his hand hover above the stones. Within seconds, one of the stones seemed to call out to him, and Izuku plucked that stone from amidst the rest, turning around to hand it to Tokoyami. “This one,” he stated. “He’ll definitely like this one.” Then Izuku smiled and walked away.

Tokoyami was left staring after Izuku in his wake.

“Well, he definitely knows his stones?” Uraraka offered. Her eyes caught on the box of turquoise three bins down. “Oh, there it is!”

The three teens left the store a couple minutes later. Izuku had only traded for his necklace, but Tokoyami had bought a labradorite stone and a couple of quartz pillars. Uraraka had decided on a small turquoise necklace that was on sale.

Before they left the alleyway, Uraraka finished taking the tag off of her necklace and handed it over to Izuku. She bowed with both of her hands out in offering. “Can you please bless this for me?”

Izuku smiled and agreed. He took the necklace from her and focused on the turquoise pendant, cupping it in his palms and raising it up to his face. He closed his eyes and focused on the same feeling from before—luck and goodness and hope, all in one. Izuku whispered into the pendant as his mind’s eye rounded the edges of the stone in light.

When he looked up, Uraraka was gazing at him with wide brown eyes and a bright smile. Izuku handed the necklace back to her with a grin. “It should work with your earrings.”

Uraraka nodded back at him with another grin before reaching up to clasp the necklace in place.

Tokoyami stared back and forth between them, silent and contemplative.

Izuku pondered the fact that he never felt worried about blessing stones in front of other people… maybe because it was only borderline magical? It was something that couldn’t be traced to him being a witch. It was just… him being good with stones? Or maybe he was just being an idiot, like Kacchan always told him he was.

Uraraka bemoaned the fact that she still needed to go home and finish the Modern Literature homework for tomorrow, even though she’d had the whole weekend to do it. Izuku and Tokoyami nodded in sympathy (Izuku had finished his with Bakugou). Uraraka headed off with a wave. She winked at Izuku as she left, raising her eyebrows between Izuku and Tokoyami.

Izuku didn’t understand what she was intuining.

In the end, Tokoyami and Izuku were left alone for the first time in a long time. The bus ride back to Tokoyami’s place was filled with small bits of humor and long bouts of silence. Dark Shadow tried to play a fun game of red hands, but Izuku was too quick for him, always stealing his hands away just in time. Dark Shadow pouted on Tokoyami’s shoulder as Izuku laughed. Popsicle slithered in happiness around Izuku’s arm.

It was a good journey.
It turned out that, when Tokoyami said that he lived with his parents, he literally meant that phrase in the plural. Parents with an ‘s’. He had one father and two mothers.

Izuku had never met someone with multiple parents before, much less multiple parents that all lived under the same roof. Apparently, Tokoyami’s house was built on three trees in order to symbolize the bond between all three of his parents.

Izuku liked that idea. Multiple people sharing their love, building a house above the ground where they would be safe, somewhere that represented their bond together. It reminded Izuku vaguely of the pack, although wolves only had one mate, not two. Still, paired wolves used to wear these necklaces that symbolized their bond—two halves of a whole deer antler, split in twain, representing that they were two parts of the same soul.

Izuku frowned, wondering who his other half was. He wondered if there even were halves, among normal humans, or if that was just a werewolf thing. He tried not to imagine Todoroki. That whole thing was still too complicated for him to figure out, and it wasn’t worth worrying about when he was hanging out with Tokoyami.

The two teens spent their time between arriving home and eating dinner by working on this one assignment that Present Mic had given them after homeroom. Izuku found it interesting how much quicker he worked with someone else to bounce ideas off of. Sometimes, Izuku took awhile to finish his homework because he got hung up on how he should answer a question. Short sentences? Long paragraphs? One-word answers? It wasn’t always clear, and sometimes the instructions left a lot up to interpretation. It was useful having someone like Tokoyami to talk to, since the other teen seemed to have a good sense of what sort of questions required what sort of answers. But Tokoyami was also really good about not talking too much, instead pointing toward things on the worksheet or stopping Izuku’s hand from writing more information than needed, helping Izuku learn on his own.

Izuku wondered if all his classmates intuitively understood the idea behind homework questions in the same way.

The thought made him feel rather inadequate.

He was thankful the entrance exams had been multiple choice, except the long-essay written portion.

Tokoyami scooted over closer to Izuku, occasionally pointing out helpful hints and best practices. His slightly-unbuttoned shirt showed off the dichotomy between where his feathers began on his jawline and the smooth skin on the neck beneath.

He was very warm, like a furnace a foot away from Izuku. Tokoyami’s emanating heat made Izuku feel relaxed and complacent.

Dark Shadow entertained himself with Popsicle in the background, playing some strange game of keep-away or tag. Izuku wasn’t sure. Happiness hummed in his chest from his bond with Popsicle, and he was pretty certain he saw Tokoyami smile. The edges of the other boy’s grin were buried beneath thin layers of black feathers, difficult to interpret in the living room light. Still, the tilt of Tokoyami’s head was unmistakable, to someone like Izuku who had lived with the tengu for long enough.

In the brief few moments between Izuku finishing Present Mic’s exercise and Tokoyami busily going through and double-checking his work, Izuku had a thought, sticky as molasses, that wouldn’t leave his mind. He stared over at Tokoyami, who was quietly working away, and then to Dark Shadow,
who had begun playing whack-a-mole with Popsicle’s swiftly slithering form. Izuku bit at his lip as he stared at the connection between Tokoyami and Dark Shadow, before slowly moving his gaze down Tokoyami’s arm and to his non-dominant hand. Tokoyami’s left hand was resting softly in his lap.

Izuku wondered how much bigger Tokoyami’s hand would be than his own, or if Tokoyami would mind if Izuku grabbed hold of his hand. Uraraka hadn’t seemed to care… she had even smiled back at him, hadn’t she? But Tokoyami and Uraraka were different. Dissonant personalities don’t often respond the same way. Izuku should probably ask Tokoyami before instigating something… but he was tired of Kacchan’s demands that he always ask first. Sometimes, Izuku just wanted to act without all the stupid censoring that Tenya and Kacchan enforced on him. It was stupid. Touching someone was a comfort thing. He should be allowed. No one ever asked, back with the pack. Izuku hadn’t even had to ask with the tengu, and their race wasn’t affectionate at all!

Touching other people had never been such a big deal, until now. Until Izuku hung around normal humans. What was the source behind everyone’s paranoia about physical contact? Sure, you don’t let enemies near your neck, but if they’re friends… if they might become pack… wasn’t getting close to someone a requirement?

Izuku took those few precious moments between finishing his own work and Tokoyami not yet being done with his to slowly edge his fingers forward. Debating. Hesitating. Berating himself for hesitating. Wondering if he should ask first. Instituting his own internal logic that anyone who had agreed to think about joining the pack should be fine with Izuku touching them, because that’s what pack did. Eventually, Izuku took a breath to brace himself, reaching out the last few inches to slip his hand into Tokoyami’s. He wanted to know. He needed to know. What it felt like.

It felt like pack-comfort-nervousness-hope.

Izuku’s fingers crept further and further into the crevice of Tokoyami’s hand. The curl of Tokoyami’s hand felt different than with Uraraka, earlier. Warmer. Bigger. More secure. Touching his hand made a tingle travel its way up Izuku’s hand, through his arm, and straight into his chest until he was shuddering from the feel, like a weak electric shock.

Nervous-unsure-nervous-hope

Izuku furrowed his eyebrows, wondering what the difference was between Tokoyami hands and Uraraka hands. Shouldn’t hands feel the same, if they were both just potential pack members?

Tokoyami’s hands were soft, unlike Izuku’s calloused ones. He wondered if Tokoyami’s hands would feel as good as Sero’s did if they were wrapped around Izuku’s cheek. Sero’s hands were broad and large. Izuku stretched his fingers out, further into the cave of Tokoyami’s curled fingers, trying to determine how big Tokoyami’s hands were, whether Izuku could reach his fingers all the way through. Izuku could vaguely feel a buzzing sensation between their hands, like too much energy pent up in one place… or energy passing from one source to another? Izuku couldn’t tell.

A few seconds after Izuku’s exploratory mission into the cavern formed by Tokoyami’s fingers, Tokoyami responded in kind. His thumb moved against the palm of Izuku’s hand. Hesitant. Testing. His eyes remained focused on the homework sheet in front of him.

Izuku’s heart skipped a beat.

Tokoyami swiped his thumb again, the thick pad brushing against Izuku’s sensitive palm, and Popsicle paused in his game with Dark Shadow to peer curiously back at Izuku. Dark Shadow joined the other familiar in staring at the pair of students finishing up their homework and… holding
hands. In the living room. Where any of Tokoyami’s parents could walk in and see.

Popsicle didn’t see the problem with it.

Dark Shadow thought it was hilarious.

Tokoyami glared over his shoulder at his familiar.

Dark Shadow moved back toward the two teens and peered at Izuku over Tokoyami’s shoulder. Head tilted. Assessing.

A soft smile formed on Izuku’s face. Dark Shadow was nearby, and Tokoyami was holding his hand. He felt warm and cozy, not on the outside but on the inside, like pillows and blankets were curling around his heart. It felt like Tenya, only a bit different. Less overwhelming. The sharp sting of a connection between their skin less distracting. A buzzing sensation remained between the trailing fingers of their hands.

Izuku shook his head, banishing the similarity to Tenya away. Tokoyami was warm, and he felt good, and Dark Shadow was warm and felt good, but that didn’t have to mean anything. He didn’t need to consider everyone that felt warm and good as potential mating interests.

Pack felt warm. Pack felt good.

Izuku shouldn’t conflate the two concepts.

Whoever makes you happiest, Mr. Aizawa had said. And Tokoyami made him happy to be around, as did Dark Shadow. But they didn’t make him happiest. There was a difference. Somewhere, somehow, Izuku would be able to tell a difference.

He hoped he would be able to tell a difference.

He wondered how this feeling between their hands and the warmth of their connection was different than the feelings he got around Kirishim—Eijirou. Around Eijirou.

Izuku wondered how you were supposed to make that decision about who made you ‘happiest’ when you were still getting to know people. How long was he supposed to wait before he determined if someone made him ‘happiest’? Kacchan made him happiest, but Kacchan was Kacchan, and they’d known each other for years, and Izuku wasn’t always certain whether what they were could ever possibly be considered a ‘relationship’ in the terms that Sero and Tenya tried to explain to him.

Of course, he had no idea who was a possibility.

Apparently, Izuku had to ask someone in order to figure that out.

And he wasn’t really a fan of asking.

Izuku shoved that thought away during dinner, between bits of laughter and Dark Shadow recounting Tokoyami’s foibles with fake hand puppets, Tokoyami blushing as he snarked back at his familiar. At one point, Dark Shadow put his arm in some stew, and Popsicle transformed into a wolf in order to lick it off. Izuku laughed, bright and clear, the shadows disappearing from his eyes even in the darkness of the dining room. Apparently, the Tokoyami household was kept dark both for Dark Shadow’s sake as well as one of Tokoyami’s moms, who had a shadow-based quirk and felt uncomfortable in bright light.
Izuku enjoyed getting to have dinner with Tokoyami’s parents. Each of Tokoyami’s caretakers were different. One of his mothers had a dark sense of humor and seemed to revel in teasing Dark Shadow. His other mother was more affectionate and calm, full of warmth and light. She reminded Izuku of his own mother, of how her laugh seemed to settle him more than any other sound. Tokoyami’s two mothers also seemed to be joined at the hip, constantly entering each other’s spaces, nuzzling light brushes of bird-like heads between each other. A casual nip of the beak here. A head butt there.

Tokoyami seemed to find their affection horribly embarrassing when displayed in front of his classmate, but Izuku was enraptured. He’d never seen two people interact like this, before. The wolves were always much more… physical. They tussled, and they ran together, and they pushed at each other, and everyone invaded everyone else’s space, but that was… that was pack. That wasn’t this—this caring or concern or light nuzzling that kept happening over the dinner table and during a meal.

Their display made something in Izuku’s chest feel warm.

He blinked away the vague stinging in his eyes.

He didn’t know why it was there.

In complete contrast to Tokoyami’s mothers, his dad was largely silent during the meal. Izuku hadn’t met a human like Tokoyami’s dad before. If Izuku hadn’t known that the man was human, he would have 100% guessed that he was a tengu. His demeanor—stern but cold, calculating, wise—reminded Izuku so intimately of the old tengu tribe he used to stay and train with, that it caused Izuku to have occasional bouts of silence during dinner. He didn’t mean to become contemplative, just as he didn’t mean for his eyes to sting. Tokoyami’s dad just… he reminded Izuku of someone. Probably Avis.

Izuku wondered what his old mentor was up to.

Izuku supposed that someone was bound to notice, at some point during dinner, that Izuku’s eyes tracked every movement of Tokoyami’s moms. That his smile edged the line between wistful and sad and gazing creepily with unblinking eyes for longer than was appropriate. Tokoyami’s dad was the first to say something; he asked Izuku if there was a problem.

Izuku didn’t know how to explain that there wasn’t a problem. That everything, actually, was perfect. That they were perfect. Their home was perfect. That he had never seen a family so wonderful, before.

Izuku had grown up with a dead father and a largely aromantic mother and only the Bakugou’s to serve as his internal sense of what a normal multiple-parent human household looked like. And Auntie Mitsuki definitely didn’t act like this. She wasn’t… affectionate. She was combative. And Uncle Masaru just rolled with the ebbs and flows of her emotions, and Kacchan took directly after her. Soft affection wasn’t really part of the menu.

So having a family dynamic like this in front of him? Izuku didn’t really know how to process.

But he did find out that bird-like mutation quirks could cause their owner to blush, when he told them how beautiful their relationship was.

Before Tokoyami’s dad could feel awkward and be vocal in his defense about the whole affair, likely intuiting that Izuku was a pervy teenage boy with woman-on-woman fantasies, Tokoyami explained in a dry monotone and under no uncertain terms that Izuku was gay and not very good at normal social interaction, so he likely didn’t mean anything offensive by his statement.
Izuku asked what being ‘gay’ was.

Tokoyami acted like that proved his second point.

Both of Tokoyami’s moms cooed adorably and took Izuku through the highlights of the sexual and romantic spectrum, over an extra serving of cabbage rolls.

It was really confusing.

Izuku hesitantly agreed with the ‘gay’ assessment, although he was still really confused about why everyone wanted a label for what gender of mate you preferred. Tenya hadn’t said anything about gender, and neither had Sero. Although Tenya's Sex Ed videos were primarily focused on male-female pairings, so maybe it was just a sex-mating thing?

Tokoyami's kinder mom told Izuku that he didn't have to decide now, and it was all something that he would figure out for himself as he got older. She apparently had never considered a woman before, until she met her wife; and then Tokoyami's dad came in late to the picture.

Izuku didn't know what to do with the influx of information.

Thankfully, Dark Shadow could be a real prankster when you got him to the dinner table and introduced him to hilariously awkward social constructs, so Izuku soon followed Tokoyami away from a food-splattered dinner table and up to his bedroom for the first time. His parents’ raised voices could be heard continuing to laugh uproariously as they departed. Izuku felt like it was a waste of food.

Tokoyami glared at Dark Shadow as though reprimanding him. Popsicle’s whole body emanated glee.

Everyone’s antics were being so distracting that it was no surprise Izuku stubbed his toe on a tree branch in the corner of… the hallway? There were trees coming out of the floorboards in the hallways. Tokoyami's house was awesome.

After they finished leaving the two main sections of the house (one for a living room/kitchen area, and the other for his parents’ bedrooms), Tokoyami finally reached a door at the end of the last section. It was apparently his bedroom, and there was a dark purple curtain draped around the doorframe as though in presentation of what lie beneath. Tokoyami opened the door to his bedroom with a silent flourish, followed by an embarrassed hunching of his shoulders as he announced, “This… is my sanctum.”

Izuku peered around with open curiosity. This soon morphed into delight.

Every inch of Tokoyami’s room was covered in some sort of decoration. There were pitch black robes that looked vaguely ceremonial, some crosses, skulls, old paintings, a sword, some pictures of the various phases of the moon. Izuku stared at the blackout curtains at the back of the room in awe. They were made of a dark blue velvet, and they looked like dreams.

Tokoyami shifted next to him, a permanent blush on his cheeks.

Izuku stared around the room, his mouth agape. “This place… it’s amazing.”

Tokoyami pretended to ignore him as he approached a table at the back of his room. He fingered the edges of the wood before turning around to present the small space to Izuku, his expression torn between inviting praise and anticipating judgment. “I have an altar, for my rituals.”
Izuku walked closer, slightly in a daze at how awesome the decor was, and observed the altar. Various stones lay placed in a specific pattern (a star?), with dried herbs and what seemed to be pieces of Tokoyami’s feathers interspaced throughout. “What does everything do?”

Tokoyami pointed to each piece, explaining one-by-one. The stones were for grounding, protection, self-awareness, mental fortitude, and balance. The herbs were burned as incense whenever he meditated. And the feathers were to… make the entire altar bound to him? Izuku didn’t understand that last part. It seemed a bit like adding blood to an altar, which was strange. You only added pieces of your own body if you needed to amplify a spell. Maybe meditations worked differently than spell-casting? Or needed some amplification to work better?

Izuku’s favorite part of the altar was a small dagger than Tokoyami had placed in the dead center. Tokoyami told him that knives could be used to visualize where an intention began and ended. Izuku wondered if something like that would work with casting a spell, if it would help him visualize the size of the area in which he could control the speed of molecules. He made a mental note to try it later, once he was alone. It couldn’t hurt to practice, and he was basically starting at zero when it came to his ability to slow down molecules rather than speed them up.

Tokoyami pulled out a dark purple piece of fabric from a trunk in the corner of his room and smoothed the edges of it out onto the wooden floor, not speaking a word. Izuku wondered if the process of taking out the fabric was part of Tokoyami’s personal ritual. Izuku crouched down to touch the fabric. He was surprised to find that it felt somewhat charged with energy. He hadn’t imagined that Tokoyami was actually capable of accessing or storing magical energy… but if he had been meditating for as long as he intimated, then maybe the fabric that he meditated on would soak up a bit of the energy that he called to him? It made some sort of sense, but Izuku was still surprised.

Tokoyami had his own book of shadows, too, although the book was more like a list of runes and meditation practices along with small blurbs of poetry, rather than Izuku’s notebook that contained specific incantations, rituals, and symbols through which to channel your energy. Still… Izuku took a large amount of delight in going through the book with a blushing Tokoyami as the other teen pointed out possibly-helpful meditations for Izuku and fun facts about moon cycles.

Izuku nodded along, wondering which meditation rituals would be best to modify.

He also kept mum about alternative rituals for the various moon cycles. Those were probably too werewolf-specific for Tokoyami. Especially with all the howling.

Izuku felt warm as Popsicle curled around his neck and Dark Shadow curled one arm around both Tokoyami and Izuku’s shoulders. The darkness of Tokoyami’s room was a soothing balm to Izuku’s fractured emotions from the past several days.

They eventually settled on a simple grounding ritual. In the past, Izuku had grounded his energy core in general for rituals, but he had never specifically done a meditation to ground himself. He wondered if a grounding ritual would be powerful enough if conducted on the floor in the middle of a house at the top of some trees. ‘Grounding’ always seemed like the sort of thing that was strongest on the actual ground, not up in the middle of the air.

Still… Izuku was just trying to get a feel for the meditation. He didn’t need to go full-out power-mode into the ritual yet, nor was he certain that doing so would be a good idea in front of Tokoyami.

Tokoyami did a lot more humming while he meditated than Izuku was used to, but the sound was calming as he laid down on the floor with Kacchan’s necklace cradled to his chest. Izuku tried to listen to Tokoyami’s voice and obey his suggestions: visualize the roots of the earth reaching up into his spine, spreading up his spinal cord, and accessing his mind. Izuku’s fingers buzzed as he
imagined his feet and fingers linking to the floorboard and drawing energy from the house around them. There was a core inside Izuku that he drew his magic from, for his non-active powers. It was so much brighter than it used to be...

Probably because his mom removed the tengu claws.

Izuku could visualize the last claw still imbedded in his shoulder, the dark tendrils that connected it to his core, leaching off energy, preventing his full power from overwhelming him. Izuku had barely been able to withstand taking out the second claw. The third one would have to remain for a while.

As Izuku imagined energy flowing into him through the floorboards, he was able to watch as some of that energy was immediately drained by the the claw. The rest slid up through his extremities and toward his heart and head, oozing through his channels as slow as honey.

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed as he focused further down his body, toward his stomach. There seemed to be something tugging at his navel. Izuku reached out with his mind, trying to focus more on that area; but the harder he focused, the more nebulous it seemed. Fractured and difficult to discern, like a gas dispersing into an either. But at the same time it felt heavy, weighing him down, tethering him to something unknown.

He wondered what was causing it.

Distracted by the strange feeling, it took him several minutes to notice that Tokoyami had stopped talking through the meditation and was now curled over on his side with Dark Shadow’s form expanding behind him. Izuku blinked through heavy eyelids as he tried to reorient his mind to focus once more on the external world, rather than the internal. Dark Shadow seemed so much bigger, darker, more tangible. He usually felt like a warm static and was barely noticeable from many feet away; but now it almost felt like Izuku could reach out and touch him, and maybe Izuku’s fingers would be able to to stick and clutch on the inky blackness that was spread out behind Tokoyami.

Izuku closed his eyes, trying to clear his mind while shutting out the strange feeling of Dark Shadow in front of him. It took him a few minutes, but Izuku finally got up from his position on the floor, his mind surprisingly centered and refreshed even as his body remained sluggish and confused.

He had the fleeting thought that he wished Kacchan was there. Kacchan nuzzles would be great, right about now. Pack nuzzles.

A flash of melancholy passed through him as ‘pack’ made him think of Tenya. He missed Tenya. He missed his silent strength, lying next to him on bed and talking the hours away.

He was surprised that the pang of loneliness didn’t twinge as hard in his chest, at the thought. Maybe meditating and grounding yourself actually did work to stabilize your emotions?

Izuku promised himself that he would definitely try this again, tomorrow. Preferably amongst nature. Maybe where he and Kacchan had camped the other night? It would really be interesting to try grounding himself on the actual ground, rather than in the air; but Izuku wasn’t stupid enough to do something like that without a protection circle. He had probably chanced fate enough for one night by not setting up a protective circle before his and Tokoyami’s meditation.

It seemed to have turned out alright, at least?

Somewhere across the room, Izuku heard a phone ring. The ringtone sounded vaguely like the one Kacchan had set for him. Did that mean it was Kacchan calling?

Izuku slowly stumbled to his feet as he meandered over to the doorway, where he’d rested his bag
earlier. He put his hands on the bag and felt vibrations through the leather.

It probably was his phone, then.

Izuku rummaged through the bag looking for where his cellphone had fallen to. He found it at the bottom of the bag beneath all his books, and barely managed to swipe the response arrow in order to answer the call in time. “Hello?”

“Where are you.” It was Bakugou.

“Tokoyami’s bedroom.”

There was a pause. “Is he there?”

Izuku made a humming noise that vocalized his agreement.

There was another pause, longer this time. Izuku almost wondered whether Kacchan was going to say anything else, when he heard a growling noise come from his phone. “Well? You gonna put him on, or not?”

Izuku blinked at the closed door in front of him. Tokoyami was still on the opposite side of the room. “Uh, you want to talk to Tokoyami?”

Tokoyami tilted his head from where he’d risen into a sitting position. Dark Shadow was still splayed out on the floor behind him, as though he was trying to make a snow angel from whatever dust remained on the wood floor. Tokoyami gestured his head at the phone. “Who is it?”

Izuku crossed the room. “Kacchan.”

Tokoyami hesitated before answering.

Izuku didn’t know what Kacchan was talking to Tokoyami about, but the other teen kept giving Izuku weird glances while he laconically answered each of Bakugou’s questions. He eventually ended the phone call by saying, “You do not need to worry,” and hanging up.

Izuku stared at Tokoyami.

Tokoyami stared at Izuku.

Owls hooted among the treetops.

Tokoyami shook his head and began folding up the fabric on the floor, standing up to place it into a chest with his other supplies. Tokoyami announced he was going to take a bath before bed, and Izuku watched him wander off, filled to the brim with questions. What had Kacchan wanted? Izuku tucked his discarded phone back into his leather bag. And why did Tokoyami not say anything?

Izuku took a deep breath and shook his head. It didn’t matter. If it was important, Tokoyami would have said something. And Izuku had bigger things to think about, anyway… like the strange feeling that flowed through him after the meditation.

In the past, Izuku had mainly used meditation as a way to link with the tengu’s stone and remember his dreams. He also occasionally meditated as a way to check up on his apartment’s protection wards (or occasionally at school), as well. But he’d never done something like this—meditating just to center yourself. Gathering in energy. Focusing that energy. Spreading it throughout your body. Sending it back into the other. It made Izuku feel dazed and unsettled, but in a strangely positive
Izuku looked around Tokoyami’s bedroom and figured that he had a couple minutes before Tokoyami returned. He shuffled over to his backpack and reached inside one of the side pockets for his protection stones. He’d used five of them when camping out with Bakugou, and he’d traded one to the shopkeeper, but he still had nineteen stones left in his bag.

Izuku peered around the room and wondered where to set them up so that Tokoyami’s room would be protected for the night. The bedroom held the normal four corners, but Izuku felt it best to improvise and put the fifth stone underneath Tokoyami’s altar. If Tokoyami was going to keep messing with weird energy, then it might be best to have the focal stone of the protection circle in the place where Tokoyami did the most of his meditations. Izuku placed the other four stones in the four corners of the room, and then stood in the middle of the room to focus on his energy reaching out and tracing its way to each of the stones, which hummed with the energy already stored in them.

Izuku marveled at the strength of the stones, from his position in the center of them. Usually, he could feel the stones like faint pinpricks of light. But for some reason, they currently felt like shining beacons. Was it because he meditated? Did he make the stones more powerful, or did he make himself more sensitive to them?

He definitely needed to practice more with this when he got home.

Izuku wondered why his ancestors’ journals never mentioned meditating as a way to ground and focus your magical energy. He wondered if his mom knew. Was it just something lost through time? Was it something typically only non-witches needed to do, since they didn’t have as much power?

When Izuku finally had his turn to shower, he was surprised to find that Tokoyami had left out a washcloth, a small packet of soap, and a toothbrush for him. Izuku smiled and used the utilities provided. It felt a bit strange to bathe in Tokoyami’s bathroom. Izuku had showered and bathed in many different areas throughout his life. Often, the places he stayed didn’t have a shower or a bathtub, so he had to find the nearest large pool of water to bathe in. And he had gotten to stay at Kacchan’s house, which had a nice bathroom, with a shower that seemed to sparkle around him. But Tokoyami’s bathroom was small with black towels, a black rug, and a white and gold tub that seemed strangely opulent amongst the wooden decor of the rest of the dwelling.

The opulence felt strange, and Izuku couldn’t seem to settle down.

He missed Kacchan’s bathroom.

He missed his home.

He wondered what it would be like to have his home be Kacchan’s, or Kacchan’s home be his. Being able to go home every night and see him there, curl up next to him, smell Kacchan wherever he turned. The thought of it curled warm in his chest, before he started thinking back to his current apartment and how vacant and abandoned it felt without his mother there. The warmth in his chest flipped over into an empty cold feeling, and Izuku’s heart felt suddenly small and alone, to have such a warm possible future be so distinctly far away from this desolate present.

Tokoyami’s house was imbued with the emotions and energy that Izuku wished inhabited his own apartment. He wondered if that was because of Tokoyami’s parents, or if it was the sort of feeling that any house gained after having years of loving tenants inside.

When Tokoyami and Izuku finally settled down to sleep—Tokoyami on his pallet, and Izuku on a cloistered bundle of blankets that would serve as his bedding for the night—it was the first chance
Izuku found where he could question Tokoyami about his family life. Most of the night had been spent lightly chatting over dinner or discussing meditation techniques, so they actually hadn’t talked much about Tokoyami himself since lunchtime. And after meeting Tokoyami’s parents and spending time in his house, Izuku had some questions.

The ceiling of Tokoyami’s room was filled with fake stars, glowing in the dark. Dark Shadow’s form was once more a static thrum, three feet away. Izuku was surrounded with darkness. And somehow… somehow, that made it okay to ask, questions swimming around at the edges of his consciousness, mixed together with imaginations and daydreams. Could a life like this be something Izuku could have with the pack? If so, how did mates fit into all that? How did you share your life in different ways with different people? It was hard to draw lines inside a circle.

“Hey, Tokoyami?”

His friend shifted over in his sheets, turning onto his side so that he could face Izuku instead of the wall. “Yes, Midoriya?”

Izuku chewed at his lips as he traced the edges of the shadows on the ceiling. The longer that he sat in darkness, the more forms he could make out. He thought back to the wolves and their antlers. He thought about the three trees that supported the house and the bedroom they were going to sleep in. Three trees acting as a symbol for his parents’ bond. “Do birds have mates?”

Tokoyami paused. A fan whirred in the corner of his room, circulating the air to prevent a stagnant rest. “…mates?”

Izuku nodded his head, though he doubted Tokoyami could see. “Yeah, like the concept of mates.” He hesitated before adding, “Wolves have mates.”

Tokoyami didn’t deign that tidbit with a response.

Izuku pulled his appropriated bedsheet up closer to his face, his thumbs running across the fabric. “I thought I understood how mates work, but apparently that’s not how everyone works? Like… your dad and your two moms. That’s three mates. And my old pack leader made it seem like there were only two. But maybe that was just a wolf thing?”

Tokoyami didn’t ask about what Izuku meant by ‘pack leader’ or ‘wolf thing,’ instead gazing into the abyss… which was probably his chest of drawers or something. “Hmm. Or perhaps that was merely the truth for him. Every soul is different.”

Izuku nodded his head. That made sense. Although it didn’t help him figure out his own situation. And it didn’t really answer his question, either. “What about you?” When Tokoyami took too long to answer, Izuku reworded his question. “Do you think you have several mates out there, or just one?”

Tokoyami stayed silent for another moment before he spoke, his voice low and stilted, unsure of itself. “I… find it difficult to imagine having even one.”

Izuku rolled over into his side and looked in the direction of Tokoyami, confused. “You do?”

There was another moment of silent darkness before Tokoyami responded. “Ever since quirk users became the majority, finding another person who is… physically compatible, in a romantic sense, has been documented to have become increasingly difficult.”

His intellectual answer sounded forced and reminded Izuku, vaguely, of something Tenya would
say. But Izuku couldn’t claim to understand what he was talking about. “What do you mean?”

A clock ticked from the dresser. Two seconds. Ten.

“For example, not every human has lips or hands or eyes. The ways in which one shows affection can be difficult if two people do not share the same form.” Tokoyami huffed, his voice growing softer and more quiet, as though afraid someone else would overhear. Dark Shadow’s form was faced away from Tokoyami, for once, staring avidly at the wall and pretending he didn’t have an opinion on the conversation. Or maybe he didn’t know if he would be allowed one.

Izuku hummed as he struggled to comprehend why the shape of one’s form would matter. Maybe because Tokoyami didn’t have lips? Izuku nibbled at his lip. “So, um... if I wanted to kiss you, it wouldn’t feel the same for you because you have a beak?”

Another pause. Tokoyami laughed self-consciously under his breath before continuing, hesitant and much too self-aware. “Yes, any physical alterations in appearance have the potential to be linked to alterations in sensory reception. My feathers might be more sensitive than the skin on your head, or it could be the opposite.”

Izuku nodded into the darkness, though no one except Dark Shadow could see, and he was turned away. “So how would you find that out?”

“...what?”

Izuku nuzzled his head into a borrowed decorative pillow of Tokoyami’s. It had a moon stitched into the cover, which reminded Izuku of the wolves, but it scratched at his cheek unpleasantly. Izuku made a face. He didn’t like scratchy things; they reminded him too much of a face-full of gravel and dirt, the course sand from the mermaids’ cove, shards of glass in his cheek. Izuku turned the pillow over and lay his cheek against the softer side.

Much better. “How would you find out what felt good?”

Tokoyami paused. His voice continued as a stunted whisper. “I suppose, every person has to find that out for themselves. It is likely a process of trial... and error... and honesty.” He trailed off.

Izuku pursed his lips together in debate. Trying out new things to figure out what felt good? Like kissing. Or cuddling. Or being cradled in a blanket of warmth, surrounded by multiple people. Izuku thought back to the lunchroom several weeks ago, when he was wondering how Dark Shadow felt to the touch, whether he was warm or cold. He hummed in remembrance. “Like you and Dark Shadow.”

“I, um... what?” Tokoyami stopped halfway through his answer. His tone of voice sounded somewhere between incredulous and strained.

Izuku laughed nervously in return. “Oh, I uh, well... there was this time when I wanted to know if Dark Shadow was warm? And if he shared your body heat? And then, um, in the cafeteria, I kind of ended up in your lap and Dark Shadow was behind me, and it felt like a warm cocoon, which was, uh, really nice? And then tonight, when I held your hand, that, uh—that was nice, too.”

At first, Tokoyami didn’t respond. A few seconds passed, dark eyes searching through the darkness for hidden expressions. “You... enjoyed that?”

Izuku nodded his head. “Yeah, it felt really good.”

“I... am glad.” Tokoyami didn’t say anything further, and the two of them were left in silence as the
clock ticked to sixty seconds.

The silence continued. A hazy sense of peace settled around the room as Dark Shadow remained quiet for probably the first time that night (other than during the meditation).

It was… nice.

Izuku’s eyes had adjusted, and in the darkness, he was better able to see the edges of Tokoyami’s feather, where his head met his pillow, Dark Shadow’s form beyond him. Izuku’s mouth opened and closed, hesitating on the question, not wanting to disturb the peace that had settled around them; but the niggling of curiosity wouldn’t leave. Izuku’s hands itched with the need to feel and touch, and his curiosity was still getting the better of him. “Hey, uh, Tokoyami?”

“Yes, Midoriya?”

Izuku licked his lips to wet them, still uncertain whether it would be obtrusive. Everyone laughed at him like he was weird when he did stuff like this during class, but Izuku couldn’t help wanting to touch, to feel, to know. And Tokoyami seemed much more likely to respond now than during school.

“Can I touch your feathers? The ones, uh, on your head?”

The room was dark around them. A car light flashed through a slit in the curtains, and then receded, plunging them back into darkness. Dark Shadow tensed at the brightness and then relaxed, settling down once more.

Tokoyami cleared his throat. “Why?”

Izuku shrugged, the sheets bunching up around his shoulders. “Because I want to.” He didn’t have any other ulterior motive.

Tokoyami was silent.


“… as you wish.”

Izuku smiled. He pushed up off his pillow and scooted over to where Tokoyami was sleeping atop his pallet. Izuku reached a hand out in the darkness, his fingers able to sense the heat from Tokoyami’s skin before they were able to find his face. Izuku felt at the top feathers on Tokoyami’s head before his fingers trailed downward to his cheek area. “They’re really soft.”

Tokoyami’s eyes watched Izuku as the freckled teen trailed his fingers up to the tips of the feathers. Izuku couldn’t see much in the darkness of the room, since Tokoyami’s feathers seemed to fade into the night around them. That sense of peace from before, lying on the floor, returned. Izuku ran the backs of his fingers over the feathers, softly petting, before he moved to lightly pull at the tips of the feathers.

Trial and error.

Trying new things to figure out what you liked.

Touching the feathers made his fingers tingle, energy zapping up his arms and causing goosebumps to rise.

“Does this feel good?”
Tokoyami’s voice sounded somewhat strangled, in return. “I... yes. Yes.”

Dark Shadow snickered, but didn’t turn around.

Izuku smiled fondly at the forms he could barely make out in front of him.

“I really love your room. You’ve got a lot of cool stuff in here.”

Izuku dreamed of Shigaraki, again, and the couch in the bar. Shigaraki stroked Izuku’s neck with a thumb and three fingers. He told Izuku he was glad to have him here.

The same woman from before appeared, her taunting words reverberating around the room. Her figure remained in shadow even as a forest grew around Izuku and Shigaraki, surrounding and suffocating them. Eventually, the woman fell into the earth, her hand outstretched. Izuku never caught a glimpse of her face.

A small flame grew from where fingertips were last seen, but it burned small and low. Izuku wanted to cradle it close and protect it, just as much as he wanted to shove it away.

He was afraid of that flame. It was wrong. It wasn’t supposed to exist.

Still, the lonely flame was beautiful, and Izuku couldn’t help but mourn. Flowers grew on her grave.

All Might’s emaciated figure crouched down beside Izuku next to her headstone, his voice a lonely echo. “I wanted to make the world a peaceful place.”

Shigaraki sneered at him from the couch, which had become overgrown by the trees. His malice emanated from the undergrowth. “You’re what’s wrong with the world, All Might.” A severed hand lay discarded in his lap. “You made it complacent.”

Izuku shook his head. Complacency wasn’t evil, just as peace wasn’t good. There was a balance between all things. “Nothing’s wrong with the world, Tomura. The world… just is.”

And then the small flame grew, spreading to the grass around it. Izuku gazed at it sadly. All Might put a hand on his shoulder. Soon, the entire forest was burning.

“It isn’t your fault, the way things turn out. We can only try our best.”

Before Izuku could answer, All Might’s emaciated figure lit up in flames so bright that Izuku had to shield his eyes. A cry tore out of his throat and tears rushed to his eyes. “No… All Might!”

The hero stood tall even amidst the flames. He smiled, as though everything would be okay. But it couldn’t be okay because he was burning. “It’s alright, young Midoriya…” He looked sad and alone, but his smile withstood the testament of flames. “Because… I am here.”

Before Izuku could grieve at the loss or rage at the fire or reach out to help, he woke up.

He was surrounded by darkness, shivering and breathless and confused. He turned over on his side and searched the dark surroundings for Tokoyami’s form. He was thankful that he at least had gotten to escape the nightmares of the alleyway, but this dream disturbed him more than those nightmares. He couldn’t make sense of Shigaraki being there, especially detached as the dream was from the
other one with Kurogiri and the mermaids. And what happened to All Might? Was this a dream? Or was it something more?

Although the image of the blazing fire plagued him, Izuku was honestly more disturbed by the inclusion of that woman again. The woman he couldn’t see. The woman who always said the same thing. The woman who kept tormenting him, dream after dream, memory after memory, from one emotional episode to the next.

Izuku wondered who she was.

Where she was.

What had happened to her.

He had no memory of her, and yet she haunted his memories. She was tied up with his dreams about Shigaraki and All Might and whatever was happening with that couch and that bar. She was entangled in his past, knotted up between the forest fire and the screams, his old pack, their hands reaching out. How he had been unable to save them. How he would never be able to save anyone. How he would always be a danger, to himself and others. How he was cursed, or how he himself was a curse, he couldn’t tell the difference. Goosebumps raised up and down his arms when he thought about her voice, distorted, asking him if he knew his part in all this.

As if he could forget.

But there hadn’t been a woman there, during the attack on his old pack. Or had there? The memories blurred together sometimes, and in his worst moments, Izuku could never tell between nightmares and memories and things yet to come.

Who knew what was real.

Certainly not Izuku.

He reached out a hand in the darkness, searching for Tokoyami’s form. The backs of his fingers encountered the warm buzzing static of Dark Shadow. The shadow shifted and asked Izuku a question, but Izuku couldn’t figure out the words. He grabbed his blanket between his fist and scooted closer toward Tokoyami’s pallet. Izuku could feel Dark Shadow reach around, a warm static claw settling on his back, not sharp but present, pulling him closer.

Izuku sighed in relief. His shoulders relaxed.

He burrowed closer to Tokoyami’s warmth, seeking heat and comfort.

Tokoyami mumbled something, but Izuku was asleep again before he could understand what was being said.

Izuku woke up at 3 a.m. to a text from his mother.

It was going to be a couple more days before she could come home, but she was alright. She was safe.

She told him to be careful.
Izuku wondered what from.

Classes on Tuesday went by rather uneventfully, and Izuku spent the lunch period humming between Bakugou and Kirishima. The same song had been stuck in his head for days. The backs of his fingers grazed Kirishima’s beneath the table, and it made his heart skip three times longer than when he held Tokoyami’s hand. Kirishima sent him a soft grin, face angled downward and huddled near Izuku.

Bakugou looked across Izuku to Kirishima, his gaze deliberative.

Kirishima blushed.

Izuku fingered the wolf pendant in his pocket, still hesitant to part with it. He nibbled his lips as he hesitated a glance over at Bakugou. He wanted to give it to him, but the time had to be just right. He couldn’t just give the pendant to him at the lunch table.

Bakugou clenched his fists on the edges of his lunch tray. He looked away, not intending to stare at anything in particular until Sero’s stupid shifting overly-large elbows caught his eye. Bakugou scowled. Then frowned. Then shoved another bite of curry rice in his mouth.

Kaminari and Ashido laughed on the other side of the lunch table, caught in their own hijinks. Jirou turned around in her seat to poke fun at Kaminari’s blustering. Yaoyorozu soothed her with a few words, and Jirou blushed. Kaminari teased her, right back, only for Ashido to slap him upside the head.

Izuku pushed away his hesitant thoughts and focused on the feeling of warmth and contentment, being surrounded by Kacchan and Kirishima.

Tenya passed by with his tray of food half-uneaten.

Izuku felt a bit more cold.

At the end of the last class period, Todoroki took a long time to pack up his things. Izuku had the feeling he was doing it on purpose, so that the rest of the class would file out before noticing that he was intending to follow Izuku home.

Izuku wondered if he even should take Todoroki home to his apartment. Izuku hadn’t been back since Saturday morning, and he needed more clothes—especially if he was going to be camping out again tonight, like he was planning to.

(Bakugou had left Sero’s tent in the locker room, and Sero had forgotten to take it back to the classroom after the last period… so it was basically free game.)

(That was Izuku’s going theory, at least. He had already grabbed the bag and placed it by his leather
Tonight would be the first time that Izuku brought a classmate home with him. It felt... odd, for that person to be Todoroki. He had wanted Tenya to be the first one, because the other boy had been the first of Izuku’s peers to invite Izuku into his home and make him feel like part of the family, wanted and embraced.

Izuku supposed he had also been allowed in Todoroki’s home, as well, albeit unwittingly and unwillingly. Maybe Todoroki should be allowed in his, after all. An eye for an eye. A home for a home.

Izuku felt nervous. His fingers rubbed against the cloth strap of his bag as he waited for Todoroki. Kirishima came up behind Izuku and nudged his shoulder with a friendly grin. The flash of shark-like teeth distracted Izuku from his thoughts. “Hey, you waiting on Todoroki?”

Izuku nodded, torn between watching Todoroki pack his bag with slow deliberate movements and turning toward Kirishima. He settled on the latter, but his eyes soon found themselves constantly refocusing on the glint of canines behind Kirishima’s smile. His fingers itched to run over the edges of Kirishima’s teeth, to press his fingers into Kirishima’s grin. It was a strange urge, and Izuku didn’t know what to do with it.

“Are you, uh, walking to the station together? I could come with.”

Izuku quirked his lips back at Kirishima, looking up at his eyes instead of his teeth. Big red eyes, less bright than Kacchan’s but larger than Tokoyami’s. “Sure! Todoroki’s coming over to my place. I haven’t been back since Saturday morning.” He wondered if that was too much information. He felt strangely nervous, talking to Kirishima while waiting for Todoroki. More strangeness. Was this because of the weekend?

“Oh, he’s going to be at... with you? Oh, that’s, uh, that’s cool, man.” Kirishima nodded and bobbed his head at nothing in particular. “Are you...” he trailed off, before letting out a nervous laugh. He scratched the back of his neck and averted his gaze, his posture screaming bashful. “Are you still figuring things out? With people, I mean.”

Izuku thought back to their conversation on Kacchan’s bed, right before he told Eijirou he liked him. He guessed that was what Eijirou was talking about. “I think that might take a while,” Izuku offered softly. He thought about Tenya leaving. He thought about what it would take to make Tenya stay.

Kirishima glanced over Izuku’s head to stare at Todoroki, who had finally finished packing his bag. Todoroki raised his eyes and stared back, his expression impassive. A few stands of his red hair fell in front of his eye, obscuring half his vision from Kirishima’s inquiring gaze.

A shiver raced down Kirishima’s spine, and his heart began to race. Direct eye contact with Todoroki always did that to him. Kirishima broke eye contact with Todoroki and laughed self-consciously, his eyes finally settling on Izuku’s attempt to balance two bags on separate shoulders. He didn’t ask about the second bag. “So... did you do the Lit homework?”

Izuku looked up at him in confusion. “The one that was due today?”

“Oh, uh, yeah... that one.” Kirishima blushed. He’d forgotten they had already turned it in. What a stupid conversation starter.

Izuku didn’t seem to notice as he smiled and nodded his head. “Yeah, Kacchan and I did it together.”
“Awww, lucky! Bakugou’s the best study partner,” Kirishima whined. Although ‘best’ was debatable. Kirishima often came away from his Bakugou study sessions with an increase in both bruises and reflex timing, from the amount of times Bakugou would try to hit him with a pencil or grind his forehead into their study table if he got something wrong.

Izuku hummed in agreement. “Tokoyami’s pretty good, too. And Dark Shadow plays with Popsicle.”

Kirishima’s eyebrows furrowed, thinking back to the lunchtime conversation from the day before, when Izuku said something about his mom still not being back home yet. “Wait, did you actually end up going over to his place? What’s up with your mom?”

Todoroki’s silent steps approached, and Izuku felt more than watched as Todoroki passed him by.

Izuku shrugged. “I don’t know, she’s doing something? She’ll be back in a couple days.”

“Are you okay on your own?” Kirishima asked, before a flush spread over his cheeks. He waved his hands in front of him. “Not that I don’t think you’re fine on your own! I just, uh…”

Izuku shifted one of the bags to rebalance it on his shoulder. He followed behind Todoroki as the other teen seemed to ignore their conversation and forged ahead toward the front gates. “I miss her…” Izuku started. “And it’s kind of lonely… but I’ll be okay!” He smiled up at Kirishima, trying to seem like it bothered him less than it did.

Todoroki’s backward glance suggested that maybe Izuku wasn’t that convincing.

Oh well, it wasn’t like Izuku was acclimatized to lying.

Everything didn’t come naturally for everyone.

As they walked to the station, Kirishima gradually walked closer and closer to Izuku. At first, their fingers barely brushed. Izuku laughed at something Kirishima said while Todoroki blazed a silent path forward. Then it was their lower arms meeting, with one graze, then two. Kirishima smiling down at him.

Todoroki stopped them at a traffic light, pretending not to watch as Izuku leaned over to nuzzle Kirishima’s shoulder while he recounted Popsicle and Dark Shadow’s antics from the night before. Todoroki’s eyebrows furrowed. He stared the walking signal down.

Before the next traffic light, the front of Izuku’s arm was basically plastered to the back of Kirishima’s arm, their fingertips linking bashful tether hooks to each other before reverting to barely-there brushes of skin. A warm flush spread up Izuku’s side as something strange happened in Izuku’s chest, a curling glow unfurling and reaching its tendrils out into his bloodstream. It made Izuku want to do things, but he couldn’t figure out what they were or how to name them. Izuku wasn’t certain whether he wanted to crawl on top of Kirishima and cuddle with him on a bed or whether he wanted to drag Todoroki down onto a couch with Kirishima next to him or whether he wanted to drag everyone over to Kacchan’s house into a pillow pile.

He wasn’t sure why his instincts kept leading him to include Todoroki in the matter, either.

Hadn’t the other boy expressed his disinterest in joining the pack? Or had he never answered Izuku’s plea? Izuku had asked Todoroki during one of their visits…

Izuku barely noticed the time pass, and he suddenly found himself walking down the steps of the train station. Kirishima looked back and forth between Izuku and Todoroki but shook his head
before saying what he was thinking. Izuku wished he would just say it. He hated it when people didn’t say what they were thinking. He wasn’t very good at guessing what was happening in someone else’s head.

Todoroki seemed to have some notion, though, because he nodded back at Kirishima.

Kirishima scratched the back of his neck, laughed, and waved goodbye.

Izuku wished he could invite the other teen back to his apartment along with Todoroki… but they couldn’t discuss what they needed to discuss with him there. Hell, Izuku wasn’t even certain he could discuss what needed to be discussed with Todoroki there, and that was probably going to prove problematic once they started.

The next fifteen minutes passed in silence, all except the creaking of the train and the whistling of metal against concrete walls. Someone was playing music on their headphones. Someone else turned the page of a paper. Footsteps. Apologies. Todoroki staring at the ground. Todoroki staring at a small child holding her mother’s hand.

Izuku wondered if he was allowed to get close to Todoroki. Izuku could count on one hand the number of times he’d actually touched Todoroki, physically. He liked to touch Todoroki whenever he was, er, visiting him in his bedroom… but those interactions were never solid, Izuku’s hand having to settle for hovering above skin. He’d gotten to feel Todoroki’s body next to his during the USJ attack, but Izuku tried his best not to remember that day. It never left him feeling good. They’d also gotten to fight during the Sports Festival and the battle trial at the beginning of school, but fighting wasn’t the same as… touching, or whatever you called it.

Getting close to someone. Feeling them out. Figuring them out. Figuring them out, with you.

Izuku looked down at his clenched hand, the hand that had touched Todoroki’s chest the day before, outside the classroom. He’d felt something then, though, hadn’t he? A connection when his hand touched Todoroki’s chest. And then Todoroki had walked away.

Izuku was beginning to think he had a complex with people walking away. It made him feel empty and alone. It made his throat close up. It made him want to shut the closet door and hide away, but he was claustrophobic and he couldn’t do that.

He wished everyone would stop walking away.

Todoroki lurched forward and braced his arm against the wall above Izuku, the train jerking to the side.

Half of him blazed warmth toward Izuku, while the other half shivered cold.

Izuku reached a hand out, settling the palm of his hand on the cold curve of Todoroki’s hipbone. His fingers found the juncture of Todoroki’s lower back through the fabric, and then Izuku’s brain immediately stopped functioning as a buzzing feeling pervaded his senses.

Todoroki’s cheeks flushed, and he pushed away from Izuku, turning around so that his back was facing the other teen. The opposite side as before now emanated heat, and Izuku shivered at the temperature differential imparted as a result of Todoroki turning around.

Izuku withdrew his hand, shaking his thoughts back into order, feeling off-kilter and at a loss. He wanted to clench a fistful of Todoroki’s shirt in his hand, to make certain the teen wouldn’t leave again.
He thought of Tenya. The classroom door shutting in Izuku’s face. Tenya shaking his head because he didn’t want to hang out. Tenya walking away.

The urge to wrap his hands in the folds of Todoroki’s blazer got stronger.

Izuku clenched his fists and stared at the ground, trying not to cry. The sounds of the train passing through another tunnel whirred around them, as Izuku berated himself. Kacchan was right. He didn’t have control over his emotions. He should be better. Better than this. He needed to do that grounding meditation again. Izuku wondered why its effects had worn off so quickly. Not even a day, and already he was ready to cry again.

Would Todoroki let Izuku touch him? Would he always turn away?

The train lurched. They had reached Izuku’s stop.

Izuku tilted his head at Todoroki, a wobbly grin stretched out over his lips, as he pushed past three other passengers and out into the the train station.

They walked toward Izuku’s apartment, both bags bouncing against Izuku’s shoulders.

Todoroki didn’t say a word.

It was… stranger than Izuku had expected, to have Todoroki standing next to his bed and looking at his Eraserhead and All Might posters.

Izuku didn’t know which part of it was the most strange. Any other teenager being in his room? That boy being Todoroki? The weird tingling sensation that would spread out over Izuku’s arms, neck, and back from prolonged exposure to Todoroki’s stare?

Given the chance to choose what they did next, Izuku would probably pick ‘sit down and stare at Todoroki’ over any sort of conversation. There was just this… thing between them. It didn’t feel like they needed words, even though too much silence would likely just make Izuku feel sad. In order to feel comfortable in any given social situation, Izuku needed either touches or words, and he wasn’t getting either yet. If Todoroki would just let Izuku touch him and not walk away, then they probably wouldn’t need to talk at all.

But at the same time, they really did need to talk.

Because… what on this wide green earth was happening to them? And why to them? Why between them, when it wasn’t between anyone else?

“This… you live here.” The way Todoroki phrased that statement sounded somehow like a question, and Izuku blushed at the slight incredulous tone to Todoroki’s voice.

“Oh, yeah?” Izuku looked around his bedroom, wondering what was phasing Todoroki. “We, um, sort of travel light?”

Todoroki turned toward him. “What does traveling have to do with this?”
Izuku shrugged and fiddled with the edges of his blazer. His bag felt like a dead weight as it rested against his leg. “My mom and I never, uh, we never really live somewhere for too long. We’ll probably move again in a couple months.”

“Why?”

Izuku averted his eyes from Todoroki’s probing stare. There wasn’t a way to explain it without discussing the danger that Izuku brought with him wherever he went. But if he and Todoroki were connected… did Todoroki need to know about the danger? What did he need to know? Were they connected? There were too many questions, and nowhere was the correct place to start.

Izuku shrugged. Best to be honest, as much as you could. “There are some things I can’t talk about.”

Todoroki tilted his head in response before looking away. “That makes two of us.”

Izuku wondered what Todoroki couldn’t talk about. He wondered if it was related to Todoroki’s dad or the distance that Todoroki always seemed to put between himself and his peers. Izuku supposed it didn’t matter. If they really were connected somehow, then Izuku and Todoroki would likely learn each other’s secrets in time. There was only one secret that had a time limit, that they needed to discuss tonight before it got more out of hand.

“So… our connection.”

Todoroki narrowed his eyes at Izuku, his mismatched gaze probing Izuku’s reactions as the freckled teen fiddled again with his blazer. Izuku swallowed and shrugged his blazer off. The room was bound to get warm with both of them standing there.

Todoroki turned to face him. “Is it because of you?”

Izuku tilted his head curiously as he dropped his blazer on the trunk at the foot of his bed. “What do you mean?”

Todoroki’s shoulder lifted in a partial shrug. “I have never encountered something like this before. I did some research, but there are no recordings of this phenomena. And you… your quirk is strange.”

True enough, Izuku figured. He didn’t want to expound on the ‘why’ of that, though. “I, uh… some people in my family have had similar things happen to them. So maybe it’s, uh, genetic? Possibly? But they still describe it happening differently than we, uh, than we seem to be experiencing.”

Todoroki lowered his head in thought. He walked over to the window, a sunset only just beginning beyond the buildings in the distance. “And what are you experiencing?”

Izuku swallowed, his mouth dry. “What are you experiencing?”

Neither of them wanted to offer the information first.

Eventually, Todoroki sighed, and they ended up sitting down next to each other on Izuku's bed and drawing out a flow chart of events on some scratch paper. When this had first started (Izuku didn't mention the tengu claws, just a vague reference to a power boost), what they had been doing when it happened a second time (going to sleep?), and what had happened the third time (Izuku really had to stumble his way through explaining that one; the tengu's meditation stone aside, Izuku still didn't understand what happened).

Afterward, Izuku sat huddled over his legs as he recounted what he found in his ancestors’ journals, making certain to leave out the parts about how magic could be involved. In total, only two of his
ancestors had ever mentioned something close to what they were experiencing. Izuku’s Aunt Lilia (his mother’s aunt) and his grandmother. They both had found their soulmate during their life and, whenever they were parted, they would dream of what they’re soulmate was doing at that time. If their soulmate was dreaming as well, then they could share they dreams together.

In a way, it sounded romantic.

Alternately, it sounded completely terrifying. If Todoroki was his soulmate and not just some soul connection/brother-bond sort of thing… Izuku was afraid of bringing Todoroki into his dreams. What if Todoroki saw some of his visions? What if he saw Izuku's past? The pack? The demons? And if that wasn't bad enough, what if Todoroki had to wade through Izuku's nightmares? He didn’t want to do that to the other teen. Izuku hoped it wasn’t going to happen. He hoped he was wrong.

Todoroki made a note that they should both keep a dream journal, so that they can keep track of whether something seems out-of-the-ordinary.

Izuku stared down at the blanket on his bed, silent and considering.

Hadn’t he dreamed of Todoroki, recently? A young boy on the couch with a lady that looked like his mother. Same white hair. Same eyes.

Well, eye.

“Assuming that this is a quirk trait you inherited from your mother’s side of the family… what do you want to do about it?”

“Uh, what?”

Todoroki turned his focus on Izuku, heterochromatic eyes piercing in their gaze. “You seem to be close with Kirishima. And Bakugou. You touch them constantly.”

Izuku gulped, his mouth drying out.

“Do you have romantic notions toward them? Or is that a part of your pack behavior.” Todoroki used the word ‘pack’ as though it were distasteful or somehow strange in his mouth.

Izuku chewed at his lower lip. “I’m, uh, still trying to figure that out?” He flitted his eyes up toward Todoroki before looking away, Todoroki’s gaze spearing through him like an ice javelin. “Mr. Aizawa told me to spend time with everyone that I, uh, think that I like? And to choose whoever makes me happiest.”

Todoroki made a noise in his throat, his expression closed off behind a barricade that Izuku couldn’t seem to subvert. Except at nighttime. Except when they were visiting each other in their beds. Except when they were both already quiet and emotional and trying to figure out their place in the world.

Todoroki didn’t ask Izuku who made him the happiest, but the unspoken question hung in the air.

Izuku answered it anyway. “I’m not sure, yet. So far, everyone makes me happy, and it’s all in different ways, so it’s hard to, you know… figure out what that means.” His hands flailed around during his explanation before settling helplessly in his lap.

Todoroki continued to stare at him.

A tingle traveled up and down Izuku’s spine, around his neck, up toward his jaw. Izuku clenched his teeth and blushed. Being near Todoroki for a prolonged amount of time was… difficult. The other
boy made Izuku feel like he was bound to jump out of his skin at any moment, his skin itching and shivering even as Todoroki’s gaze made heat creep along his chest and up toward his shoulders.

“Well…” Todoroki tilted his head, then looked away to stare at the drape of Inko’s string lights above her bed. He clenched his jaw. “I wouldn’t want to get in your way.”

Todoroki got up, as though to leave.

And Izuku couldn’t help it. He couldn’t stop the words as they tumbled out of his mouth or make the tears stop pricking at his eyes. He couldn’t stop his hand from reaching out and grasping at Todoroki’s pant leg, begging him to stay. “Please don’t leave.”

Izuku didn’t know what he was saying.
He didn’t know why it mattered.
He didn’t know why the thought left him upset.
Everyone goes away.

Todoroki stared down at him, eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “I… am just going to the restroom.”

Izuku blushed. Oh. Oops. He let go of Todoroki’s pants. “Yeah, uh, okay. Down the hallway.”

Todoroki was gone for ten minutes. When he got back, he sat down on Izuku’s bed so that they could continue sketching out a plan of how to test their connection so that they could gain a better control over it. Izuku thought the whole exercise was a bit pointless. His experience with this ability was that it came out of nowhere and couldn’t be controlled… but more power to Todoroki, if he wanted to try.

After a few minutes of planning, Todoroki turned to him. “Have you ever tried meditating?”

Izuku tried his best not to laugh in Todoroki’s face, but he couldn’t really help it. The past twenty-four hours seemed to be one need for meditation after another.

Todoroki raised an eyebrow as Izuku wiped a tear from his eye. Todoroki’s cheeks were dusted with a light pink hue, as though he was blushing. But Todoroki didn’t blush, did he?

Todoroki cleared his throat. “That was uncalled for.”

Izuku smiled up at him dopily, positive emotions still thrumming through him as he leaned unconsciously into Todoroki’s side, a shy smile tugging at the corners of his lips. “Sorry, it’s, uh… been a weird couple of days.”

Understatement of the year.

The plan was to go to sleep every night and try to focus on each other. Todoroki would text Izuku before bed, and then they would both imagine each other’s presence while meditating their way to sleep. If they could learn to consciously control their ability to visit each other while sleeping, then the theory was that they could transition that feeling into possibly controlling astral visits to each other during their waking hours.
Izuku didn't voice his doubts. It would either work, or it wouldn't. Izuku honestly wouldn't be surprised either way.

Izuku hoped Todoroki wouldn’t ask too many questions if he found out that Izuku was going to camp out for the next few nights until his mom returned. Izuku just didn’t feel comfortable in the apartment without his mom. He wasn’t certain what part of that feeling was the emptiness of the place, the creaking floors, the cracks in the walls... and what part of it was that same feeling that someone was watching him or following him. But every time Izuku turned around, there was no one there. Each room in the apartment seemed to echo every miniscule noise, and the reverberations crawled up through his arms and made him shiver, made his heart feel alone even as goosebumps prickled across his arms. Popsicle’s snake form really wasn’t helping, since it enhanced Izuku’s abilities to sense vibrations. The neighbors that lived above them kept doing something involving bouncing and creaking. Everything in the apartment felt strange and off and wrong.

So he left.

Izuku ended up camping in the same spot from the other night with Kacchan, since it was already warded. The tent seemed colder without Kacchan there to warm Izuku, so Popsicle actually deigned to sleep inside the sleeping bag with him in wolf-form. That was a bit warmer.

Before Izuku went to bed, he went through the motions of his meditation with Tokoyami. Grounding his body and mind, drawing energy from the earth. Izuku had been correct. It definitely felt stronger and more powerful when he was actually connected to the ground, rather than up in a house in the middle of some trees.

He wondered what Tokoyami was doing, now. He hadn’t found much opportunity to talk with him today.

The grounding meditation left Izuku feeling like he was buzzing with energy. He wrapped the sensation around him like a blanket, playing with the edges of his aura with his fingertips. Popsicle huffed at him and nuzzled his armpit.

They slept well.

Wednesday dawned, and Wednesday passed.

Sero didn’t ask for his camping gear back.

On their way to lunch, Tokoyami asked about Izuku’s meditation practice. Shouji joined the conversation.

Kirishima threw an arm around Izuku and laughed at something Kaminari said. Tokoyami stared at Kirishima’s arm. Izuku smiled and nuzzled at the curve of Kirishima’s jawline. Kirishima choked on air, stumbled, and fell to the floor, dragging Izuku down in a mad dash of limbs with him. Tokoyami and Dark Shadow teamed up to prevent the two fools from hitting the floor. Bakugou sneered and rolled his eyes as he passed. Izuku laughed. Kirishima blushed. Shouji used two hands two drag them out of Tokoyami and Dark Shadow's arms; he pulled out two more arms to help place each teen so they were standing on their own two feet.
Kirishima scratched the back of his neck and grinned. “Sorry about that, Izuku.”

Iida’s head whipped around from five feet forward to stare at Kirishima’s casual use of Izuku’s name.

Izuku continued to laugh and forgave Kirishima, going so far as to reach out and lightly graze Kirishima’s hand.

Iida turned back to face forward, full of self-recrimination. His friend was moving on without him. He felt both proud of Izuku’s ability to form strong bonds of friendship… and jealous that he wasn’t the only one using Izuku’s name anymore. He shook the thoughts away as inconsequential. Tensei was important. Figuring out how to become Ingenium was important. Doing homework was important. The rest… it could come later, when he had the time.

Izuku stopped by his apartment for dinner, scraping together some rice and soup. He felt eyes on his back, but no one was there. Paranoia prickled his arms and neck, so he took two buses and camped outside with Popsicle in the same area as before, safe under protection wards.

He meditated. His body buzzed.

Popsicle nuzzled him.

He fell asleep with Popsicle’s wolf form pressed against him underneath the covers.

He dreamt of Tenya and Todoroki smiling at him, in a bright white room. Everyone was safe.

After the ease of Wednesday, Izuku honestly thought he was doing better. His emotions seemed to be more stable. He wasn’t freaking out. He was starting to feel more grounded, and whenever he touched one of his packmates during class, that seemed to work as an instantaneous grounding ritual on its own. As though touching pack just… calmed him down. Soothed him.

It was nice.

So Izuku figured… why not meditate before he went to school? That way, he would be able to focus in class and not have to keep on hand on Kacchan’s shoulder while writing notes with his other hand. The ink on Izuku’s notes kept smearing from how much contact he tried to keep with Kacchan… so pre-school meditation might be a good way to solve that. And to make Bakugou stop scowling at him.

Theoretically.

Of course, Izuku also hadn’t meditated near someone else since Tokoyami, and that was up in the middle of a tree house, so he couldn’t really be blamed for not knowing that meditation apparently did something to him. Specifically his eyes.

Izuku had barely made it to his homeroom—only noticing off-hand that Mr. Aizawa had made it to
class earlier than usual and actually seemed to be writing something on the board—and finished putting his bag down, when he was accosted from behind. A hand clamped around his neck, and Izuku froze up, wondering what was happening, wondering who was grabbing him…

Only it was Mr. Aizawa, and he was forcing Izuku to keep his head down while marching him out of the classroom, down two hallways, and into the faculty lounge that Izuku had visited way too many times.

Izuku wondered what was wrong, but he was afraid to speak. He didn’t want to make his pack leader angry. When your pack leader dragged you somewhere by the neck, you stayed down, and you shut up, and you did what you were told and only spoke when spoken to. That was the rule.

Shouta’s voice was somewhere between Eraserhead and Mr. Aizawa, professional yet potentially deadly. “What have you been doing?”

Izuku had no idea what he was talking about, but betas answered the pack leader when questioned. Izuku tried to fall to his knees to plead forgiveness, but Aizawa kept a hand on Izuku’s chin that forced him to look into Aizawa’s eyes.

In Aizawa’s irises, Izuku saw something green glowing back at him. Wait… were his eyes… glowing?

“Your eyes are more vibrant than usual. Do you know what could be causing this?” Aizawa sounded exasperated, now, as though he didn’t want to be dealing with this.

Izuku felt his lip tremble, not wanting to disappoint his teacher. “I, uh, I don’t know?”

Aizawa narrowed his eyes. “Has anything changed in the past several days? Have you done anything different?” He leaned further away to peer at Izuku’s eyes from different angles. “I thought your eyes seemed more vibrant yesterday, but they are significantly brighter today. Have you done any rituals?”

Izuku shook his head. Then paused, a creeping realization overtaking him. “I did start meditating at night in the forest, though. And I meditated before school today?”

Aizawa nodded his head and let go of Izuku’s chin. He closed his eyes, sighed, and pinched at the skin between his eyebrows. He pointed over at the couch. “Go lie down. Try to reign in your power, problem child.”

Izuku shook his head, even while he kept his eyes closed.
“So why were you meditating there?”

Izuku felt his body settle down, the muscles around his eyes and eyebrows relaxing. He didn’t think twice before answering truthfully. “My mom’s been out of town since last Friday, and I didn’t like being alone at home, so I’ve been camping in the woods.”

Aizawa didn’t respond positively to that, at all. After Aizawa berated Inko’s parenting abilities and Izuku explained that he was originally staying with the Bakugou’s and Izuku’s mom now had to stay wherever she was for a bit longer… Aizawa still didn’t look happy. Especially when Izuku showed him the text message that his mom sent him on Monday night, telling him to be careful.

Aizawa didn’t like the way she had phrased it. He asked Izuku if he felt safe in his apartment.

Izuku didn’t know how to describe the strange feeling of being at home, of someone watching him but no one being there, so he just told Aizawa that no, he didn’t feel safe.

Aizawa told Izuku that he was going to check the apartment for dangers, so Izuku should wait for Aizawa after school before heading home to his apartment together.

The thought settled nervously in Izuku’s stomach as the rest of Thursday passed. His pack leader was going to see where he lived… just like Todoroki a couple days before. Two people in Izuku’s apartment, when previously it had only been him and his mom. Were the blood stains still obvious? Would Mr. Aizawa care? Would he worry about the sparse furnishings, like Todoroki had?

Bakugou told Izuku to stop worrying his lip, and Sero flashed him a friendly supportive smile.

Izuku got through the day.

He got through the day.

Aizawa, it happened, didn’t think Izuku’s apartment was safe. He got the same strange feeling of someone watching the apartment as Izuku did. He made Izuku pack up a bag with enough clothes for several days, and then they took five buses too many in order to verify that whoever could have been following them from Izuku’s apartment would be bound to lose them in the confusion. Aizawa brought Izuku to his own apartment, and unlocked the door while speaking to what sounded like Present Mic on the phone (if the high-pitched shouting was anything to go by). Aizawa called the person on the phone ‘Hizashi’ and told him they’d be having a guest at home for the next few nights.

Izuku peered around Aizawa’s shoulders into his apartment, taking note of a brown suede couch, a table, and a television, as well as some pillows and blankets thrown into large baskets, as though someone couldn’t seem to collect enough of them. A smell wafted out onto the hallway, like black pepper and earl grey tea. Izuku hadn’t had earl grey tea since he lived with his old pack.

The scent warmed him with memories, and he smiled shyly up at Aizawa as his teacher led Izuku into his apartment, paranoid enough to keep peering around the corners of hallways for any intruders. Izuku set his bag near the door and shuffled further into the apartment. There was a small kitchen,
what looked to be a bathroom down the hall, and two bedrooms.

Did Eraserhead live with Present Mic? He said 'home,' as though the apartment belonged to both of them.

If that was true, Izuku's mind didn't quite know how to comprehend it. Although he supposed there might be several pro-heroes that lived with each other… maybe it was safer that way? Izuku could understand safety in numbers, having someone there to watch your back in case trouble appeared. If he had a choice in the matter, Izuku would like to live with Kacchan. And maybe Kirishima. And Tenya. Maybe Tokoyami? Or Todoroki?

How many bedrooms would that be?

"Midoriya."

Izuku raised his head up to meet Aizawa’s stare. The man gestured with his head toward the room on the right. “You can stay in that room tonight.”

Izuku nodded his head, shifting the heavy bag on his shoulder and walking into the room in question. Aizawa went into the other bedroom and shut the door. The sounds of a shower began moments later, so he was likely a "clean first, then eat, then sleep" sort of person. Izuku liked to eat and then shower, otherwise Popsicle would sometimes lick the smell of dinner off Izuku in the night. Izuku didn't like waking up to wet patches on his shirt from wolf licks.

While Aizawa was busy, Izuku surreptitiously crept around the apartment to place protective stones. The protective wards took less than five minutes to place, and Izuku settled down on the couch and pretended to have been working diligently on his homework the entire time.

Aizawa, stumbling out of his bedroom with a towel around his shoulders and loose black pajamas, didn't seem to believe him. He stared Izuku down for the three minutes it took for Izuku to bow his head and admit that he set up wards. Aizawa smirked in victory at how quick Izuku's broke down. He patted Izuku's head as he passed him and went into the kitchen.

"Do you like ramen?"

Izuku soon confirmed that Aizawa, while a great martial artist, was a terrible cook. Izuku split his dinner with Popsicle, once Aizawa left the room, and Popsicle pouted at Izuku like he was a traitor. Izuku shrugged. Sustenance was sustenance, when needs must. Popsicle grumbled and ate his share. Their bellies, at least, were partially full.

An hour later, Izuku also confirmed that Present Mic did, in fact, live with Eraserhead.

Also, from the way Present Mic hung off Aizawa’s shoulder… Izuku was pretty certain they were mates. And that Present Mic was some kind of angel, because he brought with him some dinner bentos from the store. Izuku shared his bento with Popsicle, too. That made Popsicle smile.

Present Mic pouted from the sidelines, upset that his bentos were being given to a dog. Wolf. Familiar.

Aizawa patted his roommate's head like he had done well.

Present Mic slumped down amidst the pillows of the couch, his head nearly disappearing between his outfit and the pillows encapsulating him on either side.

And for the first time in his life, Izuku heard Aizawa laugh.
Hello, everyone!

I was going to finish the Aizawa home life scenes in this chapter, but then the chapter would possibly be 2x longer, and I just... didn't want to deal with that. Especially since I keep rewriting the Tokoyami scenes, and I need them out of my hands pronto so I stop editing. So! More Aizawa next time. I've got shenanigans planned for Eraserhead/Present Mic and Izuku. Just need to get in the humor mood to write it. Then Inko comes home, and we are on to the hero internships with Sir Nighteye, which I've got the intro sketched out for already. So we should be getting some action in the next couple of chapters.

As always, let me know what you did or didn't like! I figure the Tokoyami spend-the-night thing will be either hit or miss, with folks. I had that planned for a while, as a potential Izuku relationship path that he decides against taking (probably). Re: the tag for "Dekubowl." Let me know if you want more TodoDeku next chapter before we head off for internships. I haven't decided how often to mention their nightly attempts at connection.
The brief bit of camaraderie didn’t last long.

Aizawa left for his evening patrol, leaving Izuku under Present Mic’s care, and Izuku had already finished his homework, so he didn’t have much to occupy his time with. Instead, he looked around the apartment from his spot on the couch and eyed Present Mic has his teacher meandered in and out of the room. Izuku didn’t have that good of a read on Present Mic. The blonde man, while friendly and amusing during class, hadn’t really been there emotionally or physically for Izuku. Hadn’t been there to protect him. Hadn’t been there to keep his secret safe. Hadn’t mentored him, to help Izuku fit in with his peers. Hadn’t offered him advice or protected him from both villains and demons alike, putting his life on the line for the pack.

No, Present Mic was nothing like Mr. Aizawa.

But he was still a teacher and a pro-hero, and Tenya said that all the U.A. teachers deserved the students’ respect and attention. Therefore, Izuku didn’t consider it strange to peer over the couch, intently focused on Present Mic’s trek around their pack leader’s domicile. He wondered how the blonde teacher fit in with Aizawa’s life. Did they always share the same home? The same meal? The same bed? Izuku’s eyes tracked the way Present Mic knew exactly where the trash can was, where to place the chopsticks after cleaning them, the correct cupboard for the glassware. Izuku watched as Present Mic hummed to himself and pattered around the kitchen in the plain white shirt that typically was obscured by the black leather jacket of his hero costume. Black pants, studded red leather belt, long blonde hair up in a ponytail. His teacher looked cool, even when half-stripped out of his uniform. Izuku wondered if his own uniform would transition that well from hero work to civilian life.

Which then made Izuku wonder about whether his own hero work would ever be able to transition toward a civilian life, or if Izuku would always need to be in costume and prepared for the worst. He didn’t like to imagine wearing casual clothes that didn’t have some sort of pocket to hold his stones.
All his life, Izuku had worn a pair of pants or shorts with big pockets that he could easily reach into to fetch his stones.

Did other students not have to worry about that? Were they able to just wear whatever they wanted? Throw on any old pair of jeans or pants or a shirt and just… walk ahead without fear.

Izuku shook his head and refocused. Present Mic had finished circling around the kitchen and returned to the couch. Izuku sat huddled beneath two layers of blankets, his head turning to rest on the back of the couch like a pillow. Present Mic let out a sigh as he propped his feet up between them on the cushions and turned on the television. Some news report flashed on the screen, detailing the fallout from a villain incident this morning. Izuku shifted his attention to the screen. Present Mic started offering occasional commentary as they proceeded to watch the report together.

Neither of them decided to mention that they were waiting on the couch for Mr. Aizawa to return home, safe. The unspoken anticipation hung over the couch like an aura, suffusing them both with an odd sort of watchful relaxation that had Izuku shifting and twitching in turn, before curling his body closer toward Present Mic for comfort.

A couple hours passed like this. One news reel. The next. Present Mic’s comical narration. Izuku’s random bouts of laughter. At one point, Izuku even started joining in on the commentary, his chest flooding with warmth and acceptance. Beneath him, the couch felt like a cloud. The stress and worry of the day bleeding away into the cushions.

Eventually, Present Mic reached the end of his ability to browse through news reports and ignore the peculiarity of their home situation. He muted the news (which now sported talk of post-U.A. Sports Festival merchandise sales) and turned toward Izuku with a surprisingly hesitant expression on his face.

Present Mic’s fingers twitched on the arm of the sofa as he looked over their temporary ward, who had moved much closer to him over the course of the past few hours. The kid was still bundled beneath blankets, but their shoulders shared the same back cushion, so he seemed to be relaxed enough to handle some questioning. It was probably safe to fish for some level of information from the kid, but he kept his voice low enough to avoid frightening animals.

“So, Eraserhead never said why you’re staying here tonight.”

Izuku turned toward his teacher with wide eyes. “Oh, uhh, my mom's been away? And it didn’t really feel safe at home? I told Mr. Aizawa, and he didn’t think it felt safe either, so he told me to pack my stuff and come here.” He nodded his head at the end, as though verifying his own answer had been correct.

Present Mic smiled. That did sound like Shouta. Always paranoid. He decided to keep the conversation more casual. “Where did your mother go to?”

Izuku shrugged and looked away. “She’ll be back soon.”

Or rather, Present Mic had been intending to keep the conversation casual until Midoriya began evading his questions. The boy even broke eye contact and stared up and to the right, and Aizawa’s voice reverberated in Present Mic’s head about how 'Mr. Midoriya was a poor liar and they needed to train that out of him, given his circumstances.' Present Mic bit back a sigh as he watched Midoriya try to give a non-answer. Not only was he being obvious about it, but it was also one of the strangest circumventions that Present Mic had heard in a long while. And he dealt with petty villains and poor excuses on a weekly basis.
Midoriya’s mother would be back soon? What was that supposed to mean?

Now, Hizashi Yamada was not above badgering someone until they came clean. In fact, it was his primary tactic in dealing with Shouta after a day full of teaching and patrolling. That man could glare and dodge and tell half truths with the best of them.

So Yamada smiled at his student winningly and nudged the boy’s shoulder with his own. “Glad to know she’s on her way.” Even though that wasn’t exactly what Midoriya had said, it would hopefully distract him from the fact that Yamada was about to repeat his question. “Where was she?”

Izuku’s eyes shifted to the right again, his teeth beginning to attack his lip as the pitch of his voice shifted. “Somewhere.”

Another lie.

This time, Yamada was saved from having to interrogate the kid further by the entrance of Aizawa from the bedroom. Wait—when had he gotten home? And managed to take another shower?

“Does she often go somewhere, and leave you on your own?”

Aaaaand here comes Shouta, with his amazingly astute observations that come from seemingly nowhere! Seriously, Yamada wasn’t certain how Shouta had managed to sneak in, shower, and listen into Yamada’s conversation with Midoriya without either of them hearing him. If Yamada didn’t know about the other teacher’s actual training techniques, he would suspect Eraserhead was a ninja.

But that conversation was for another time. Yamada flashed a pleased grin at Shouta (he made it home safe, he didn’t seem to be wounded) before redirecting his attention to the shifting form of Izuku Midoriya, first year and general confusing entity among the staff of U.A. Who apparently had a mother who sometimes left him at home alone. Question mark on the ‘sometimes.’

At some point, Midoriya had also started blushing, as though he was embarrassed over something.

“I’m usually with someone…” He trailed off, not saying anything more.

Which to Yamada meant yes, Midoriya's mother not only abandoned him, but did so often enough that he was acclimatized to having external caretakers. Although with the way Midoriya seemed to curl up on their couch and make the blankets his second home, Yamada couldn’t exactly claim to be surprised. People didn’t generally get this relaxed in other peoples’ homes unless they were used to having to make whatever home they were introduced to into their own.

Aizawa sat down on the arm of the couch next to Yamada, his arms folded and his gaze hooded. Yamada watched him out of the corner of his eye. Something on Shouta's patrol must have displeased him, for his body to be hunching over like that. Yamada wondered what it was.

Midoriya squirmed in his seat, oblivious to whatever else could be driving Aizawa’s interest in the conversation.

Aizawa raised an eyebrow and decided to hammer the point forward. “And why does she go away?”

“Because we’re… you know.” Midoriya looked like he was ready to bolt, his fingers clenching and unclenching in the mound of blankets that cocooned him into the cushion with Present Mic. He was also raising his eyebrows as though to emphasize…

Oh.
There was a pause. No one said the word.

Aizawa rolled his eyes and took the bullet, his tone gratingly sardonic. “Witches?”

Midoriya nodded shyly, his body language screaming ‘deer in the headlights’ and ‘get me the hell out of this conversation.’

Aizawa pinched at the skin between his eyebrows, and Yamada stifled a grin at the way it made Aizawa purse his lips in turn. He loved it when Shouta made that face. “And what does you being a witch have to do with it?”

Yamada shifted his head to watch Midoriya shrug, once again, his head falling down so that his eyes were focused somewhere around the folds of his blankets and Yamada's black pants. “We can’t stay in one place… it’s not safe.”

His emphasis on the word ‘safe’ was both obvious and disconcerting at the same time.

Yamada looked up Aizawa, who was nodding as if this was all normal behavior. A student who was… what, on the run? Always moving? Because apparently he was a witch and that made things dangerous?

Aizawa’s dry response revealed his equal incredulity at their student’s circumstances. “So your mother leaves you in one place while wondering away somewhere, and that makes you safe?”

“It’s hard to explain…” Midoriya trailed off. It was obvious he wasn’t about to say more.

Yamada wondered if Shouta had any additional information or background to deal with this than he himself did. He hadn’t been there for the initial discussion between the principal, Midoriya, and Aizawa. Yamada had been caught up on most of their antics and worries after the fact, but he was still largely in the dark about what this whole ‘witch’ thing had to do with the boy's life or even how the boy's supernatural society interacted with the world that Yamada lived in.

Aizawa narrowed his eyes. “I wasn’t aware that witches had to be on the constant move.”

Midoriya shrugged again, as if this was all normal. As if his teachers should understand. “It’s not safe otherwise.”

Yamada and Aizawa shared a look, but Yamada was the one to raise the question. “And who told you it wasn’t safe?”

Midoriya raised his eyes, not hiding behind his answer this time. “My mom.”

That was definitely the truth.

Aizawa caught Yamada’s eyes again. Yamada tilted his head, implicitly asking whether this sort of behavior sounded normal to Shouta. The other man shook his head, slight enough that Midoriya probably wouldn’t pick up on it.

Definitely not normal, then.

Although Shouta had only the most basic of introductions to the supernatural world, so the principal would probably know the best out of all of them.

Aizawa settled a hand around Yamada’s neck, which caused a shiver to race down his spine. Shouta wasn’t often very affectionate. He must be either very worried or very upset. “I feel like your mother
and I should have a chat.”

Midoriya unfurled his legs from beneath the layers of blankets, curious. “Do you wanna be her friend? She doesn’t have a friend. I think she’d like that.” Yamada knew that wasn't Aizawa's intention… and he was honestly surprised that Midoriya hadn't picked up on that fact, too. Yamada tried not to be surprised by the innocence in the boy’s voice, or the way Midoriya suddenly tilted his head and started speaking to himself. Guileless. Open. Much more open that students typically were, at his age. “But she doesn’t really like heroes, so maybe she wouldn’t want a hero for a friend.”

Yamada kept his posture relaxed, even though he wanted to whip his head around and raise his eyebrows at Shouta for confirmation. Combined with all of the boy's previous comments… something definitely felt wrong about this situation.

Being 'wary of heroes' was not generally a good sign, for a civilian.

Aizawa’s thumb clenched tighter on the muscle at the juncture of Yamada’s neck and shoulder. Yamada stiffened in his seat and watched the student-teacher exchange. Confirmed. Something was definitely wrong. Shouta felt it, too.

“Oh? And why does she not like heroes?”

“She says heroes are always in the spotlight, and the spotlight isn’t safe.” Midoriya smiled, as though sharing an inside joke. It sounded like the sort of debate he might have often had, with his mother.

“Your mother seems to find many things dangerous.”

Yamada could detect the hint of anger underlying Shouta's voice. He always was protective of his students. Well, the students that he didn’t expel. Yamada wondered if Shouta was more worried about the potential dangers to his student, or the constant state of fear that the student’s mother seemed to be raising him in.

Unknowingly or not, Midoriya worked to dispel their worries. “I think she tries to protect me, as much as she can, because I’m always the one protecting her.”

He had a smile on his face, still, but it was more bittersweet than before. If Yamada knew the kid better, he might have said that the kid looked sad. But he’d seen Midoriya crying and pleading with his mother on the faculty lounge floor. He had seen the mother’s fear. Heard them share code words signifying that she was about to take her son and run away, all over Midoriya’s true nature being revealed to a few of his teachers.

No, the kid wasn’t sad. He was just… much more open and contemplative than a typical student would be, sitting on his teachers’ couch, staying overnight in their apartment, cuddling with their blankets. Even Kaminari would have been more reserved.

Midoriya ran his hand against the back of the couch, fingertips brushing Present Mic's arm. The kid's smile gradually became strained. “There are… things out there, that she can’t protect herself against. But I can stop them before they hurt us, so I do, but she’s my mom, so she thinks that she should be protecting me instead. Not the other way around. Even though she doesn’t have the power to protect us.” Midoriya eventually shrugged and looked up at them beneath a flop of his bangs. “She does what she can, and I’ve never been upset at her for it.”

Yamada sighed. It probably wasn’t worth pointing out that it was Midoriya, not either of his teachers, that was suggesting the kid had a reason to be upset at his mother or blame her for anything.

Aizawa’s hand lifted off of Yamada’s shoulder, and the blonde pouted at the loss of contact. Aizawa
folded his arms and stared at Midoriya with heavy-lidded eyes, his tone authoritative but worried. “As a teacher, I do not generally like for my students to be in danger. Teachers, especially those at U.A., are supposed to be the ones to protect the students. Do you understand?”

Midoriya nodded his head slowly, as though he understood but there wasn’t anything he could do about the dangers existing. He then offered up another attempt at a reassuring smile. “It will get better when I turn eighteen.”

Which was poor enough, in terms of consolation. If anything, there being a time limit on whatever trouble Midoriya was in made the whole scenario seem more abnormal and dangerous. And maybe a typical civilian would be able to shrug off a goosebump-inducing response like Midoriya’s, but Aizawa and Yamada were pro-heroes. Good ones. ‘I will stop being in danger in three years’ was the sort of thing that kids reported to a hero agency. They didn’t just sit on a couch and admit to it with a reassuring smile after having fled their own apartment because they were being followed. Their mother didn’t threaten to drag them out of school, for it.

Where was the government oversight for this situation? And why the secrecy? And what were pro-heroes who were also teachers who were also a student’s temporary guardians supposed to do for the student in danger?

Yamada shared another look with Aizawa, who seemed to agree with the warning flooding through Yamada’s veins. Aizawa leaned further into Present Mic’s space, peering over at the boy. “And what exactly will happen when you turn eighteen?”

That one made Midoriya pause. And wait. His body shifting, as though he was debating if he could say anything about it. Yamada feared he might actually keep mum about whatever it was. It seemed like the sort of thing the kid would do. But Aizawa was here… and Midoriya typically admitted everything he could to his ‘pack leader’.

“That’s, uh… my majority. After that, they can’t turn me anymore.”

Which made everyone pause.

Yamada’s heart rate raised a few notches, and he felt Aizawa stiffening behind him. That sounded… ominous. And strange. And like something was definitely going on here.

Aizawa’s tone darkened. “Turn you?”

Midoriya nodded again, although it seemed hesitant.

Aizawa loomed further over Yamada’s shoulder, his leg knocking into Yamada’s arm. “And what, exactly, are ‘they’ trying to turn you into?”

Yamada hadn’t picked up on that inference. It was a good point. ‘They’ who?

Midoriya, bless his soul, kept an expression of complete seriousness when he responded, “Into something evil.”

Outside, rain started to fall. It hit against the rooftops, making the apartment seem less like a haven and more like a shield. Yamada wanted to run his hands through his hair and shake the kid back and forth. What was Midoriya afraid of? Who were ‘they’? How could ‘they’ turn you evil? Or was that just another of his mother’s ghost tales, repeated ad infinitum to keep her child frightened and under her wing?

Yamada tried to banish that thought. He didn’t know their circumstances. He shouldn’t get upset at
Inko Midoriya simply because she kept her son in line with a few warnings. Maybe she hadn’t even meant for the boy to take the warnings so seriously.

Aizawa pushed off the couch and walked over to where Midoriya sat huddled and curled up beneath blankets. Shouta looked sad, and it made Hizashi ache for him. Shouta didn’t get sad. He didn’t typically do emotions, in general. But Hizashi hadn’t seen him look this sincere since the night he and Shouta shared their first kiss beneath a bridge overhang in the dead of night.

That is to say, a long damn time ago.

“I have taught many students, Mr. Midoriya, and I have seen many personalities walk through my homeroom door.” Aizawa was kneeling next to couch, now, his hand upon the arm rest near Midoriya’s back. Still not touching his student, but offering his support. “You aren’t going to turn into something evil. You do not have the capacity for it.”

Rain continued to pelt the rooftops.

Yamada held back the urge to cry at how beautiful his Shouta’s concern for their student was. The only thing that held him back was the recognition that his sobbing would probably distract both of them and ruin the moment that Aizawa was creating.

Midoriya eventually nodded his head, his voice quiet and his eyes staring somewhere around Aizawa’s chest instead of up at his eyes. “I know.” The boy smiled to himself. “It’s all about choices. What someone chooses to do.” He looked up at Aizawa, as though seeking his validation. “And I choose to be good, to save, and to protect. And no one can take from that me. I won’t let them.”

Shouta nodded in approval, finally placing one of his hands on Midoriya’s head.

The boy smiled at Aizawa like he was the sun.

Yamada knew the feeling.

Yamada also couldn’t stop himself from bursting into tears, which then caused Shouta to sigh and shake his head and look over at him in exasperation. Midoriya peered over worriedly and asked, “Are you okay?”, his hands waving around in an attempt to aid and comfort his teacher while he shuffled his knees forward. It also caused Midoriya to tip over and fall off the couch in a tangle of limbs and fabric.

Aizawa snorted.

Yamada started laughing through the tears.

Midoriya blushed.

It was a good end to the conversation.

That night, Yamada went to bed and was able to lay next to Aizawa for the first time in almost a week. His partner hadn’t been feeling up to physical affection, lately, so Yamada had been contenting himself with curling up alone on their secondary bed and cuddling one of his various
stuffed animals (which he had collected from a range of amusement parks over the years).

Yamada missed getting to share a bed. He understood Shouta’s occasional aversion to touch, which could last everywhere from a few minutes to a few weeks. But it felt so good when Yamada got to curl up with the person he cared about. Crawling into bed that night, getting to trail his fingers over Shouta’s sleeveless shirt and down his arm, and curling up behind him… Hizashi had almost forgotten this feeling of comfort and warmth and home. Everytime he could reacquaint himself with this sensation, after being held at bay for so long, felt like a triumph. It lulled him into a stupor, and Hizashi was out before five minutes had passed.

He was jerked out of his slumber at around 2 a.m., according to the clock beside the bed. Hizashi had a brief second to wonder what had awoken him (he didn’t even remember dreaming). But then the mattress tilted near his feet, and his heart rate skyrocketed, and Hizashi opened his mouth in preparation to use his quirk on the intruder and stop whoever it was from breaking into his bedroom…

Only it wasn’t an intruder. It was Midoriya. And he was trying to crawl into Hizashi and Shouta’s bed at the ass-end of the morning. He was kneeling on the mattress and shifting from the edge of the bed to the middle near Hizashi’s feet. An arm arced over Midoriya’s head carrying a blanket, which then fell down on top of the boy. Yamada raised his head to get a better look, blinking blearily in the direction of his feet. It looked like Midoriya had grabbed one of the blankets from the couch. Yamada closed his eyes and rested his head back down on Shouta’s pillow, his heartbeat still racing from the encounter.

The danger having past, his mind grew hazy again with exhaustion. He still needed more beauty sleep. But before he could manage to succumb to the darkness behind his eyelids, Hizashi paused. He opened his eyes again and stared at the ceiling.

Wait… why was Midoriya joining them, again? Hizashi blinked at the ceiling in confusion. Students didn’t climb into bed with their teachers, right? That didn’t generally happen?

Yamada lifted his head again but—yeahhh, Midoriya was still there, and he seemed to have settled down and passed out in the thirty seconds it took for Yamada to get his bearings.

Hizashi’s head settled back down on the pillow, causing Shouta to shift in his sleep. His brain took a couple more seconds to function as his heartbeat slowed further to a crawl.

Midoriya was… in their bed. Sleeping at their feet. And the kid’s hand was… was it curled around Shouta’s foot? Or was that his own foot?

Hizashi twitched his feet, which seemed to have ended up somewhere around Shouta’s calf, but he couldn't feel any pressure on them.

So… Midoriya was definitely touching Shouta’s foot then. Hizashi’s face scrunched up in confusion. Was this one of Midoriya’s ‘werewolf pack behavior’ things, and Hizashi had somehow gotten pulled into the middle of it because of Shouta’s pack leader standing?

He would have to ask Shouta in the morning. Hizashi paused, the corners of his mouth twitching as he imagined telling Shouta that Midoriya crawled into bed with them because wolf betas apparently joined their alphas in a cuddle pile. The sheer notion of explaining the results of Shouta’s promises to Midoriya was hilarious. Hizashi turned his face into the warmth of their pillow and suppressed his grin in the folds of the fabric.

…oh, this was gold. Shouta wasn’t going to be able to live this one down. Hizashi would shout it
into infamy.

A frown appeared on Hizashi's mouth, aggravating the wrinkles on his forehead as he realized that this was also possibly harassment of some sort, since Shouta hadn't given the kid permission to join them in their bed. At the same time, Yamada felt guilty when he tried to label it that way in his mind. The kid wasn't trying to do anything impolite. He was just... inherently inappropriate with physical affection.

(Hizashi knew all about Midoriya and the awkward timing of his physical affection escapades. Hizashi had called the kid out multiple times for trying to nuzzle Bakugou during English class, not to mention Midoriya's recent forays into trying to hold hands with every other student in his class except Kouda. To varying degrees of success and reciprocation. Hizashi was keeping his eye on Sero and Kirishima's reactions to this new behavior, in particular.)

Still, though... comedic timing of Midoriya's physical and affectionate nature aside...

Shouta was going to be pissed.

Hizashi was frankly surprised his partner wasn’t already awake enough to kick the boy out of their bed. Hell, maybe Shouta was awake, and he was simply ignoring it all.

Hizashi let his head roll back so that he could stare at the ceiling, a smile on his face. He supposed, the more he thought about it, that he didn’t actually care that Midoriya had come and joined them in their bed. (Although a warning may have been nice, so Hizashi wouldn't have had to deal with the dregs of adrenaline that had flooded through his body at the thought of an intruder.) But the actual ramifications of having this little tiny beta (was it alright to think of the kid as a wolf?) in their bed... were honestly quite pleasant. Something about having a presence at his and Shouta's feet, curling against them and holding on for comfort... it felt strangely like family. And Hizashi hadn’t gotten to savor a feeling like this for a very long time.

The warmth in Hizashi’s chest was bittersweet as he tried to imagine days long since past, of crawling up on the couch with his mother and talking with her about what a great hero he was going to be one day. Of winding his small fingers in the folds of her dress and falling asleep on her lap and not waking until dinner, her hands still stroking through his hair.

It had been a long time since all of that.

A lifetime.

And Hizashi had almost forgotten what it felt like.

It made his heart ache.

In turned out that Shouta was, in fact, pissed. His first words upon waking were a groan next to Hizashi’s ear. “He’s like an amoeba.”

Midoriya’s arms were now completely curled around Aizawa’s feet, acting like Eraserhead’s Own Personal Spaceheater™.

However, Aizawa didn’t take his annoyance out on the kid. He just grumbled his way out of their
bed and into another shower, flooded his sleepy eyes with eye drops, and regretfully shuffled his way into the kitchen to make breakfast. Hizashi yawned and buried his face into the warm spot left on their shared pillow. He nudged their yawning student with his foot and nodded his head toward the bathroom, indicating that the kid should shower.

The boy nodded his head, flopped out of bed, and yawned on his way to the bathroom.

Ten minutes later, Midoriya was clean, and Hizashi was covering his eyes in horror because the kid hadn’t brought his school clothes into the restroom with him and was now walking around his teachers’ bedroom butt-naked instead of wearing pajamas.

Nooo... Whyyyyy...

Aizawa did decide to scold Midoriya for that one (after Hizashi wailed about being blinded and how he was going to be fired and why did the kid think it was okay to walk around his teachers’ apartment without clothes on!), causing the boy to droop sadly at the breakfast bar as he shoveled cereal into his mouth.

They all walked to school together, and Aizawa stuck Midoriya in a mini-detention at the back of the classroom for the next thirty minutes until his classmates arrived. Additionally, he wasn’t allowed to speak to his classmates (unless absolutely necessary for class purposes) until lunch.

For Midoriya, it was the worst punishment ever, but he learned his lesson.

No more walking out of a bathroom naked.

Aizawa spent his lunch period informing Present Mic and Principal Nezu about his recent visit to the Midoriya household.

He explained his observations—the threadbare dwelling, the cracks, blood stains, the general abandoned nature of the whole apartment. How the living room only had a small stained rug and a cardboard box that was dressed neatly enough to pretend to be a table. The opened cabinets in the kitchen. Two bed mats on the floor of the bedroom, two suitcases, two posters on the wall, a string of lights. And nothing more.

The apartment was barren. It didn’t feel as if anyone lived there, or had lived there in some amount of time… even though Aizawa knew his student had frequented the domicile at least once within the past week. All in all, it was a disturbing place for a young hero to be raised. If Aizawa hadn’t known the household belonged to the Midoriya’s, he might have anticipated it was the hideout of a villain. Aizawa had seen plenty enough apartments that looked just like this one, whenever he tracked down a villain who was on the run. But it wasn’t a hideout. It wasn’t a temporary home for a villain who changed apartments every few days while he fended off the law and heroes alike.

No, it was an actual home. A home for a hero in training.

But the apartment had not felt like a home, and that was probably what disturbed Aizawa the most.

Aizawa explained his concerns—that sinking feeling of someone watching the place, not being able
to ascertain who it was even though he sensed the eyes on them at every turn. Aizawa had been on alert from the moment he had set foot on Midoriya’s street, and his suspicious nature led to his hands reaching out and his capture tape fluttering around his neck in anticipation. He was ready to strangle or restrain any intruders from the moment he set foot through the door.

Both Yamada and Nezu agreed than Aizawa had acted in his student’s best interest by offering his own apartment as a place to stay until the boy’s mother returned. They also both shared his worry about who or what could be watching Midoriya's apartment. Nezu suggested checking the safety of all the other students, in an attempt to figure out if the danger was common among them or merely directed at young Midoriya. All of the U.A. teachers had been waiting for the fallout from the USJ attack, anticipating that the villains responsible would come again or possibly even narrow their focus to the students who had gotten away.

Aizawa, feeling protective and paranoid, agreed.

They sketched out a plan, and soon the other teachers would be assigned to check the living space of each of the Class 1-A students to verify that they were not being followed.

Even then… Aizawa couldn’t shake this nagging feeling that something was wrong about Midoriya's home life situation, specifically. He slumped on the couch in the teacher's lounge and stared at the ceiling, contemplating what he knew so far. Midoriya was reckless, but only in the bounds of the parameters his teachers gave him. After seeing his living space, Aizawa felt like he could understand that recklessness. Consideration and planning were qualities best developed in a stable environment. If what Midoriya had said was true, and if Midoriya and his mother's traveling habits were what Aizawa believed, then it was understandable that the instability of his environment had led to a certain recklessness in his nature. It also explained his ability to come up with ideas on the fly and react quickly to situations.

It seemed like he might have been raised in a way that demanded those skills from him, sheerly in order to survive.

Midoriya also had difficulties with understanding laws and the strict adherence that their quirk-laden society had to them, even though the boy could follow directions in class and was willing to abide by any rules that Aizawa set for him. That behavior and ideology could also have resulted from the way in which he was raised. Honestly, Aizawa was surprised the boy could listen to rules at all. Although Aizawa probably had Midoriya's previous 'pack leader' to thank for that. The structure of the werewolf pack he had lived with… well, it must have been the only stabilizing influence in Midoriya's life.

No wonder he kept trying to recreate the pack ideology with both the faculty and his peers.

But what did all those abnormalities add up to? Did Midoriya's personal circumstances set him outside of societal rules, which in turn drew the wrong sort of attention to him? Is that was caused the danger? Was the boy in danger? And if so, was the danger from his own supernatural world or from villains?

And most importantly, with how out-of-touch Midoriya was, both with societal laws and typical human customs… how was the boy supposed to become a hero, when heroes were expected to protect and uphold the laws? Upholding a law inherently required knowledge and understanding of that law, as well as of the expectations behind the law. Could Midoriya grasp that? Aizawa knew the boy had morals and was a good person, but those two qualities didn't always add up to a law-abiding citizen. Or a law-abiding hero.

The distinct urge to attach Midoriya and Iida at the hip, in the vain hope that the latter’s obsessive
adherence to the rules would rub off on Midoriya, resurfaced in Aizawa’s heart. Or perhaps attaching Midoriya to Todoroki would be better. Todoroki had the added benefit of being clever enough to decipher any hidden meanings behind things Aizawa implied but did not directly say.

Yes, maybe that would be a good pair. Aizawa couldn’t keep an eye on the kid all the time. Midoriya’s peers would have to do, for now.

Aizawa sighed and sank further into the couch.

He had a bad feeling about the students’ hero internships, next week.

Midoriya was either going to do something terrible or something wonderful, and Aizawa wasn’t actually certain they wouldn’t be the same thing.

Katsuki Bakugou had been sending furtive glances over his shoulder all day. Deku was being quiet, and the silence from the desk behind Bakugou was so abnormal that it actively destroyed his focus during his first two class periods. He eventually shrugged it off with a growl and sparked some explosions in the palm of his hand to let off some steam… but the wrongness settled in his gut, and he swore to himself that he would corner Deku before lunch.

Except Sero seemed to have the same idea.

As did Kirishima.

All three of them ended up stopping together with Izuku at the classroom door, hesitating, waiting for each other to bring it up.

*Why wasn't Deku talking? Why wasn't he looking at them?*

Bakugou raised an eyebrow at Kirishima, who flushed and looked at Sero, who raised an eyebrow back at Bakugou.

He was the *alpha*, wasn’t he?

Izuku refused to look at any of them. He simply stared at the ground while biting his lip and shifting from foot to foot. Eventually, Aizawa had shooed them out, and they had gone to lunch without answers.

Bakugou probably would have blown something up in his frustration if the behavior continued into sixth period, but Deku seemed to be perfectly fine talking after lunch. As if a switch had been turned on, and then… boom, Aizawa was nodding his head, and Deku was back to babbling nonsense and nuzzling Bakugou’s shoulder and trailing his fingers against Bakugou’s back.

And fuck anyone who thought they were allowed to say anything about it, but Bakugou felt his shoulders relax as he paid attention to the board.

Whatever had happened… things were back to normal again.

Or whatever this weird new ‘normal’ was that had developed between them.
By the end of the school day, Izuku hadn’t received any more texts from his mother.

Aizawa didn’t say anything, but Izuku could sense that his pack leader was worried. Even Present Mic was shooting Izuku strange glances on their walk home (which only involved four buses this time, because one of the terminals was underground and difficult to navigate).

Izuku wished he had more to offer them, some piece of information that would make their concerned expressions fade away. He wondered what was disturbing them more—his mother’s lack of contact, his apartment apparently being watched, or yesterday’s discussion about his ‘majority’ and the dangers he was under until he came of age. Aizawa hadn’t said anything to him this morning, other than to institute his no-speaking punishment and to explain why Izuku was being disciplined.

But both of his teachers had been paying attention to Izuku all day. Over breakfast. During class. On the walk home.

Izuku felt their eyes on him.

He wished they would just talk about it. Ask him questions, even if they made Izuku uncomfortable. Even if the questions made him want to run away, or made his tongue tie up in knots from what he wasn’t allowed to say.

He didn’t like this silence.

Silence never ended well.

And then the night came.

(The pack's saying reverberated in Izuku's brain: "The day was long, but the night is here. And the night is where we are free.")

Midoriya had gone home with Aizawa and Yamada. The teachers kept their eyes on the corners of buildings, covering each other’s blind spots, ready for an attack that never came. The group erred on the edges of sidewalks, searching through dark alleyways and up above the rooftops. They shuffled quickly from bus stop to bus stop to apartment door and kept Midoriya between them at all times.

Entering the apartment and shutting the door behind them felt more like shirking off a heavy coat than coming home. Suffused with the paranoia of his teachers, Midoriya had clutched at the back of Aizawa’s shirt. He had held onto the shirt tight enough that it had become dislodged from Aizawa’s pants, a corner of it hanging uselessly in Midoriya’s grasp. The three of them had stood, protected by the four walls of the apartment, and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

Whatever was happening out there, in the rest of the world, it wasn’t likely to touch the three of them for the rest of the night.

Aizawa had traded his nightshift with another nighttime hero, willing to forego his usual patrol in return for protecting his newly gained ward. After the conversation at lunch, Yamada had chosen to do the same. So now they were both in their apartment with a little green-eyed trouble magnet
between them, debating whether to shower or eat or patrol the perimeter.

They ended up deciding to take shifts on all of the above.

(Except for cooking supper. Aizawa wasn’t allowed to touch that. Being capable of pouring a bowl of cereal didn’t mean he could navigate an entire meal.)

Midoriya offered to make something from whatever was left over in the cabinets and fridge, and Yamada agreed wholeheartedly. Aizawa still kept an eye on the kitchen, waiting for something to explode.

Nothing exploded.

Dinner was actually rather good. Apparently there had been some frozen tuna in the freezer? And more than enough ramen bases and spices to create a decent soup broth. Yamada patted his stomach after supper in sheer delight, his other arm splayed out on the back of the couch behind Aizawa. Midoriya sat on Yamada’s other side, sitting cross-legged and balancing a bowl with one hand and feeding Popsicle with the other. They talked about Midoriya’s Art History class that happened earlier today, where there had been a discussion about how modern art was influenced by each age of heroics. Yamada was strangely passionate about the Silver Age, while Aizawa knew a perturbing amount about contemporary heroic art in the Bronze Age. Izuku giggled his way through the conversation and learned more from that discussion than he’d been taught in the class itself.

It was 9 p.m. when they collectively decided to stop discussing each subsequent ‘age of heroes’ and head to bed. And it would have been a good night. It could have been. The warmth of a full stomach, the lingering salty aftertaste of the broth, a cup of matcha tea in front of each of them. Aizawa and Midoriya burrowing under various blankets and looking for all the world like twins or brothers or father-and-son. (Yamada made certain to take a picture, and he even managed to avoid Eraserhead’s capture tape as the other pro-hero tried to steal his phone and delete the picture, Midoriya laughing all the while.)

So yes, the potential for an altogether amazing night had been there.

But then Inko Midoriya appeared knocking at the door.

And then Inko Midoriya fell through the doorway and rushed to the couch, where she pulled her son’s face into her hands. The woman looked almost dead to the world, kept awake solely by the desperation in her eyes and the fear in her grasping hands. Her ponytail was in disarray, and the bags under her eyes and pale face told tales. Aizawa almost felt sympathy for her. She looked around the room, barely giving Aizawa or Yamada any consideration beyond brief glances at their expressions and the empty bowls of food on the table. She ran her fingers through her son’s hair and whispered more passcodes that had the boy nodding and his teachers sharing concerned looks. She wanted to take her son home with her.

Screw sympathy. Aizawa settled for glaring at her, all his instincts for danger screaming at him that something was wrong or about to go wrong.

Still, the woman was the boy’s mother, and she had the legal right to take him wherever she wanted. Aizawa probably wouldn’t have said anything. She moved to collect her son. Asking him to gather his bag. Shuffling him away from the couch. Watching the walls of the apartment as though something could come creeping out at any second.

Aizawa probably would have allowed her to take his newly accepted ward and head off into the night. (Sure, he might have donned his goggles and followed them home, certain to keep to the
shadows—but he would have let her leave, at least. He would have given her the option.)

But then the boy returned to pick up something that had fallen out of his pocket in the couch (one of his stones?), and he looked up at his mother from where he was half-sitting on one of the cushions, searching through the crevices of the couch with one hand. His wolf sniffed at Ms. Midoriya’s leg.

The boy tilted his head and looked up at his mother without judgement, his tone curious. “Mom, Popsicle says you smell like blood. Are you hurt?”

Aizawa would have let her leave with her son… until that statement raised every single goosebump and hackle that Aizawa had on his body, and then he was most certainly not letting the mother leave with her child. Not while the child was still, somewhat, under his care. Not when the kid was already in danger as it was.

And even more suspicious was the way the mother’s eyes darted first to Aizawa and then to Yamada before putting on a strained smile and pulling at her son’s arm. “Not now, Izuku. It’s fine.”

Aizawa was starting to get an inkling where Mr. Midoriya’s poor evasive techniques came from. He cleared his throat. “I find myself seconding my student’s concern. Are you bleeding?”

Inko narrowed her eyes up at him, from where she was crouching next to the arm of the couch and trying to hurry her son along. “It’s just a scratch.”

“And where did you get this scratch?”

She shifted her gaze away from him and back to her son, who was beginning to look perturbed by her deflection. She patted at his green hair soothingly, staring at the curves of his cheeks, running a hand down his arm and checking for wounds. Eventually settled, Inko breathed a sigh of relief and hesitated a glance over at Aizawa and Yamada.

She took a few more seconds to measure her words, picking the appropriate ones for the situation. Both of the teachers knew about Izuku, after all. “I had to do a blood to blood spell. It’s the only way to locate someone protected behind wards, and when I couldn’t find my son…” She trailed off.

Aizawa’s eyes shifted to Izuku, who blushed in turn.

(Izuku had never texted his mom that he was staying with Aizawa, so the only way for her to find him at Aizawa's apartment was a location spell. And only the blood to blood spell would work, given the wards that Izuku had erected the previous night.)

Aizawa narrowed his eyes. He had known the wards the boy created were for protection, but the kid hadn’t mentioned how strong they were or what they could do. Aizawa made a note to ask him for clarification, in the future. Actually, it should be a personal rule for dealing with Midoriya: always badger him for clarification. Otherwise things like this tended to happen.

Izuku shrugged off the reference to his wards and focused back on his mother, his tone concerned. “Popsicle says the smell is stronger than that. Blood to blood’s just a prick.”

Aizawa’s list of questions, apprehensions, and outright paranoia grew. He stood up and rounded the couch in an effort to approach Ms. Midoriya and determine where (if anywhere) she was wounded. It didn’t take long to find. She flinched away from his approach and steeled her eyes, but Aizawa saw the damp cloth at the back of her shirt. Sticking with much less elasticity than a simple swath of sweat would cause. Her back was injured and bleeding, or had been injured and she had bled. He couldn’t be certain without further questioning.
He mimed reaching out to touch her back, but she stood swiftly and backed away from him.

She may as well have admitted her guilt. Even she realized that, soon enough.

The woman looked pale and worn, as though she’d spent too many nights awake and never managed enough rest. Aizawa knew the feeling. She wore the pallid color well, enough. She kept her back straight and her mouth in a stubborn line. Her eyes kept flicking down to her son, and Aizawa could at least appreciate the ‘mother lion and her cub’ feeling he was getting from the pair of them. Her dark green hair was the same shade as her son’s, but she seemed to have aged a couple years since he had last seen her a couple weeks ago.

He wondered at the change.

He also wondered what on earth it was going to take for at least one person in the Midoriya household to tell him the truth and admit to whatever danger was following them. He was a pro-hero. He was the boy’s teacher and worked at a school of pro-heroes. If there was anyone to share a secret with, especially when that secret involved direct danger to a student and that student’s parent, then Aizawa was the one who should be told.

Thankfully, the woman seemed to have realized this as well. She sighed and walked over to the window, turning her back away from them. It took a few minutes, but she eventually explained her week away in fragmented sentences. She would leave entire gaps of time out of her story, but the end result at least made cohesive sense.

Inko Midoriya had apparently been scouting another werewolf pack to the far north of Japan (she hesitated around mentioning there were only three packs, and Aizawa held his tongue from interfering in her story). She hadn’t wanted to tell her son about the potential of another pack until she had met with them and figured out what sort of pack they were. And apparently the new pack must have passed whatever test she set for them, because she shared a warm smile with her son that seemed to indicate that she was pleased from her discovery.

However, on her way back from the pack, she was attacked by something or someone. She wouldn’t give specifics as to who. Or how. But apparently she had held off whoever it was long enough for one of the pack to hear her being attacked and come to help. This necessitated her staying with the pack for an extra couple of days to heal and pay back the debt of protection by creating wards around the pack territory.

She artfully neglected to mention why her wound had seemingly reopened on her return journey or how she had traveled so long with no bags or belongings.

At the end of her tale (likely anticipating that Aizawa would have an exhaustive list of follow-up questions that she did not want to answer), she knelt by her son and told him it was time for them to leave. That it was time to go home.

Aizawa couldn’t tell whether she was sharing more secret code words or if she was actually intending to take the boy back to that blasted apartment, but he set his foot down quite spectacularly. He told her that under no circumstances would she be returning to that apartment. Mr. Midoriya practically began kneeling on the couch and baring his neck in submission, as the kid bobbed his head in acquiescence to his pack leader's orders.

The boy’s mother? Not so much.

Aizawa tried to explain in simplistic terms that the Midoriya apartment wasn’t safe and that he was absolutely certain that someone was watching the place, likely someone of villainous intent.
But the damn woman just smiled at him and said, “Someone’s always watching.”

Which was enigmatic and frustrating and precisely not what Aizawa wanted to be hearing. He wanted to hear a 'yes sir' and a 'right away sir,' not a complete disregard of his concerns for his ward and the boy’s family.

Thankfully, her son had more sense than she did. “Mom, it really doesn’t feel safe. I didn’t want to be there alone when you were gone, and I… I can’t imagine leaving you there alone during the day, either.”

He was visibly upset. His mother sighed and stroked his knee with soothing hushes and croons.

But she must not have really understood, because her next words were that “money was tight right now” and so she would “do what she could” but it would “take more than a night to find a new place.” Of course, if her son was willing, she emphasized that there was “one place” that they could go.

She didn’t say where, but she looked reluctant to go there.

Which to Aizawa just added another layer of secrets and evasions that he was increasingly tired of having to deal with.

“Mom, I don’t want to go back there. I won’t. I can’t.”

His mother stroked his hair.

Aizawa was ready to clear the coffee table of empty bowls with one fell swoop, just to make a crash loud enough that would make these dolts pay attention to him. Thankfully, he wasn’t one to let his anger or paranoia control him.

Well, he wasn’t one to let his anger control him.

Well, he could control himself.

“And what ‘one place’ are you speaking in code about now?”

The boy’s mother continued to ignore Aizawa. She reluctantly continued her offer. “Izuku, it’s the safest place there is. It’s where I grew up, and no one ever found me there.”

“Yes, they did. They found us both, and they appeared in the attic, and they ripped our lives apart, Mom.”

Nearing his breaking point, Aizawa attempted to interject. “Midoriya, who found you? Who are ‘they’? Is this the same ‘they’ you mentioned last night?”

Inko Midoriya’s eyes went wide, and she grasped at her son’s blazer with panicked hands. “What did you tell him?”

The boy shook his head, tears appearing in his eyes as he looked between his pack leader and his mother. “I didn’t tell them anything, Mom. I promise.” The boy started chewing at his lip. “I just told them about the danger and my majority, but that’s it.”

She shook her head, soothing the creases in his blazer back down with measured strokes. She looked sad and apologetic. “You’re just going to make them worry for you, Izuku. They can’t do anything to help.”
Aizawa interjected again, his narrowed eyes blazing fires at the woman on the floor. “Regardless, if whoever this ‘they’ found you in this ‘safest place’ before, then it is likely another ‘they’ can do so again. Although it would be preferable to not speak in code words for an entire conversation about things having to do with the wellfare and security of my student?”

The student in question nodded, tears slipping out of his eyes and down his cheeks. “I don’t want to go back there, Mom. Please don’t make me.”

She pursed her lips, caught in an internal debate. Her eyes glanced briefly at the walls and passed over the doorframes, searching for something. After a quick assessment, she refocused on her son. “We have to go somewhere, Izuku. We don’t have many options. You won’t go back to the apartment. You won’t go to our old home. You won’t leave your school, so we have to stay in this general area… the city’s getting smaller, and there are fewer safe places to go.”

It was about this moment that Yamada decided to enter the conversation. Ms. Midoriya couldn’t seem to place who the blonde-haired man was at first (his face looked considerably different without the sunglasses), but the timber and pitch of Yamada’s voice soon tipped her off. He was Present Mic. And he asked the room at large why the Midoriya’s didn’t just ask the school for protection. Apparently, there were funds set aside for students who had become targeted by villains, and those accounts acted to fund a Student Protection Service that offered relocation and housing benefits.

Izuku turned wide eyes on his mother and asked if they could do it.

Aizawa warned that the student would need to show probable intent of the ‘villains’ in question, and Aizawa’s word would probably only account for so much, since no physical attack had been made. At least not on the younger Midoriya. And they weren’t certain that the attack on his mother was made by the same people who were watching the Midoriya apartment, especially since Ms. Midoriya refused to say who attacked her or exactly where she was attacked or if she knew why.

The woman in question looked sadly at her son as she sat in Present Mic’s old place on the couch. She rested her hand on her son’s leg, and she at least looked apologetic when she sought to let him down. “That program sounds like it is there to help students being targeted by villains. But there aren’t any villains after us, Izuku.” She paused, her smile strained. “Weren’t you the one telling me, last week? There’s a difference in what we face. Villains, at least, can be saved.”

And then it was like a switch had flipped. Izuku turned on the couch and knelt next to his mom, grasping her hands in his. His eyes wide open with intent. His voice pleading. “They can be saved, too, Mom. They’re like me. They just made different choices.”

The woman shook her head and shared a fond, exasperated glance with Aizawa. As though trying to say, *See what I deal with?* He didn’t return the sentiment. He was more confused about how the conversation had flipped from ‘where should we live to avoid danger’ to ‘how do we save someone from themselves.’ Aizawa wasn’t able to follow the boy’s brain, sometimes. And he needed to put another box in his checklist of things to discuss with Mr. Midoriya at some later date.

She turned back to her son with a sad smile. “We’ve discussed this before. These people can’t be turned back. You can’t think of it that way, or you’ll never be able to protect yourself from them. Their choices made them what they are.”

*Choices.* The word stuck out to Aizawa, and he recalled Midoriya mentioning something similar last
Inko Midoriya raised her hand to pet her son’s hair, curling his bangs behind his ears with a forced smile on her face. “You’re such a good boy, Izuku. And you’ll make such a wonderful hero, with that big heart of yours.” Her smile fell. “But not everyone can be saved. Not everyone deserves to be.”

Aizawa had the dawning intuition that it sounded like the woman was speaking about herself. But he didn’t have any proof, other than a similar furrow appearing between Yamada’s eyebrows and a quick shared glance of concern.

“Everyone deserves to be saved, Mom. Everyone.”

Aizawa felt something in his heart clench in response (the boy was a fool, he was such a fool, how could Shouta teach him otherwise). But before he could interject and try to shine light on this new avenue of conversation… Inko Midoriya began crying. Between one second and the next, a hand was covering her mouth as she tried to hold back her sounds. Tears poured out of her eyes as she shook her head, trying to will them away. And then, in the span of three seconds, her son was the one attempting to comfort her, and Aizawa was gaping at the pair on the couch, uncertain how to react. What to think. What to do.

On one hand, his student apparently had a heart of pure gold (no real surprise there), and it was likely going to get him killed unless Aizawa could curb his absurdly heroic tendencies. On the other hand, his student’s mother… something was going on there, and he needed to get her away from her son and preferably into an interrogation room in order to figure out what. But whatever her story was, it seemed complicated. She was obviously torn up over something (something she’d done, or something she’d chosen?), and they were both in danger, and it had all been happening for a very long time.

This wasn’t the sort of thing you could just barge into. Aizawa wasn’t even certain he had the right…

If it had just been some family drama or mother’s guilt over the past, then it wouldn’t be his place as a teacher or a hero. But someone was stalking the pair of them. Someone was watching them. His student was in danger. The mother knew, and she wasn’t doing anything.

Or more worrisome… was there nothing she could do?

To Aizawa, that notion seemed worse. She was a witch. Witches weren’t weak. So what was happening, that she hadn’t solved it herself?

Between the crying and story-telling and confessions and arguments, Midoriya’s mother ended up tiring herself out and begging for a reprieve.

Yamada led her by the elbow into the bedroom and showed her where the bathroom was. He even fetched her a towel and told her that he could likely find some clothes in her size, if she would like him to.

Her black shirt was still stained and sticky with blood. The blood had crept down to the top of her pants and dyed the blue jeans dark.

She hesitantly accepted Yamada’s offer. She waited by the bathroom door for him to retrieve the items in question, wiping the drying tears off her face all the while. Then she disappeared inside the bathroom and didn’t come out for the next hour.
Aizawa tried to question Mr. Midoriya, to little success. The boy didn’t have any idea what was wrong with his mother or why she was so upset.

In the end, his mother agreed to stay the night and to sleep in the same bed with Izuku in the second room. Izuku helped her sew up the wound on her back, while Popsicle whined at her feet. Apparently, her stitches had popped while she was traveling home, and that had caused the bleeding.

Aizawa felt it prudent not to question how his student knew how to reattach stitches. He lost another washcloth to bloodstains, but that was nothing new in a hero’s life.

No one small and freckled came crawling into Aizawa’s bed that night.

It made Yamada strangely melancholy.

Izuku woke up at 1 a.m. to the harsh whispering of two voices in the corridor. Next to him, Popsicle twitched and whined in his sleep. Izuku rubbed his eye with the hand that wasn’t trapped beneath Popsicle’s fur. In the darkness, he propped himself up on the mattress and looked around for his mom. She wasn’t in the bed with him, anymore.

The whispered voices continued, and Izuku tuned his ears to focus on their words. Popsicle was in wolf-form, which generally meant that Izuku’s sensitivity to sound was heightened. So with his eyes closed and ears focused, he could hear almost every word being said.

It sounded like his mom and… Aizawa?

His mom sounded upset and defensive, her tone a mixture between hysterical and mocking, which made Izuku want to hunch into himself. “What would you have me do! Settle down, stay in one place, find Izuku another father figure? Live another short, happy life until I had another husband dead and have to run away with my son again?”

Izuku paled, his fingers curling into fists in the sheets. He wondered how long they had been talking, and what the discussion was about. It didn’t sound fun. It didn’t sound like something he should be listening to.

There was more harsh whispering, as the light of the moon finally breached the edges of the window frame, brightening a thin strip of the bed with a cold glow. “You don’t understand this life, Mr. Aizawa. You have no idea how to raise a child like this.”

There was a sound indicating movement, but Izuku couldn’t imagine who was moving or to where.

“So am I to believe this sort of migratory behavior is natural?” A pause, Aizawa’s tone rough with interrupted sleep. “Earlier, both you and your son admitted that you grew up in a house. A single protected house. Not moving around. Not being dragged from place to place. What kind of life did you decide to give him, instead?”

A snuffle. Was his mom crying again? Izuku didn’t want her to be crying. He didn’t like it when she cried.

Another movement in the hallway. Popsicle shifting. The strip of moonlight feeling so small and thin and alone, as Izuku focused his eyes on it.
“I’m giving him the best life I can.”

Izuku’s eyes pricked with oncoming tears as he turned over on the bed, burrowing into Popsicle’s warmth. He wasn’t certain whether he should continue listening or try to block out the sounds. He blinked away the feeling stinging his eyes. He didn’t know why it was there.

Before he could shut the voices out, Aizawa’s derisive tone reached his ears. “And what is so difficult about having a safe home and sticking around to raise your own child?”

A whisper turning to a shout. “When he’s killed because of it!”

Izuku clenched his fists tighter in Popsicle’s fur. He shut his eyes and tried to will himself asleep. He didn’t want to be hearing this. He didn’t really remember Hisashi, his father… but this argument felt like deja vu, something he had witnessed long ago when he was still too young to understand.

“I’m not certain if you’ve noticed the rise of quirks in society, Ms. Midoriya, but there are ways to protect your family.” A pause. A softened voice, kinder. “There are services you can request—”

“No, there aren’t,” his mother’s voice interrupted. She sounded defeated. “And if there were, I would have requested them already.”

More shuffling.

“I’m not a terrible mother, Mr. Aizawa. There is simply no other way.”

Izuku’s pack leader said something in return, but Izuku tried not to hear it—the voices disappearing down the hallway. Not even a minute later, Izuku’s bedroom door creaked open.

Izuku lay facing away from the door, huddled next to Popsicle, still willing himself asleep and pretending he wasn’t awake. He didn’t want to talk about this. There wasn’t anything Mr. Aizawa or Present Mic or even All Might himself could do; things were how they had to be, and it was his fault. His fault, for trying to save the monsters. His fault, that they would never be left alone. *His fault his fault his fault—*

There was a soft thump of a head impacting a door frame, a sigh from somewhere near the hallway. A higher voice than Aizawa’s speaking in a joking tone. “We should be sleeping.”

Izuku kept his eyes shut. His bangs tickled his nose.

Footsteps shuffled toward him across the carpet, and the bed dipped down beneath someone else’s weight, causing Izuku to roll away from Popsicle and follow the vector of gravity. Rolling. Rolling. Impacting against something soft and warm that smelled of cloves.

He didn’t want to open his eyes and talk about it.

A hand settled on top of Izuku’s hair, long fingers pulling his bangs away from his eyes and tucking the strands behind his ears, just like his mother used to do. Except it wasn’t his mother. It was Present Mic’s hands, and it was Present Mic’s voice saying, “You deserve better than this.”

Izuku didn’t cry.

When he managed to fall back asleep, he didn’t even dream.
The next day, Izuku's mom avoided Aizawa as best she could in his teachers' decent-sized apartment. She made some calls and took down notes, but she only seemed more troubled as the day went on, rather than more relieved. Izuku suspected she wasn’t having any luck with finding a new job, after her old one fired her for disappearing without notice for five days.

Their situation wasn’t exactly anything new.

Inko patted her son on the arm as she passed, telling him that it would be okay. Izuku chewed at his lip, his gut churning with guilt and uncertainty. How could he help? If he took the week to travel instead of going on his internship, would that give her any more options? Could that raise up some contacts that would help…?

She told him not to worry.

Izuku’s eyes tracked her movement out of the room.

His mind flashed back to the night before, his mom’s voice raising up from the hallway, admitting her fear that he would be killed if they both stayed in the same place for too long. She’d never said as much to Izuku's face before. She would just drop him off with the wolves and leave with a kiss in the night. He had learned to intuit her reasons why, rather than asking her directly—because whenever he asked, it just made her sad.

Izuku tried to focus on feeling out his plans for the binding ritual for Popsicle. Something felt wrong with the rune he’d chosen for the sacral chakra, but he couldn’t put his finger on what. He ran his fingers over one of his Aunt Lilia’s old journals, tracing the list of runes she kept in the back fold. Something was missing, something he had forgotten to include. It was nagging at him, a sensation of swirling discord around his heart. Izuku pulled on his hair and tried to engross himself in the feeling behind the symbols, which was what mattered most when using runes in rituals. Popsicle huffed his nose on Izuku’s lap, the cold snout causing him to shiver.

The day went on.

Come nighttime, Izuku had new worries. The nightmare of the alleyway returned with a vengeance, and Izuku found himself throwing off his covers and rushing out into Aizawa’s living room to stare at the four walls and the brown couch and the coffee table, trying in vain to remind himself that he wasn’t in the city, he wasn’t in the alleyway, he wasn’t surrounded by blood and hopelessness and lullabies that made no sense—

Too many things to mention, that couldn’t properly be phrased aloud.

Too many worries with no reality to call their own, just this nebulous haze on the horizon that whispered of darkness tinged with a vain hope. Izuku didn’t understand. He couldn’t understand.

He looked out the window and saw a circle haloed around the moon.

It meant trouble was coming.

On Sunday night, Izuku had trouble falling asleep. He was both nervous and excited for his
upcoming internship with Sir Nighteye. On one hand, he had no idea what to expect from it. Aizawa had been hesitant on the details over a supper cooked by Izuku’s mom (furikake rice and a slow-boiled soy egg, delicious!), and Izuku had eventually let the conversation topic go. He didn’t want to push for information he wasn’t supposed to have.

Izuku did his grounding meditation on the floor before bed, and it worked moderately to calm his nerves… but it left him with a buzzing feeling of anticipation that he couldn’t seem to shake, no matter how hard he worked to calm his aura and make his eyes stop glowing. His mom asked if he wanted to talk about it, but he shook his head. There was nothing to talk about, really. What would come, would come, and Izuku could only try his best when the moment presented itself.

Instead, he curled up on the bed with Popsicle and tried to force himself to sleep for the second time that weekend.

It wasn’t very successful.

His mind kept racing from one thought to the next, even though his body had been relaxed by the meditation. Izuku searched his thoughts for something to concentrate on, but the hazy image of Tenya that appeared only caused more questions, a heavy feeling of loneliness rather than solace.

Izuku switched to thinking about Kacchan… he still needed to give him that pendant, and preferably he would have the time to do so before they all departed for their internships. Tomorrow morning? Yeah, he would do it tomorrow morning.

Thoughts of Kacchan inevitably led to thoughts of Kirishima and that time he walked to the train station with Izuku and Todoroki. Their hands brushing. Kirishima’s shark-toothed smile. The edges of Izuku's mouth lifted in a fond grin, his eyes still closed. But then his mind slid to thinking about Todoroki and how quiet he had been on that walk home. He had followed Izuku back to his apartment, and they had tried to figure out what caused their bond and how to control it.

*Actually, Izuku opened his eyes, wasn’t he supposed to be focusing on Todoroki before bed? So that they could practice intentionally visiting each other?*

Izuku hadn’t been doing that the past few nights. In fact, he had only done it on the nights he spent camping outside after Todoroki came over. So maybe he should try doing that now? It might help him settle down.

Decision made, Izuku closed his eyes again, turning over to cuddle with Popsicle and pulling the wolf’s form closer to him. Izuku tried to imagine that Popsicle’s warmth was Todoroki’s left side. He tried to imagine Todoroki’s face, the left side scarred, the right side clear skin. Red hair on the left, white hair on the right. One grey eye. One teal.

The minutes passed.

Izuku still couldn’t seem to fall asleep.

He concentrated harder on the idea of Todoroki. Fighting next to him in the USJ. Fighting against him in the Sports Festival. Izuku kneeling down next to his mat in the middle of the night, after an exhausting ritual. Izuku trying to go to sleep and waking up beside Todoroki. Izuku trying to rest his hand on the other boy’s chest. Izuku hearing Todoroki’s voice calling to him, when he was walking through the forest with Kacchan. Their walk home with Kirishima. Todoroki visiting his apartment…

Izuku’s heart clenched when he realized that was the last time Izuku felt safe in his own home.
Izuku pulled Popsicle close to him, nuzzled into the fur, imagined Todoroki there instead… and pushed.

When he opened his eyes, he was lying on Todoroki’s bed and staring at the wall. Todoroki sat with his back against the wall, his legs huddled up against his chest and a frown on his face. He stiffened when he caught sight of Izuku, before relaxing. A hint of a smile appeared on his face.

“Successful, were you?”

Izuku shifted, pulling his hand up beneath Todoroki’s pillow and nuzzling his face into it. He wished he could smell it, but that sense wasn’t prominent in this form. He wondered what Todoroki would smell like. It was probably something nice. “I suppose.”

“Hm. You have good timing.”

He didn’t say what for.

Izuku lay on Todoroki’s futon, wondering how the blankets felt so solid beneath him, yet he couldn’t smell. Todoroki looked sad. Or no… not sad… contemplative? His brows were furrowed, and he was staring at his desk on the other side of the room, or staring through it at least. Izuku wondered what he was seeing.

Izuku chewed at his lip in worry. “Are you okay?”

Todoroki’s face remained impassive, but he turned toward Izuku at the question. His eyes fell to the sheets, his fingers reaching out to chase their folds into some semblance of order. Eventually, he looked up from the futon, his eyes gazing into Izuku’s. Calculating, debating. His expression remained cold as stone as he looked away.

“There’s something I need to do tonight. Before I lose my nerve.” He paused, his voice lowering. “Something I need to face.”

Izuku stared up at him. He had a feeling that whatever Todoroki was talking about, it was important. Izuku didn’t want to leave him to do something important, alone. Not unless he asked Izuku to leave. And Todoroki wasn’t asking him to.

“Do you want me to do it with you?”

Todoroki raised his eyes to watch Izuku sit up. Lean forward. Smile helpfully.

Todoroki didn’t answer him, but he also didn’t say ‘no.’

So Izuku followed the other teen as Todoroki rose and walked toward his bedroom door, sliding the screen open and heading down the hall. Izuku followed him past a window. Izuku followed him down a staircase. Izuku followed him into a basement room with curious stone walls and a heavy door.

He felt like he knew this place. He felt like he had been here, before. Or maybe those were Todoroki’s memories? Or a dream?

On second thought, it was probably just one of Izuku’s dreams. He walked forward and traced his fingers over the symbols in the stone walls, curious about their meaning.

Todoroki shut the heavy door behind them. His breath hitched and his hands clenched into fists, but
he continued walking toward the far wall.

Izuku turned around and followed him, jogging forward to match step for step.

Eventually, Todoroki reached the other side of the room. He turned around and sat with his back against the wall, sliding down to the floor and staring back toward the door. Izuku’s eyes shifted between Todoroki’s stiff form and the door, trying to remember the dream. It had been a week ago, at least, but he couldn’t remember the details. His meditation stone couldn’t help him now, either, because it was sitting in his backpack miles away in Aizawa’s second bedroom.

Izuku watched as Todoroki clenched his fist. Unclenched his fist. Clenched it again. Todoroki’s face remained impassive, not letting through a single hint of his thoughts or emotions. His hands seemed to be the only honest part of him. Well, his hands and his words earlier, about having something he needed to confront.

Izuku couldn’t help but wonder. Why had Todoroki come down here? What did he feel like he needed to face?

Hesitantly, Izuku approached the wall and sat down next to him on the cold floor, staring in turn at the heavy door near the front of the room. (The floor was solid, and the floor was cold; how could Izuku feel temperature, when in this form? That didn’t make sense!)

“Have you been dreaming about this place?” His voice seemed to echo off the walls in a creepy way that reminded Izuku of vampire caves and mermaid coves and too many things he couldn’t discuss aloud.

One leg slid up from the ground, to be cradled close against Todoroki’s chest. His face was blank. He didn’t respond.

Izuku continued, his eyes searching the walls. “I remember this room from somewhere…”

That got a reaction out of Todoroki. His head turned sharply, his eyes piercing Izuku’s as his breath hitched again. But he didn’t say anything, and something about the press of his lips seemed tight and uncertain.

Izuku had that feeling again, that frustration of people always keeping their thoughts to themselves. Not talking. Not sharing their fears. Everything bottled up, away from where Izuku could reach it and help release the pressure.

Eventually, Todoroki let out a short laugh and a weak smile. “Not everyone appreciates other people prying into their issues.”

‘Not everyone’ indicating himself, Izuku figured. He shrugged, an optimistic smile lighting up his face. “Well, what else is a soul connection for?”

Izuku sat, hoping Todoroki would answer him. Something darkened in the other teen’s eyes as Todoroki nodded his head in acknowledgement of the sentiment, but he didn’t say anything further. A few minutes passed as Izuku tried his level best to force his own hand into corporeality. He wanted to reach out and hold Todoroki’s hand. He wanted to be there for him, physically, if Todoroki wouldn’t let him be there for him emotionally. But no matter how hard he tried, Izuku’s hand continued to pass through Todoroki’s, unable to make contact. Like a ghost trying to become real again.

The thought made him sad.
It brought back memories that he would rather forget.

Todoroki had gone back to staring at the door, and there was nothing Izuku could do to help.

After several minutes of silence, Todoroki finally reached out, meeting Izuku in the middle of this truce between them.

“My father used to lock me in here,” Todoroki confessed. “And he wouldn’t let me leave unless I used my flames.”

Izuku looked down at the floor to give Todoroki’s revelation more privacy, trying to match Todoroki’s words to a half-forgotten dream. Izuku imagined a flash of small fists beating against a large door, but the metal would never break or respond. “Shouto,” a disappointed voice had called, “You know what you have to do.”

Izuku shivered, the memory of the dream too much like a memory of his own past. You know what you have to do.

They knew, but neither of them had wanted to.

Izuku clenched his own fists.


On the last word, Todoroki’s voice broke, but his face remained set in stone. Izuku wanted to reach out, he wanted to hug him, he wanted to drive the memory away. He wanted to say, You don’t have to do anything, you can be whatever you want, he can’t make you. But that wasn’t the truth for the younger version of Todoroki, was it? Todoroki had left the room, eventually. Which meant his father had made his son do exactly what he wanted, in order to get past the door.

And if Todoroki thought of himself as something 'not human,' then what did that make Izuku?

Izuku tried to offer him a bolstering smile. “But you got out of here. And you grew up. And now you make your own choices.”

Todoroki’s head swayed back and forth in a negative, red and white bangs swishing in front of his eyes and obscuring his vision. From beneath his bangs, a self-deprecating smirk was evident. “The last time I was locked in here… was after the Sports Festival. After I had lost.”

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed. “But… you’re strong enough to break that door with your ice!”

Todoroki snorted. “Hm. You would think. But that doesn’t work if he’s using his flames to heat the door from the other side.”

Izuku didn’t have a response for that. A hero using his quirk on a door, to lock his son in a room and force him to use his powers? It didn’t sound very heroic. It sounded—

Izuku growled, deep in his throat, as he glared at the heavy door. It wasn't an act of evil, but it definitely wasn't an act of good.
… on the other hand, Izuku couldn’t exactly say he was surprised. Endeavor was a dick. If he let himself remember, Izuku could still imagine Endeavor’s hand forcing Izuku’s chin up so that the pro-hero could look his fill. That crawling sensation of wanting to escape. The heat at his back when Izuku managed to walk away with his head held high.

What would it be like, to have that man for a father?

Izuku shivered in disgust. Izuku didn’t think he was capable of hating anyone; it simply wasn’t part of his personality. But he sure as hell didn’t like Endeavor, and he couldn’t wait for the day when he could sequester Todoroki away from him and steal him away forever, somewhere he could keep the other boy safe. The overwhelming desire to do exactly that was so strange and so sudden that it left Izuku feeling breathless, like he had taken a punch to the gut when he wasn’t looking.

Izuku shook his head and tried to focus back on the conversation. “He can’t keep you in there forever…”

“No, but he certainly tries.” Todoroki shook his head, willing away the memories, before standing up. “I didn’t come here to whine about it. I just wanted to remind myself why I chose this internship.”

Izuku stood as well, his expression perplexed. “Wait, who are you interning with?”

Todoroki took a few steps toward that heavy door before looking back with another self-deprecating smile. “Endeavor.”

A pit opened up in Izuku’s stomach, threatening to swallow him whole. “Y-you… what?”

Todoroki brushed his hair out of his eyes, the slightest grimace appearing on his face. “As much as I don’t like the idea… the best person to train me to control my quirk and become a better hero, it’s that man. I’m not…” he paused. “I’m not accepting how he treats me. But I’m willing to face it on my own terms, now.” He started walking away, a glint of steel in his eyes. “Plus fucking ultra.”

And in that moment, he sounded enough like Kacchan that Izuku didn’t know how to respond.

He followed Todoroki back to the other boy’s room and watched him pull back the covers on his futon before laying down. Izuku sat next to his bed for what felt like an hour, acting as a sentinel. He curled his legs up toward his chest and glared at the door, caught somewhere between upset and confused.

Todoroki was interning with Endeavor. With Endeavor.

Izuku felt the heat at his back and the hand on his chin, that graveled tone calling him Witch.

Izuku had a sudden and very bad feeling about the upcoming week of internships.

(That made two of them.)

Izuku and his mom had ended up spending the weekend in Aizawa’s apartment. On Sunday, they followed Present Mic’s advice and approached the school board to ask for special consideration for their danger-prompted moving circumstances, but without Inko Midoriya’s oral or written testament
about the circumstances and specifics surrounding the attack on her, they couldn’t receive any funding.

Izuku wasn’t bitter about the whole ordeal. He had expected that outcome. It wasn’t like his mom could tell the board if something supernatural attacked her, and it wasn't like Izuku or Aizawa could prove their paranoia of eyes watching the Midoriya's apartment. In the end, Izuku and his mom were on their own until they could save up enough money to cover both the moving costs and initial payment for a new apartment… for however long that would take.

To Izuku, this was nothing new, just one more step in their life together. Izuku shared a strained smile with his mom as they both accepted their temporary fate and moved on. It was what they did. Deal with things as they happened, accept them, and move on. Don’t look back, and make certain to burn the house down so you aren’t tempted to return. Or more importantly, so no one can trace it back to you.

Apartments were harder to burn down, though. Instead, you had to scrub them with chemicals and remove all spells, to hide the evidence of your existence.

The only problem with getting a new place to live in on the quicker side of immediately, was that the prolonged (and unannounced) absence of Inko this past week had caused her to lose her job. By Monday morning, Inko was still promising to try to find a new job, and Izuku was promising he would consider moving back into their old house if she couldn't manage to find a job within the next week.

Inko didn't want to continue living with Aizawa and Yamada (she felt they were constantly judging her and could never seem to settle down; in fact, she hadn't been able to sleep well for days, always keeping one eye open to watch the doorways and the walls). So Izuku handed his mom the tent he had borrowed (somewhat without permission) from Sero, and she agreed to find a cave in the forest and set up wards until he got home. She agreed that she wouldn't go back to the apartment unless she dragged some pro-heroes as back-up. Inko even suggested that she might travel to find a few odd jobs over the week, before finding something more stable in town.

Izuku suggested that shop he visited with Tokoyami and Uraraka, since the owner seemed to at least be able to sense power in a stone.

Inko said she would look into it.

And so it was, that Izuku left Monday morning for his Hero Internship with a heavy heart and the backpack full of his belongings, clothes for the week, toiletries that Present Mic had loaned him, and a determination in his step that hadn’t been present before.

He might not typically consider becoming a ‘hero’ as a job occupation, but he knew that people got paid for it. And maybe, if he worked harder and got there faster, then he could afford somewhere safer for him and his mother to live.

Maybe.

Since Aizawa and Yamada escorted Izuku to school, he was the first student to make it to class on Monday. As luck would have it, Katsuki Bakugou was the second one there. He eyed Izuku from the doorway before coming in, footsteps heavy.
Izuku watched him approach with fleeting glances. He felt more aware of the other teen than before, although he couldn’t pinpoint when that had started happening. His heart picked up its pace as Bakugou approached. Glared down at him. Huffed. Plopped into his seat and stared at the board in front of them.

Izuku reached a hesitant hand forward, fingertips trailing across Bakugou’s blazer. They were supposed to wear their school clothes until they arrived at their internship, since wearing a hero costume in public was prohibited unless you had a hero license. Izuku fingered the pendant in his pocket that he had been meaning to give Kacchan. Last week had seemed to run away from him, and Izuku had never found the chance to go over to Kacchan’s house after school, since he had been staying with Aizawa. Neither Aizawa nor Yamada would let Izuku or his mom leave their apartment that weekend without an escort, so Izuku had ended up staying inside, planning the binding ritual, and practicing his powers with Popsicle.

Izuku hadn’t gotten to talk with Kacchan since the end of class Friday, right before he left to head home with his teachers. And now Bakugou looked like he had something on his mind…

But he didn’t say anything, and a minute passed in silence.

Eventually, Izuku decided that Bakugou would be more likely to talk if Izuku was the first one to approach the conversation.

“Hey, uh, Kacchan…?”

Except Bakugou took the exact same second to whirl around in his chair and pierce Izuku with a glare. “What the fuck are you doing with Kirishima?”

Izuku blinked back at him, surprised. “Uh, what?”

“I thought you… you wanted to date him or something, right?”

Izuku blushed. “Yes?”

Bakugou narrowed his eyes and sneered. “Then why did he send me shitty texts all weekend whining about you not wanting to talk to him or get together?”

“Uhh…”

Bakugou grit his teeth before huffing, his gaze sliding toward the wall as the sneer left his lips. “I knew it.”

“I knew what?” Izuku’s hand hung suspended in the air from where it had been resting on Bakugou’s shoulder.

Bakugou shifted his focus back to Izuku, going so far as to reach backward, grab Izuku’s hand, and pull Izuku toward him. Bakugou’s eyes were three inches away from Izuku’s, and Izuku found himself gulping.

Bakugou’s tone was rough. “You don’t know what dating is. You’re just attracted to him, aren’t you?”

Izuku blushed. “Uh—”

“Well, listen up, idiot. Dating means you’re in a relationship. Being in a relationship means you spend time together, lots of time, and you try to fucking get together outside school. It means you pay
attention to each other and talk to each other, and there’s a whole lot of communication involved that you’re not doing. So if you want to date Kirishima, then fine. I said you could. But you’re not doing it right now.” Bakugou huffed again. He seemed angry to have needed to say that much. “Right now, you’re just attracted to him. So clear it up, before you head off to the Internships. Got it?”

Izuku was still blushing. He nodded his head. He would do whatever Kacchan told him to.

Bakugou let go of his hand and sat backward, his spine resting against the front of his desk, one leg laying open while the other was curled against the back of his desk. He narrowed his eyes at Izuku. “And don’t make me talk this much again about… that stuff, alright? I’m not supposed to be involved in it.”

Izuku nodded his head again.

Bakugou turned away back toward the board, but Izuku stopped him before he had completed the motion. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the necklace, the tiger’s eye wolf pendant seeming to frown up at him in displeasure.

Izuku bit his lip in nervousness. “Kacchan… I got this for you.”

Bakugou looked down at the object with confusion. He raised an incredulous eyebrow at Izuku.

Izuku ran his thumb over the pendant. He’d blessed it over the weekend with a variety of protection charms. He’d also put a spell on it that would allow Izuku to sense Bakugou. No matter where Bakugou was, as long as he wore this necklace, Izuku would be able to find him. Find his way home. He’d decided to create the charm after watching Aizawa and Yamada interact over the weekend. He had imagined what it would be like to come home to another pro-hero, someone he could trust to watch his back. And he had specifically imagined Kacchan.

Kacchan Kacchan Kacchan.

Izuku held the pendant out. He grabbed Bakugou’s arm, still perched on the back of the chair, and flipped it over so that his palm was facing up. Izuku placed the pendant in Bakugou’s palm and then pushed Bakugou’s fingers over the pendant, so that he was clutching it in his hand. Izuku could feel the stone’s warmth from inside Bakugou’s clenched fist, and it made something in his chest flutter around in sheer happiness.

Izuku smiled at the sight of their hands touching. “I found this at a store, and it felt like you. I figured it could… could signify you being the alpha.” Izuku glanced up hesitantly at Bakugou. “I, uh, I blessed it. For you.”

Bakugou stared down at their hands, which were still touching. The stone in his fist, the cord dangling off to the side.

It was a symbol of… his authority?

Bakugou grasped the pendant tighter in his hand, before opening his fist to look at the small wolf’s head inside. The stone shown with golden and dark brown streaks, and the cord was black. He ran a hesitant thumb over the wolf’s features, but he refused to let any expression enter his face. Eventually, he handed the pendant back to Izuku, who looked back at him, wounded and hurt in response.

Bakugou rolled his eyes. “Are you gonna put it on me, or not? Damn nerd.”

Izuku beamed and did as he was bid.
Other members of the class started trickling in after that, as though Fate herself had allowed them that moment in the room together, alone. Bakugou had never worn a tie for a single day in his life. Always rejecting that symbol of a collar around his neck, that feeling of something choking and holding him down. And yet now the tiger’s eye pendant hung against his clavicle, barely visible above the unbuttoned top of his white shirt.

It wasn’t a brand, Bakugou told himself. It was a sign… a symbol of his progress. Of his promise. Of what he would become.

Eventually, all the students made it to class on time, chatting in excitement about their upcoming internships. The energy in the room was palpable, and it rolled off them all in waves. They grabbed their costume suitcases, and headed to grab the shuttle to the train station with bright eyes and eager faces.

As class leader, Kirishima led the way, but Izuku and Bakugou weren’t too far behind. Izuku managed to snag a seat at the back of the bus next to the red-headed teen, and Izuku nudged Kirishima's shoulder with his head.

Izuku sent a smile up at the other boy, but kept his voice low. “So, uh, Kacchan said we should talk?”

Kirishima’s ability to hold a normal conversation basically devolved from there, but at the end of their talk, he was much clearer on where they stood. ‘Thinking about entering a relationship' instead of actually being in one.

Kirishima could work with that.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, everyone!

It’s been a while since I updated. This chapter was a bit of a bitch to edit, since I wanted a mostly consistent tone throughout. That was difficult to achieve since Aizawa kept bitching at Inko. It was troublesome.

I hope you all like the chapter! I felt like it got a bit darker and more serious than I typically like this fic to be, but I guess that’s just setting you up for the next couple of chapters. We are about to meet Sir Nighteye, with a surprise appearance by Mirio (well, it’s a surprise to Izuku). And if I can write them well enough, we’ll also get to meet Best Jeanist during Bakugou’s internship and see a bit of Iida at his internship. The primary focus next chapter will be Sir Nighteye & Izuku, though.

Let me know what you liked or didn’t like! Comments fuel my writing (which I never thought would be true of myself, but it totally is). Kudos to 4nymphadora4 for accidentally convince me to get this chapter out post-haste, because I felt bad leaving them hanging. ;)

And to all of you who expressed your displeasure with Inko last chapter... uh... please don’t hate her? She’s trying her best? But I also wrote like half of this chapter for you, to
validate some of your observations. Inko definitely isn’t winning mother of the year award, in this fic. But let’s be honest, Endeavor is still 100% worse.
Chapter Summary

The beginning of the Hero Internship / Field Training Arc, and the prelude to the Hero Killer Stain fight.

Featuring: Izuku not being able to sort out premonitions from emotions, Izuku's first meeting with Sir Nighteye, discussions about his abilities, more interactions with Mirio than you were probably expecting, two-ish days of training with Sir Nighteye, and a whole lotta foreshadowing in creepy dream format. Because Izuku. Also, Todoroki is getting really good at sensing Izuku in distress, and a;oweihsa;lkdflh;slhd they're all on their way to Hosu.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All of Class 1-A made it to the train station with more than enough time to spare for the students with the earliest departure times to make it to their respective trains or buses. The rest of them milled about in groups, separating to head toward their departure platforms. Izuku followed half of the class to a platform near where his train would depart. He fiddled with his costume case while discussing with Shouji and Tokoyami his weekend meditation attempts, avoiding any mention of his mom or his brief stay with Mr. Aizawa or the fact that Izuku was pretty certain that Eraserhead and Present Mic were mates.

Tokoyami talked about his own meditations. His peculiar sense that a new energy had begun to hover over his room ever since the middle of last week.

Izuku kept a cryptic smile to himself, wondering if Tokoyami was sensing Izuku’s warding stones and the protection circle he had left around Tokoyami’s room. It would be nice to know someone else his age who could sense energy, even if Tokoyami wasn’t involved in the more supernatural elements of society. Maybe they could have more sleepovers and do more meditations? That was fun, and Izuku like Tokoyami’s parents, so it would be nice to see them again.

Yaoyorozu and Jirou headed off to board their train, ten minutes until departure.

Izuku offered them both a wave before returning his attention to Shouji. He was still trying to get over how much taller the other teen felt, standing right next to him. Shouji often hung around Kouda during class exercises, so Izuku had been avoiding going near him ever since the Sports Festival. (He still couldn’t get near Kouda without Popsicle hissing in anger. It was starting to become a Problem.)

It was nice to get to talk to Shouji more, even if it was only for a few minutes before the class separated for a week.

A whole week. The thought was difficult for Izuku to comprehend. He felt like he had gotten so close to his peers in a matter of months—their group camaraderie, shared jokes, and combined energy thrumming through Izuku’s veins with its own sort of power. And now they were breaking up the group, only to reform a week later and hopefully connect once more.
Class 1-A weren’t a pack yet. They hadn’t agreed to the bond. Izuku couldn’t know for certain that they would all come back the same, or even come back still wanting to join. It worried him, and it made him sad. Izuku tried not to focus on it.

“Ah, our fate calls to us.”

Izuku whipped his head around to look at Tokoyami, away from where he’d apparently been staring at Shouji’s hands. Shouji had very distracting hands. “Uh, I’ll see you later then?”

“May destiny smile on us all.”

Izuku figured that meant ‘good luck,’ so he grinned back at his friend. “Good luck to you, too. Stay safe.”

Tokoyami nodded, a fondness in the tilt of his head, before he shared prolonged eye contact with Shouji and walked away. Izuku supposed that was their version of a goodbye. Or, wait, wasn’t Shouji on the same train as Tokoyami?

Izuku blinked himself out of his thoughts as Shouji placed one of his left hands on Izuku’s shoulder. Another hand settled on Izuku’s lower arm as one of his right appendages asked, “Will you be alright?”

Izuku shivered at the concern in Shouji’s voice.

Shouji. Shouji was concerned. Shouji hadn’t ever seemed concerned for Izuku before. They had sat across from one another at lunch a couple times, talking over Tokoyami and Dark Shadow. But Shouji tended to be more of a silent monk than the rest of his peers, so Izuku never knew whether Shouji secretly thought Izuku was a fool or whether he was trying to get to know Izuku in his own way. Even after several months at school, Izuku still found himself wondering if his lack of social graces and a lifetime spent moving around were impeding him from connecting with his peers.

But Shouji was touching him. Shouji, the silent protector at the back of the room. Shouji, the unmoving wall of strength. He was concerned. For Izuku.

Warmth traveled all the way from Izuku’s fingertips to the middle of his chest, as though Shouji’s energy was traveling through Shouji’s hands and into Izuku. Giving him energy. Giving him support. If Izuku hadn’t been ‘alright’ before, after a weekend spent traipsing around his pack leader’s apartment and getting to reconnect with his mom… then he was definitely more than ‘alright’ now.

“I’m doing better,” Izuku responded, a puppy grin lifting his lips.

Truth be told, he was doing much better. He still had nightmares, and he didn’t have a home, and he hadn’t yet completely gotten the hang of using meditation to control his emotions… but he was doing better. Shouji didn’t need to worry.

Although Izuku was glad that he did. Pack worried for each other. Pack didn’t worry about others outside the pack.

Shouji let his heavy gaze fall on Izuku for several more seconds, before he nodded his head and walked away, following in the wake of Tokoyami and Dark Shadow.

Izuku tried to hold onto the warm feeling in his chest for a bit longer as he watched Shouji disappear in the crowd. The other teen stood a head taller than several people on the platform, so it was easy for Izuku to follow him for a while longer, but eventually even Shouji’s head couldn’t be tracked
through the mass of people. The warm feeling in Izuku’s chest began to diminish, and he looked away. He twisted his head around to see which classmates were still left on the platform. Tenya, Kaminari, Sero, and Todoroki were still there, but they were all separated. Kaminari was doing something on his phone, Todoroki was leaning against a wall with a nonchalance that Izuku had begun to associate with the other teen, and Tenya was…

Izuku averted his gaze, forcing himself to stare at any solid object that wasn’t Tenya’s tall form, the other teen’s fingers pressing glasses back onto his nose, his back ramrod straight as he lectured Kaminari on his appearance. Izuku wanted to get swept away in the emotions that rose up—the sadness, the emptiness, the longing, the confusion. But instead, Izuku closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. One breath, two. He focused on the heat left over from Shouji’s hand on his arm and forced a grin back onto his lips at the thought.

New friendships, to help replace the old.

A bittersweet, salty taste flooded his mouth. Izuku swallowed to get rid of it. Something heavy settled in his chest, above his sternum. Izuku focused hard enough on the warmth in his arm and the newfound concern of another classmate that the churning in his gut eventually subsided. The heavy pressure on his chest lifted, allowing his lungs to rise and fall at their normal pace.

Izuku raised his head, aiming to monitor the other students on the platform; but before he could move his head more than a few inches, Izuku’s gaze got caught on an approaching train. He swayed, Popsicle hissing around his wrist, as his mind became wracked with a staggering feeling of inevitability and hopelessness, like a hole was opening up in the center of his head with no purpose behind it, just an empty void, the edges of Izuku’s vision narrowing to a single focal point as the train screeched to a halt in front of him.

Something wasn’t right.

Izuku wanted to reach out and push the train away with his sheer force of will, but he couldn’t move, a roaring wind of desolation shoving its way through his mind and robbing him of his ability to speak.

The crowd around him seemed to pass in a blur as Tenya stalked forward and got on the train in question, not looking back.

Izuku felt like he could barely breathe. A feeling of wrongness lodged in his throat, choking him. He felt dizzy, his hand reaching out as the world began to turn grey—five seconds, ten, fifteen, thirty—and then the train jerked away from the platform and trudged inexorably forward. Far away out of Izuku’s reach. Izuku stood in a daze, watching the train disappear, his mind disjoining from the present and trying to follow that train forward, to figure out what was wrong—before the announcements rang sudden and sharp overhead.

Izuku winced as the sound pierced through the grey, some electronic voice declaring that Izuku’s train would be leaving soon. His train that was still two platforms away.

Izuku took a deep breath and shook away the sensations plaguing him, forcing the grey back to color, his hand falling back to his side. His tunnel vision widened to observe the approaching form of Sero. Izuku forced another smile on his face as Sero’s hand grasped Izuku’s elbow.

Sero asked Izuku what was wrong, but Izuku didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know what was wrong, couldn’t say for certain whether anything was wrong or if Izuku was just getting his emotions mixed up in the thought of Tenya leaving again. That feeling with the train… it could mean several things, couldn’t it? It was just as likely caused by Izuku’s own overwhelming feeling of guilt as it
was caused by a vision, and Izuku didn’t have evidence either way. He couldn’t ask Sero to call Eraserhead because his brain was being weird and his chest was caught up in it, too. Izuku refused to let his own churning emotions get blown out of proportion. He was trying to get better about that.

Izuku focused instead on the comfort of Sero’s body, a foot away, Sero’s hand clasped around Izuku’s elbow. A ringing sound reverberated in his ears, his hands still shaking with the aftershocks of something he didn’t know how to name.

Izuku turned away, unwilling to look Sero in the eyes. He didn’t know how to answer the questions he would find there. Instead, his gaze caught on the form of Todoroki. The other boy was staring at Izuku from across Kaminari’s shoulders as the blonde-haired teen continued typing on his phone with a smile. Todoroki’s eyes were bright and concerned, his posture stiff and alert. Sero’s voice rang in Izuku’s ears, saying something else.

Izuku shook his head to dispel the sensation clouding his mind. The fuzziness seemed to clear as Izuku’s ears popped. The ambiance of the train station surrounded him once again: voices murmuring, feet bustling back and forth, the sounds of fabric and shoes, luggage being rolled down the walkway.

Once he felt more steady on his feet, he nodded his head in Todoroki’s direction. Offering a promise. **Izuku would be fine. Would Todoroki?**

Todoroki nodded his head back, a slight smirk on the corner of his lips. **He would be fine, as well.**

“Midoriya…”

Izuku hesitated a glance up at Sero. Concern wrinkled the other boy’s forehead and furrowed his brows.

“You know you can always talk to me, right? Even if… even if you make different choices about what you want, or who you want, it doesn’t matter. I’m here for you, if you need me.”

That choking sensation in Izuku’s throat returned, but this time it wasn’t a confusing physical response that haunted Izuku out of nowhere. There was no eerie train or ringing in his ears. No, this was pure emotion, invited by Sero’s smile and the way his eyes never seemed to give up on Izuku, always looking out for him, always searching for a way to help. This lump in Izuku’s throat was one that Izuku was becoming intimately familiar with.

It meant he really wanted to kiss Sero, but he wasn’t allowed.

Izuku lowered his eyes as he took a deep breath. **There wasn’t time for this. Izuku had to leave. He had a promise to fulfill and an internship to get to. His mom needed his help, they needed a home, he had to prove himself.**

But Izuku Midoriya could never help being honest when a situation called for it, and Sero’s admission was practically begging for reciprocated sincerity. Izuku peered up at Sero with the largest grin he knew how to muster *(it was probably shaky, Sero likely knew something was wrong, he always seemed to be able to tell when something was wrong).* Izuku reached his hand out toward Sero, linking his fingers lightly with Sero’s own. “I know. Maybe I can even take you up on that, someday.”

There was another stolen second of **Kacchan wouldn’t approve.** Their fingers swayed together as one link in a chain that hadn’t been fully formed yet.

And then Izuku was gone, wandering down the train platform, up an escalator, and far out of sight.
Wondering whether his friends were going to be okay. Wondering which parts of his dreams were
nightmares, and which parts might be real. Where the line between emotions and fears could be
drawn.

He’d checked last night. The circle had yet to leave the moon.

Trouble was still coming.

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Izuku didn’t know what he was expecting when he walked into Sir Nighteye’s agency and greeted
the lady at the front desk. (Tenya had taught him how to say a polite hello and how to politely
inquire for more information. It made Izuku feel both sad and hopeful to use Tenya’s advice, his
friend’s reprimands over the daily Tenya family dinner coming to use.)

For security reasons, Izuku had to get a badge and prove his identity before he was allowed to enter
the upper levels where Sir Nighteye’s office was. Getting to the security room involved four
confusing hallways, two staircases, what Izuku could have sworn was five minutes of meandering in
complete circles, and then a long discussion with the security orchestrator about how No, Izuku
didn’t currently have a home address, he and his Mom were in the process of moving, but he was
staying with Eraserhead? And also No, Izuku didn’t have any other form of identification except his
school ID. Did they need another form of ID? Because he’d never gotten one before, and he hadn’t
known that he would be required to have one. Not to forget the Oh, this is just my familiar. He’s
allowed to come with me, right? He’s registered with the school, and Izuku was passably certain
that Sir Nighteye expected that Izuku would bring him along during his internship.

Sir Nighteye didn’t look too pleased when Izuku turned up at his office roughly twenty minutes late
for their meeting. Or late for what Sir Nighteye had scheduled for their meeting to be. With the pro-
hero’s quirk being related to precognition, Izuku wasn’t quite certain what Sir Nighteye had or had
not expected. Had he known Izuku would be late because the security guys were really picky and
kept giving Izuku the stink-eye?

Izuku introduced himself as he entered the room, uncertain about the appropriate protocol. He tried to
emulate Tenya’s bow, but he didn’t have the experience to make a graceful transition between
bowing and then knowing where to look or what to say once his back was straight.

A couple seconds of awkwardness passed. The pro-hero gestured for Izuku to walk forward and sit
in the chair across from the main desk. Izuku shuffled forward obediently, his teeth nibbling at his
lower lip.

Sir Nighteye made a striking figure, sitting formally in a tall wingback chair and wearing a full suit
and tie. Green hair, slicked back behind both ears. Somewhat triangular glasses frames that did
nothing to obscure the man’s piercing gaze and stern expression.

Izuku’s mouth felt dry as he took the seat offered to him. He twitched in his chair, the silence
measured solely by a ticking clock. Sir Nighteye stared at him with steepled fingers. Izuku wet his
lips, feeling like the pro-hero was recording every twitch of Izuku’s eyes and every clench of his
fingers in the fabric of his pants.

Izuku didn’t know what he was expected to do here. Was he supposed to say something? Wait for
his—what, mentor?—to speak first? Should he pretend he wasn’t being stared at and not even
He didn’t know. The werewolves didn’t prepare him for this. Tenya hadn’t told him what to do. And the clock kept ticking somewhere, making the seconds seem longer than they actually were. Popsicle slithered around Izuku’s wrist, grounding him and reminding him to take another deep breath.

*This might be a test. Show him you can weather the attention. Breathe.*

Izuku followed Popsicle’s advice, relaxing his shoulders and taking a deep breath. He let the breath out, focusing on the present, moderating his body’s reactions, and staring at the pro-hero head-on.

That seemed to be what Sir Nighteye was waiting for. Once Izuku had gained his bearings and settled appropriately into his seat, Sir Nighteye leaned forward and began outlining his intentions. His voice was surprisingly soothing, its cadence regimented but smooth, and Izuku found himself loosening even further as he nodded along attentively.

Apparently—Sir Nighteye clarified—first year students typically underwent ‘internships’ that were actually more like field training than anything else. The students were meant to follow around a pro-hero and get a feel for the lifestyle of a pro-hero and what sort of skills that it took to get through day-to-day professional hero work. As such, students followed pro-heroes around and gained insights. There was occasional on-the-job training, but that was rare and depended on the pro-hero in question.

Sir Nighteye settled back into his seat as he explained that he simply didn’t have the luxury to spend time meandering around with Midoriya for such loose, unstructured goals. Nor was he interested. Neither—he hinted—was that why he had extended his internship offer to Midoriya.

Izuku was afraid to ask why he had.

Instead of elucidating his reasoning any further, Sir Nighteye pivoted the conversation to Izuku himself. If Sir Nighteye was going to train Izuku (and that’s apparently what this was, Sir Nighteye had a plan for Izuku for this upcoming week, and it sounded like an actual training regimen?), then he needed to understand what Izuku could do.

Roughly ten minutes into Izuku meeting a pro-hero behind a fancy desk at a large agency for the first time, he was asked to explain what his abilities were.

Izuku… didn’t quite know how to respond.

The pro-hero’s eyes cast downward as he moved a sheet on his desk with graceful fingers. “And it may speed along our discussion for you to know that I’m aware of your rather… classified designation.”

He paused, and Izuku’s heart tried to crawl up out of his throat, with his lungs well on their way.

Sir Nighteye raised an eyebrow, his tone matter-of-fact. “That you’re a witch.”

To be fair, it wasn’t like Izuku hadn’t been expecting this. Both Mr. Aizawa and All Might had suggested that Sir Nighteye probably knew about the supernatural. On top of that, Sir Nighteye had the gift of foresight, which was relatively supernatural as far as quirks went… so if Izuku was going to discuss his abilities, at least it was with someone who shared some similarities power-wise.

Even then, this wasn’t something that Izuku was used to discussing out loud with strangers. Izuku felt a chill race up his arms as he attempted to keep his voice even and to decide what he should reveal. How he should reveal it.
Izuku attempted a smile, pretending that this conversation was normal. “All Might said you might, uh, that you might figure it out.”

Izuku watched as Sir Nighteye’s piercing gaze slacked into one with widened eyes, his mouth dropping open the slightest bit. A second later, the pro-hero’s expression fell flat, emotions once more hidden behind a tight smile. “Did he now?”

The abrupt facial transformation hurt to watch. If Izuku had been a werewolf, he would have been able to smell the change in emotion. Instead, Izuku was left wondering whether he was should begin listing out his abilities or if he should keep talking about All Might. Sir Nighteye’s question seemed to suggest the latter.

Izuku continued with a degree of hesitation. “All Might said you were clever. I was hoping that meant… I wouldn’t have to explain my abilities to you. Or at least not have to explain them in detail.”

There was a short nod of green hair, following by fingers pressing glasses frames back in place. The pro-hero’s expression seemed to cool off, moving past whatever disturbance had been caused by Izuku using All Might’s name. “If I’m going to be guiding your initial progress as a hero, then it would be useful for me to be informed about both your talents and their limits.” Sir Nighteye picked up a pen and clicked it, setting the tip down to paper and staring Izuku down over the rims of his glasses. “What can you do?”

Izuku was afraid he was going to ask that. It was an open-ended question that gave Izuku zero ideas about how to answer. His mouth opened before his brain could catch up, ushered along by the hint of ice in Sir Nighteye’s gaze. “I can’t, uh…”

Crap. Izuku didn’t know how to continue with the curse still active. He had only gotten through his last conversation about his abilities because it had been ninety percent Principal Nezu guessing and only ten percent of Izuku vaguely referencing things in a backward way.

Sir Nighteye narrowed his eyes as Izuku took shallow breaths and darted his gaze around the room. Who, Izuku’s behavior? Nope, not suspicious at all.

Figuring he wasn’t going to get anywhere without Sir Nighteye being more forward with his guessing skills, Izuku attempted to recall his former discussion with Principal Nezu. How had he worded it then? How had Izuku implied that there was something preventing him from speaking?

A light entered Izuku’s eyes as he remembered, and a smile lit his face. “I physically cannot,” Izuku stated.

He probably shouldn’t have looked so proud at coming up with that answer, since he was essentially denying his new (mentor?) information. But thankfully, the pro-hero in question was made from good stock. Sir Nighteye continued to stare at Izuku, but his annoyance had faded away to make room for a spark in his eye.

Curiosity. Intrigue.

Izuku could work with that.

“Do you have something physically preventing you from telling me?”

Izuku sighed in relief. All Might had said that Sir Nighteye was smart, but Izuku had been worried that he wouldn’t play along like Principal Nezu had, even if it was a necessity. But he’d gotten the
It was a curse with physical repercussions, after all, not mental ones.

Izuku bobbed his head with a grateful smile. “Yes.”

“Do you know the limits of this thing that physically prevents you?”

“Um… a bit?” Izuku didn’t know how to answer that further. He knew the curse wouldn’t allow him to speak of his abilities or the supernatural directly. “I think so. I can—I know how to work around it. Sort of.”

Sir Nighteye hummed. He tapped his pen, furrowed his brow, and made a notation on the paper in front of him.

The clock continued to tick.

“Alright, then let’s begin with the most basic abilities. From what I am aware, witches have dominion over various areas of focus. I will suggest a power, and you can nod if you are capable of using it. If you are capable, I would like you to speak more to it, as much as you can.” Sir Nighteye paused and considered Izuku over the rim of his glasses. “Will this method work?”

Izuku winced at the blatant phrasing of ‘witches,’ but he nodded his head in acquiescence. Popsicle slithered around his wrist, curious but watchful.

There was a pause, during which Sir Nighteye seemed almost hesitant as he tapped consistent dots onto a paper.

“I will be honest. I do not have much experience with witches. Most of my knowledge was passed down to me. However, I know that most witches are capable of location spells?”

Izuku nodded his head.

Sir Nighteye raised an eyebrow, inviting Izuku to offer more information if he could.

Izuku assumed there wasn’t any harm in trying. “Uh, yeah, I can… figure out where someone is, if I have something of theirs. Or… focus on something similar.”

Izuku paused, wondering how to phrase a qualification to his previous statement. He couldn’t find someone who was hidden under containment spells, but he didn’t know how to specify that without using the word ‘spell’. Maybe electronics references? Those had worked with Principal Nezu.

“Unless they’ve blocked a, uh, signal from being sent out?”

Sir Nighteye noted something down. “Many witches also brew potions…”

Izuku shook his head in the negative.

“They can also create certain protections…”

Izuku nodded his head emphatically. He constructed protection wards a lot.

“… and bless certain objects with certain characteristics?”

Izuku nodded again, more hesitantly. “I’m best with the first, but I’ve done a little bit of the second. It’s not usually, uh, all that useful? It’s, umm… small stuff.”

Sir Nighteye made another notation on his paper. “And from your presentation at the Sports Festival,
I assume that you have a familiar, who seems to be able to shift into several different forms.”

Izuku smiled. He knew how to answer this one. “Snake. Wolf. Raven.”

Said snake slithered around Izuku’s wrist in amusement, hidden beneath the sleeve of his blazer. Izuku never seemed to specify what type of snake Popsicle was. He figured that mattered less than the general shape, whereas saying “bird” would never effectively describe how large Popsicle was in his bird-form.

Izuku hesitated, wondering whether he should expound any further on his familiar’s abilities. Mr. Aizawa had wanted to know whether the different forms helped Izuku in different ways, and Sir Nighteye might find that information useful if he was going to be training Izuku to—what, use his abilities?

Izuku still wasn’t certain about the purpose of this conversation. He only knew that Sir Nighteye wanted to train him. That he saw promise in Izuku, for some reason, and wanted to nurture that promise.

Izuku should probably focus on explaining things rather than looking at gift horses in their metaphorical mouths.

Sir Nighteye waited patiently, his pen lightly tapping at the page.

“Um, each of Popsicle’s forms have different abilities, and they can… help me?” Izuku took a deep breath and let it out, trying to figure his best way around the explanation. “Raven helps… mental abilities? Wolf helps physical. Snake heals. Which is kind of physical, but…”

Izuku trailed off, uncertain how best to clarify. He shrugged at his new mentor, hoping that explanation was sufficient.

Sir Nighteye hummed in response. “So your familiar doesn’t give you a different ability. It merely amplifies current abilities you presently have, except possibly in the case of the snake. Although I think I have heard of familiars aiding in their owner’s healing…”

Izuku didn’t know how to articulate his disagreement. He shook his head, searching for the right words. “Raven…”

There wasn’t a right word for it. He couldn’t say he got premonitions. He couldn’t say he could see the future. Izuku chewed at his lip, debating on a broad enough way to phrase his visions. All Might had intuited that Sir Nighteye likely already guessed that Izuku had some level of precognition. But how to word it?

Izuku decided to be as general as possible. “He makes me see things.”

Sir Nighteye’s pen clicked. “See things…” He paused, the seconds ticking on as he stared at Izuku, his steely gaze turned cold as ice.

The switch between the two was disorienting. Shivers raced up Izuku’s arms as he once again twitched in his seat. Izuku had said something wrong. He only wished he knew what it was.

“Do you know why I offered you an internship at my agency?”

Izuku shook his head ‘no,’ confused about the shift in topic. He had wondered at the reason behind Sir Nighteye’s offer. He hoped it was because of his performance at the festival. Or maybe that Sir Nighteye had been able to figure out that Izuku knew something was happening in Hosu and had
sent All Might to save a group of pro-heroes in danger. The Hero Killer. Tensei. Izuku hoped something good actually came of all that.

Sir Nighteye put down his pen and leaned back in his chair, hands clasped on the desk in front of him. The slant of his hips was formal, his tone measured. Izuku continued to shiver under his gaze.

“I saw something curious during the Sports Festival. A boy who had full control of his power. He seemed clever, inventive, empathic… until he had to fight his fellow students in a tournament. During his first fight, he had an emotional breakdown after his familiar left the stage. He would have lost if his opponent hadn’t forfeited out of some noble sentiment. And during his second fight, this boy did lose. Suffering yet another emotional breakdown on the stage, right after the fight began ramping up. For someone who was lauded by his teachers as being very powerful, this boy did not seem to have full control over his emotions, nor was he able to control his quirk while emotional. Therefore, despite the boy having strong physical abilities, I assumed his emotional and mental state must be weak.”

Izuku’s hands clenched into fists, guilt curling in his gut. All his sins were being laid to bare in a dry tone with a clock ticking in the distance and nowhere to hide his face. He wanted to crawl on the floor and bare his neck, but Sir Nighteye wasn’t his alpha. He wasn’t his pack leader. Izuku didn’t have to defer to him like that. He wouldn’t.

Even though… even though—

Sir Nighteye continued. “Then something curious happened. All Might jumped down to the stage before the end of this boy’s second fight and leapt away without another word. Indeed, he left the Festival entirely, despite the fact that he was supposed to administer the awards during the end ceremony. Ten minutes later, he appeared in Hosu City and saved three heroes from certain death. None of those heroes publicly admitted to how All Might found them or how he knew where they were.”

Izuku stayed silent, his gaze averted as he pretended to stare at the pro-hero’s desk. Popsicle hissed at the gooseflesh on his arms.

Izuku missed the slight smile that edged across Sir Nighteye’s face, lilting his voice. “I thought to myself: this boy, who seemed in full control of his power but kept having emotional breakdowns on stage… what if there was a reason for those breakdowns? What if there was a reason for All Might rushing down to the stage? What if he knew something about that boy? What if he knew that those breakdowns had a purpose and that the boy might know something was happening or was about to happen far away from the tournament? Somewhere that the boy shouldn’t know about, couldn’t know about. What did this mean about the boy whose only quirk was supposed to be the power to create explosions?”

Izuku’s hands gripped tight at his chair as he tried to keep the emotion off his face. He was torn between guilt and pride, confusion and recollection, his heart racing all the while. *What did Sir Nighteye want from him? Did he want Izuku to admit to it?*

Sir Nighteye looked at Izuku over his spectacles, his steely gaze once more assessing. “What if that boy’s ability was like mine?”

Another wave of chills raced over Izuku’s arms, and he felt that he might as well be shaking in his seat with the amount of emotion thrumming through him.

“Now, that boy sits in front of me, saying that *his raven* is the one making him see things.” Sir Nighteye leaned forward, his arms crossed on his desk as his tone developed a taunting edge. “But
that isn’t how witches’ familiars work, is it?”

Izuku’s eyes lifted to his, feeling cornered. Something between fear and tears lodging in his throat.

“Familiars don’t give witches their abilities. Familiars help witches control abilities that they already have.” The pro-hero’s eyes moved to the slithering form of Popsicle, peeking out from beneath Izuku’s left sleeve. “In which case, the boy is either being purposefully obtuse, or he doesn’t understand his own abilities.”

Izuku looked the man straight in the eye. “They aren’t my abilities, they’re Popsicle’s!”

The pro-hero’s eyes flashed. “That is a lie.”

Izuku shook his head emphatically, his voice soft but insistent. “No, it isn’t!”

Sir Nighteye’s voice sounded strained, with an undercurrent of iron. Strong and cold and unbending. “Then you obviously don’t understand your abilities.”

Sir Nighteye took a deep breath and sighed. He picked up a sheet of paper and looked down at it, his expression one of torn contemplation. His other hand fiddled with the edge of his glasses.

“From what I remember, mature witches generally have one or two abilities—one active ability and one passive ability. Or rather, one power that allows them to affect their surroundings, and one power that allows them to intuit or work with their surroundings. It is my belief, based both on your words today and your performance at the Sports Festival, that your active ability allows you to generate explosions and your passive ability allows you to glimpse either the present or the future.” He paused, his eyes glancing up at Izuku. “Would you disagree?”

Izuku’s eyes were pleading, his gaze darting around the room as though searching for an explanation. He couldn’t accept that assumption. He wouldn’t. “It can’t be my ability. I can’t do it without him!”

“Not being able to ‘do it’ without your familiar is likely an indication of how little you have trained your ability. No quirk or power comes easily. They must be trained. How much have you actually tried to train it?”

Izuku opened his mouth to retort but fell silent, his mouth still agape.

He had never really tried to train his visions, because they were Popsicle’s ability. There was no point in training them unless Popsicle was in raven form, and Popsicle was annoying in his raven form. He always made Izuku feel sick, his gut clenching, nausea swirling around his stomach. Izuku never got mad at Popsicle for transforming into his raven form, but Izuku rarely requested it.

And he’d always thought that was part of it. Popsicle’s raven form bringing visions and nausea and the inability to stay focused in the present, sensations and smells caused by things that weren’t there, ruined watercolors of dreams and visions that followed Izuku even when he was awake. And all of that only ever happened when Popsicle was in raven form… right?

Sir Nighteye hemmed. “So you haven’t trained it.” His eyes glanced toward where Popsicle’s head was sneaking out of Izuku’s cuff, his familiar hoping to catch a glimpse of whoever was riling up his soulbond. “To put this another way… have you ever had glimpses of the future when your familiar wasn’t in raven form?”

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed. He hadn’t… had he?
Izuku tried to think back to his recent visions. All of the nightmares about that alleyway started with Popsicle being in raven form, and the rest of them were a mix of Izuku using the meditation stone and having repetitions of nightmares from things he’d previously dreamed. And Izuku’s vision about the USJ attack—

*Wait, he had dreamed about those villains while having his first sleepover at Kacchan’s house, hadn’t he? And Popsicle had been a snake that whole night. Izuku distinctly remembered dreaming about Kurogiri and Shigaraki. How could he have dreamed about villains he’d never met, if Popsicle wasn’t in raven form?*

Izuku dug his canine into his lip, dragging the flesh back and forth as he considered the possibility further. *Was he capable of having premonitions without Popsicle transforming into a raven? Did Popsicle’s form just help amplify his ability, like Sir Nighteye was suggesting, or help Izuku realize when his ability was already trying to tell him something?*

Popsicle growing larger, his frame flying above the group of students, cawing as though to portent doom.

Izuku raised his eyes to look at Sir Nighteye, feeling lost. “I’ve had dreams. About people I couldn’t have known, and things…” Izuku hesitated. “But not that often.”

Sir Nighteye assessed Izuku for a few moments longer. His hand raised to stroke fingers against his chin, lips pursed in debate. Eventually he shook his head.

“We may have more to achieve during this week than I had originally anticipated. If you cannot consciously control the ability…” He sighed. “You must stop using your familiar as a crutch. I had some suggested exercises based on the potential of you having a precognitive ability. We can start with those and alter them accordingly.”

Sir Nighteye made a note on whatever record he was keeping of their conversation. Then he paused, a hand reaching up to rub his forehead as though in pain. More seconds passed. Sir Nighteye peered up at Izuku, glasses hiding his eyes, as his tone switched to something pensive. Or, Izuku felt, almost apologetic.

“Precognitive abilities are powerful things, and they are quite rare in society. They are also, to be quite frank, much of a curse. Most pro-heroes face internal battles with themselves about wishing they could have done more, that they were more powerful, that they could have prepared ahead of time. But with precognitive abilities, we are able to prepare ahead of time. This causes us to feel the burden of our choices even greater. What if we had made another decision? What if we had never interfered? Would the situation have ended better, or worse?”

Sir Nighteye made certain to catch Izuku’s gaze and hold it. “Being able to see the future, it charges a heavy toll. One of the reasons I issued you an offer to intern here… well, I hoped that I could teach you how to manage that toll. How to strengthen your body, but more than that, your heart.”

Izuku stared at Sir Nighteye, entranced. The shivers on his arms forgotten, his indignation erased. This man… could he really help him? Kacchan and Kirishima had told Izuku that he let his emotions get the better of him. And Izuku knew that. He knew he was weak. He knew that a lot of his weakness was caught up in his inability to manage the emotional weight of the things that had happened at the Sports Festival. (Losing Popsicle. The vision about Tensei. Wondering whether he’d made the right choice. Wondering how to talk to Tenya about it. Wondering how it would ever be okay.)

*Could Sir Nighteye teach him how to get rid of the emotions, or ignore them, or figure them out well*
enough so he wouldn’t be affected by them? Izuku needed that. He needed that more than he knew how to express. If he could handle the fallout, he might even be more willing to use his ability and train it to be stronger.

He just hadn’t had the heart for it, until now. He didn’t like living in a dream world, uncertain how to find the ground, knowing those dreams would have unintended consequences if uttered aloud. Could there actually be hope for him? Some way to stay tethered? Some way to focus on the future, and then forgive himself for it?

“But before we move on to discussing those methods, I have one more question for you.”

Izuku nodded his head, ready to answer anything. He needed this training. He needed it with every cell in his body and every thought in his mind. No doubts. No insecurities. What Sir Nighteye demanded of him, Izuku would do. He needed to do.

“Your active ability, I assume it is some sort of explosive force. I reviewed the Festival footage, and your explosions seemed to affect both solid objects as well as air. In order to suggest methods of training, I need to know the limits of your active ability. Is it just explosions? How big or how small can you make them? These sorts of things.”

Dread crawled down Izuku’s spine and settled somewhere in his gut. He wasn’t certain how to discuss the limits of the ability without directly talking about the ability itself. And he couldn’t… it wasn’t… Principal Nezu had guessed the entirety of the ability, last time, all except the part where Izuku defined that his power could be used in a certain area radius.

But Izuku had no idea where to start. The subtle nuances of that power were too tricky to name, especially when he wasn’t even supposed to open his mouth.

The clock ticked.

And ticked.

Sir Nighteye grew tired of tapping the paper with his pen. He sighed, leaning back in his chair as he leveled a look at Izuku. “I understand you have something physically preventing you from discussing your abilities… but this is important, Mr. Midoriya. Your active ability is, by and large, what you currently use to protect you. It is your most useful method of attacking in a fight for surprising the enemy and controlling their actions. I need to know more about it, if I’m going to schedule your time here appropriately.”

Izuku’s eyes cast about the room for an anchor, but everything around him felt like it was in flux. Mr. Aizawa had told him not to use his ability to pause time, not to talk about it. But Sir Nighteye seemed like he would be able to help Izuku better if he knew about it. Sir Nighteye knew things. He could help him. Izuku wanted to tell him everything. He wanted to tell him as much as he could. If Sir Nighteye knew that Izuku could pause time, would that change the training? Would that give him different ideas about how Izuku could use his precognition? Would he have recommendations about how Izuku could train his ability to pause time? Right now, Izuku couldn’t control it at all. He couldn’t control the size, he could barely control it triggering. Currently, that ability was more of a fear response than anything else.

And Sir Nighteye was the most likely person on the planet to be able to teach Izuku how to use those abilities, active and passive, simultaneously.

Izuku wanted to tell him… but how much could he say? How could he mention it at all? He’d never managed to, before. The curse seemed tightest around this specific aspect of his abilities, as though it
was the most dangerous facet to mention aloud. Or the most dangerous to the revelation of the supernatural world, in general.

After all, there was no such thing as a quirk that could pause time, just like there was no such thing as a quirk that could distort space. Even with quirks, physics was physics.

But magic... was something else entirely.

Izuku opened his mouth, even as stumbled around trying to construct the best analogy in his head. Analogies worked before. “I can...” speed up time. The words stopped in his mouth, blood pooling at the back of his throat. “I can control—” the speed of molecules.

_Damnit. Why couldn’t he say anything?_

“I can make—” the air speed up, the world pause, everything stop in one place.

Izuku shook his head, helpless, as he looked up at Sir Nighteye.

The man got up from his desk and walked around in front of Izuku, crouching down on his knees to peer into Izuku’s eyes. His voice was soothing. “It’s alright, try it again. Try to push past whatever forces your words to stop. Be as general as possible, and I can figure it out from there.”

Izuku had a bad feeling about this, but he was willing to try. He wanted to say it. He wanted to be able to tell him. This pro-hero had been watching him at the Festival. He had a precognitive ability similar to Izuku’s. He could help him control it! And if he could just mention this other ability, then Sir Nighteye might be able to coach him about how to combine them!

“I can make—” His throat closed up. Izuku shook his head. “I can m-make th-the—”

Blood pooled up in his throat, but Izuku tried to push through.

“Th-the a-ar—”

And then he was gagging on the blood pooled in his throat, leaning over to the side away from Sir Nighteye to hack out a blood clot the size of a cat’s hairball. Izuku tried to speak again, but the words wouldn’t come. Only more blood. Only more gagging, tears beginning to stream down his face. Only more globs of a metallic red mass forcing themselves out of his throat and onto the floor, until he was sobbing, and he was shaking, and he couldn’t do this he couldn’t do it he was trying so hard —

(And Todoroki’s voice whispered from far away. _Midoriya? Something feels wrong... Midoriya?)_

But Todoroki wasn’t there. He was never there.

Izuku felt hands around his shoulders pulling him up, the world spinning, the room moving, his feet tripping in a trajectory that he couldn’t comprehend past the mass in his throat and the way the words wouldn’t come out they wouldn’t he was trying he was the words—

A hand forced the back of his neck over a mass of white, and it took Izuku about ten seconds to realize it was a sink. Izuku kept hacking out blood clots as his shaking hands raised up to grasp at the edges of the basin, trying to ground himself. A hand was warm around his neck. Another hand reaching down to turn on the cold tap, scooping up bits of water to splash over Izuku’s face, his forehead, the back of his neck. A few more seconds, and it felt like he could breathe. His body cooling down, calming, the hazy edges of his vision receding into sharp focus.
Izuku glanced up to find a mirror with his own reflection peering back at him. Pale. Clammy. Afraid.

And Sir Nighteye was beside him, eyes glittering worriedly behind his glasses, one hand holding up Izuku’s chest and the other hand still soothing Izuku’s forehead and hair.

Izuku attempted a smile, but it was weak and shaky just like the rest of him, red liquid dribbling out the corner of his lips. “Sorry about that.”

The man in the mirror shook his head. “It is alright. I should not have pushed you like that. I apologize.”

Izuku watched as more tears leaked out of his eyes and down his cheeks. “I should—should be able to… but I can’t.” Izuku shook his head and stared helplessly down at the sink, splatters of blood still coloring the edges of the bowl. “I can’t…”

From the other room, Izuku could hear someone knocking, then the sound of a door opening and closing. A voice calling out, “Sir?”

The man in question looked down at Izuku one last time, checking whether Izuku was strong enough for him to let the boy go. Izuku nodded his head, pushing away from the sink to shakily sit down on the toilet directly beside. Sir Nighteye eyed him in something resembling pity or understanding, Izuku wasn’t sure, before he trailed his hand one last time over Izuku’s forehead and hair in a consoling gesture. Then he turned around and left the bathroom to greet whomever was on the other side.

Popsicle hissed, offering to bite the pro-hero if Izuku wanted.

Izuku chuckled and said that it wasn’t necessary. Sir Nighteye hadn’t meant to cause this. It was Izuku’s own fault for not stopping, for not trying to find another way.

A couple minutes later, a less pale version of Izuku exited the bathroom to see that Sir Nighteye was chatting with Togata Mirio, a third-year student at U.A. with a blonde cowlick, blue eyes, and a perpetual smile. As he walked over, Izuku could feel Sir Nighteye’s gaze searching his body, making certain he was healthy, scanning for any weakness. Izuku still felt shaky from the ordeal, but he was alright. It was nothing new, and Popsicle’s healing was working wonders from his spot around Izuku’s wrist.

Or was that Izuku’s healing? Izuku was confused about the line between his familiar’s effects on him and what were, supposedly, his own powers.

After introductions, Izuku and Mirio sat side-by-side in front of Sir Nighteye’s desk as the pro-hero leveled a stare at the both of them, his tone serious. “Mirio, I have asked you to come here today because I have great belief in your potential as a hero. My predecessor once sat me down for a similar conversation as what we are about to have. However, at the time, I did not have any examples or proof in front of me with which to understand what I was being told. That is why Mr. Midoriya is here.”

Izuku, who had been wondering in a rather innocent way about what the other student was doing here, froze in his seat. He suddenly had a bad feeling about where this was going.

Sir Nighteye sent Izuku what looked like an apologetic smile, before continuing. “Your education at U.A. has introduced you into the complex history of hero society, including the discovery of quirks, the rise of villains, and the subsequent rise of heroes. After your years of training with me, I believe that you understand what it means to be a hero and to use your abilities to protect and save others.”
Next to Izuku, Mirio blushed, but he had a hopeful and curious smile on his face.

“What you are likely unaware of… is that there are those in our society whose abilities are much different and much older than quirks. Hidden away from our society, there is a community of supernatural beings. They are much like us—they have abilities similar to quirks, they have their own society with its own rules, and they struggle with their own dichotomy of good versus evil. However, it is my understanding that the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ that they struggle with has a more direct impact on who they are and what they are capable of, compared to heroes and villains.”

Izuku cast his eyes at the ground, his head unintentionally bobbing in admission. That was definitely true.

“It would be difficult to give you an exhaustive list of what you might run into or who you might meet, but suffice it to say that if something exists in old fables, then it likely has some bearing on truth. Demons, parasites, shapeshifters, normal people with magical abilities… all of these are possible. Some of these entities are very old, and some are very young. All of them like to keep hidden from our society, and there is generally a rule about not discussing how or where these beings exist. We keep our worlds, by and large, separate from each other.” Sir Nighteye paused, his eyes focused on Mirio. “Do you understand why I am telling you this?”

Mirio’s gaze fell, a student searching for the answer to his teacher’s question. Izuku studied the other teen as his eyebrows furrowed and then relaxed, his shoulders tensing and broadening, his head raising up with a determined smile. “Because I need to be prepared to protect the good, just as I would protect the innocent.”

Izuku felt the need to cry. He tried his best to hold it back.

Sir Nighteye smiled. “Aptly put. There are many in that society who are in need of protection, and there are some in that society capable of protecting those in need. But there are times when our worlds cross, and I fear that such a time is not far off. And this… is where Mr. Midoriya here comes in.”

Izuku gulped.

This was illegal on so many levels that Izuku didn’t even know how to open his mouth.

Mirio turned his head to offer Izuku another bright smile.

Izuku appreciated that the other teen seemed to have enough energy and positivity to be his own freaking sun. But—

Izuku forced a reciprocal smile on his face, his eyes flicking worriedly to Sir Nighteye. He still felt weak from ten minutes before. “Are we… actually discussing this right now?”

Sir Nighteye leaned forward in his seat, his elbows like bookends on the table representing the beginning and ending of the upcoming week through his steely gaze. Or perhaps it was symbolic of the beginning and ending of something else that Izuku didn’t yet have the foresight to name.

“With what is coming… secrets will only destroy us.”

Sir Nighteye had no idea how true that statement was.

Of course at that time, neither did Izuku.
Sir Nighteye wanted Izuku to train his precognitive ability with a focus on combat. Predicting events far in the future had a broad set of problems, most specifically that Izuku couldn’t seem to pinpoint when something would happen, only that it would. But if Izuku primarily focused on the near future, a couple seconds or minutes ahead, then it would be a future that Izuku could directly engage with and change.

Apparently, Mirio would be coming to spar with Izuku for a couple hours every day. Mirio’s quirk allowed him to basically disappear and reappear by phasing through objects, including the ground. Since it was hard to predict where he would appear, fighting against him would help Izuku train his ability to use precognition during a fight to determine where an opponent would be. Izuku would need to tap into Popsicle’s ability (no—Izuku’s ability, it was Izuku’s ability) to “see” what was coming, and try to use that ability to see the close future, the actions his opponent would take, the weaknesses in his opponent’s fighting style.

Honestly, Izuku would settle for any proof that he could use that ability in a fight. Izuku had been able to see the near future once or twice, but it was always before something tragic and terrible was about to occur. A demon about to kill Kacchan when they were twelve. A demon about to kill Mr. Aizawa and brutalize Kacchan and Kirishima at the USJ. In each instance, Izuku foresaw the event about twenty to thirty seconds before the trouble would happen.

If Izuku could hone that ability, could learn to see things on a whim and not simply based on how traumatic they would be to his psyche… there would be a ton of potential for hero work. For saving people. For doing good.

Over lunch, Sir Nighteye answered any questions that Izuku pelted him with. Including: What would Izuku’s training consist of? Who did Sir Nighteye learn about the supernatural from? Why did he tell Mirio about that world? Why did he make Izuku be there for that conversation? (This question awarded Izuku with a stink eye.) Aaand moving on from that can of worms, how would Sir Nighteye like a more “show and tell” version of their conversation earlier that ended in Izuku coughing up blood in his bathroom?

Sir Nighteye was pro-‘show and tell.’ (No surprise there.) In the future, Izuku decided to start doing demonstrations instead of explanations. There was less blood that way.

Said demonstration resulted in more questions that Izuku couldn’t answer, more deductions about what Izuku’s powers were capable of, and a more thorough run-down of all the flaws of Izuku’s current physical and magical capabilities than Izuku was expecting at 12 p.m. on a Monday. It also failed to account for the fact that Izuku could pause molecules in time, in addition to speeding them up.

Nevertheless, Sir Nighteye sketched out a schedule for Izuku to follow over the next five days of his internship. In the morning, Izuku would train his foresight ability. That ‘training’ would involve a combination of meditation (Izuku couldn’t seem to escape the need for meditation, it was exasperating) and physical training. The meditation would be used to find the voice or sensation inside of Izuku that let him see the future, to tap into that voice, and to grow comfortable with listening to it rather than being afraid of what it would show him. The physical training sounded like it was going to involve Sir Nighteye throwing things at Izuku, Izuku wearing a blindfold, and Izuku training himself to know where and when he was going to be hit so that he could dodge.

Izuku foresaw a range of bruises on his body, before the week was out.
The schedule was thus: Izuku would arrive at the agency at the crack of dawn in order to meditate, then eat breakfast in the cafeteria, then do some more meditation, some relaxing tai chi (supposedly it was good for focusing your energy?), then have Sir Nighteye throw things at him, even more meditation… and then lunch. After that it was meditation again, sparring with Mirio once he got out of class, another round of—you guessed it—meditation, then dinner and the official right for Izuku to sleep. After potentially some more meditation.

Seriously, with the amount of meditation occurring. Sure, witch powers were primarily focus-based and internally-powered… but… that was a lot for one day. And then to do it five days a week?

Sir Nighteye warned that he would only walk Izuku through a few meditation exercises with some abstract goals for each method. Izuku would be expected to do self-guided meditations every day after Monday. Whenever Sir Nighteye wasn’t busy, he would come down to check on Izuku, determine what he had learned or achieved, and possibly walk him through some new techniques.

Which was… okay? Izuku was probably better off doing the meditation on his own than having someone breathing down his neck and distracting him. Still, Izuku’s schedule for the week seemed to contain very little ‘Izuku learning and/or mentoring from Sir Nighteye’ and a lot more ‘Izuku learning on his own with occasional commentary by Sir Nighteye’.

On one hand, the training mimicked how Izuku had learned most of his magical powers. On the other hand, it definitely was not what Izuku expected out of his field training. When Izuku heard the words ‘training’ and ‘internship’, he thought it would be more like the werewolves or the tengu. He expected some element of physical training, a one-on-one give-and-take with an instructor… and sure, Sir Nighteye would attack a blind-folded Izuku for a couple hours, but that only counted as physical training in a tangential sort of way.

Izuku tried to shake off his doubts. The only way that this training regime would succeed is if Izuku devoted himself to it 100% and believed that he could achieve the goals that Sir Nighteye set for him. Izuku didn’t have the time for doubt. He only had five days—less than five days, actually, by the time the schedule was set.

(Sir Nighteye’s voice interrupted Izuku’s internal diatribe, snapping at him to focus. Izuku apologized.)

The intense rounds of meditation had a purpose. Sir Nighteye believed that Izuku’s inability to foresee the future when Popsicle wasn’t in his raven form was a wholly internal problem. Supposedly, because Izuku thought about his ability in a certain way, his mindspace acted as a barrier preventing Izuku from exercising his ability without the help of his familiar.

Izuku tried to ignore the memory of his mother, telling him that familiars were more trouble than they were worth. That having a familiar would be dangerous for him. Young Izuku had refused her advice, because he had wanted a companion and a friend so badly. He wouldn’t accept that she was right about this.

She wasn’t right. Popsicle wasn’t trouble. Izuku had just become too dependent on him, and he could fix that. He could get better.

(Sir Nighteye snapped at Izuku to focus, again. Izuku blushed, another apology on the tip of his tongue, but Sir Nighteye interrupted him and told him to stop apologizing and start doing something about it.)

Izuku nodded, and he closed his eyes once more. He was supposed to be focusing on breaking that expectation in his mind of Popsicle being in control of his foresight. Izuku needed to believe that he
could do it. He needed to follow the mental pathways down from where the visions appeared in his mind to where they came from—a feeling that he had tracked to somewhere inside his gut.

But even when Izuku found the source of the visions, he couldn’t seem to tap into them. It was like knocking on a door that refused to open. Even when Sir Nighteye asked that Popsicle turn into a raven form, the door remained shut. They tried again, and again, but the door wouldn’t budge. It seemed to only want to open of its own accord.

Or maybe it only wanted to open when bad things were going to happen.

Izuku wondered if the door remaining shut was a good thing. If it opened and Izuku saw visions all the time… he could only imagine how distracting that would be. But what if the door was opened just a bit…?

Not that it was an actual door, of course. That was Izuku’s mental image of the presence in his gut. Or not a presence… sensation? Feeling? Spiritual link?

Izuku tried not to get frustrated. His precognitive ability made more sense when it was actually Popsicle’s ability. When the burden of the power became something inside of him rather than something because of Popsicle … it got a lot more confusing. Izuku became lost in internal sensations, localizing energy to specific parts of his body, searching with his mind for something transient and unformed. It made his head hurt, something behind his eyebrows growing dizzier the harder he focused, his gut beginning to feel strange. He felt nauseous and unbalanced. Like something was hooking into his navel and getting ready to tug.

Sir Nighteye’s voice shook Izuku out of his daze. The pro-hero announced they were done for the moment. Apparently, too much meditation in one sitting could tax the mind, and Izuku would need to be at full mental capacity for his sparring session with Mirio.

Izuku acquiesced and stood up, thanking Sir Nighteye for the water bottle handed to him. He looked at the clock on the wall and tried not to groan at how late it had gotten. Monday was mostly gone by the time Izuku had finished the first of his meditation sessions with Sir Nighteye.

Mirio appeared a few minutes later, with bright blue eyes and a peppy smile. Izuku tried to breathe himself back into his body as Mirio took them both through some warm-up stretches. And then Mirio proceeded to just take off his shirt, out of nowhere, even though Kacchan kept telling Izuku that he wasn’t supposed to strip his shirt off all the time whenever he got hot.

Maybe it was okay for Mirio to do it? But not Izuku?

Or maybe it was allowable when training?

For the first few minutes of sparring, Mirio seemed to be sizing Izuku up. Figuring out his speed, his agility, his offensive and defensive tendencies. After that, though, things sped up, and the resulting sparring session between the two of them was… enlightening.

And by ‘enlightening,’ Izuku meant terrifying.

Mirio promised that he would take it easy on Izuku for the first day, but Izuku had never seen anyone move this fast. Tenya was a speedster who used his engines to rush across the field or propel his kicks with unparalleled speed. But Mirio… Izuku could swear the older teen had the ability to teleport. How else could he quickly disappear from one spot, only to reappear on the other side of Izuku moments later?

Izuku definitely understood why Sir Nighteye thought they would make a good sparring pair. If
Izuku could only sense where Mirio would appear, then Izuku would probably make a fair opponent for the other boy.

Sadly, Izuku had only finished a single meditation session with Sir Nighteye—which, sure, had lasted a couple of hours, but it was still one session. Even with Popsicle flying in raven form overhead (a crutch that Sir Nighteye allowed Izuku for his first day), Izuku didn’t stand a chance against Mirio. Popsicle could help Izuku foresee disastrous events, specific deaths of people that Izuku cared about. But Popsicle couldn’t help Izuku sense where the next attack would come from.

Izuku would need to learn to do that on his own.

Over the next two hours, Izuku spent all his focus on dodging and trying to prevent himself from pausing time just so he could get a good hit in.

Sir Nighteye still didn’t know he had that ability. He hadn’t guessed, during the show-and-tell episode earlier, and Izuku didn’t know how to tell him. He wasn’t even certain that he should tell him, the more that he thought about it. He would need to ask Mr. Aizawa first. He would do whatever his pack leader suggested, whether that was to keep the ability secret or to figure out a way to divulge it to Sir Nighteye.

At the end of their fight, Mirio was very nice about the fact that he had beat Izuku ten different ways to Sunday. He even offered to stay for dinner in the cafeteria and talk to Izuku about how his own training with Sir Nighteye had gone. Izuku took him up on the offer, but they didn’t end up talking much about training. Instead, Izuku distracted Mirio into a conversation about the most important things he had learned under Sir Nighteye during his first internship.

Izuku had hoped to hear about what it took to become a great hero. Instead, a sobered Mirio leaned on his forearms and mused about how ideals and reality never quite remained in sync. How, even if you wanted to be able to save someone, sometimes a mission took precedence. What you did in a certain moment could impact several other heroes who were working to solve a specific case, and you couldn’t just let your heart run away from you. A hero had to be logical. They had to put the mission first, in order to save the most people. A hero’s life was full of hard choices juxtaposed next to shining ideals, and the hero’s journey was all about navigating your way between the two, in order to save the most people.

At the end of the conversation, Mirio nudged Izuku with a grin. “But I know it’s worth it, to see someone smile that I’ve saved. To give someone hope again.”

Something sad swirled in Izuku’s gut, and the feeling didn’t leave him even after dinner. Izuku walked up to the bedroom that he was using at Sir Nighteye’s agency, tangled up in his own thoughts.

He pulled out the paper with his schedule on it and tried to focus on the words. Before bed, Sir Nighteye suggested one last meditation session to calm Izuku’s mind and clear his head. The meditation would have been more useful if Izuku could focus beyond his scattered mind.

He tried to focus, he did. But he kept getting distracted by everything that had happened that day. Wondering about Popsicle’s abilities (that were Izuku’s?). Questioning what it meant to be a hero and how that fit into fame and finding a sense of purpose. Trying to figure out what he could do better in order to find that ‘voice’ of precognition inside of him, to open the door just enough to see a couple seconds ahead without getting overwhelmed by the sensation.

At the end of the meditation, Izuku still hadn’t found any answers.
Izuku eventually crawled into bed to join Popsicle. He felt exhausted and lost and lonely, Popsicle nuzzling at his legs as they settled in for sleep. Popsicle eventually shuffled up the bed to lay next to Izuku and licked at his cheek with a lopsided smile. Reminding Izuku of the past. Of cuddle piles, warm bodies, and the moon. The feel of river pebbles beneath his feet, the sound of laughter and rushing water. Running in the night, with only shadows to chase them.

Izuku found himself smiling at Popsicle and quoting the pack saying back to him. “You’re right. It was a long day, but the night is here.” Izuku closed his eyes and pressed his head to Popsicle’s. “And the night is where we are free.”

But was he free, really? Izuku shook that thought away as he tried to fall asleep, his mind backflipping in confusing arcs and swirls, trying to make sense of the day. His eyelids eventually shuttered close… only for him to wake up halfway through the night panting and clutching at his sheets.

There had been something in his dreams, something familiar.

Izuku searched the darkness of the room, but there was nothing there. He curled up next to Popsicle, stroking his fur and trying to calm the frantic racing of his heart.

The room was too silent, after the music in his sleep. Or was it singing? Izuku couldn’t remember, the shapes of his dreams having faded into the shadows of his room.

Something wasn’t right.

Izuku wished he knew how to control his precognition, better. Maybe then he would understand this sensation vibrating through his bones. Like he was about to step into freefall, and there would be nothing to cushion the blow.

The next morning, Izuku woke up feeling uneasy. The smell of an alleyway followed him to the bathroom, and he kept seeing shadows out of the corner of his eye while he showered. He wiped at the condensation on the shower door, revealing a streak of red that reminded Izuku far too much of a red scarf, jagged, fluttering around a corner.

Izuku shook off the image of a man with too many hands, the purple edges of a portal, a knife imbedded in the floor. He walked out of the shower and resolved to bring 100% of his focus to today. No distractions. No worries or deliberations or concerns. Just the present, the meditations, this power he needed to awaken in himself.

He couldn’t allow himself to be haunted by confusing nightmares that would never leave him, no matter how hard he tried to figure them out.

A couple hours later, Izuku was glad for his determination. Without his focus at 100%, Izuku probably wouldn’t have survived that first session with Sir Nighteye unscathed. The pro-hero hadn’t been kidding when he told Izuku that he would blindfold him and then pelt him with objects until Izuku could sense where they would hit. The tennis balls weren’t thrown with an excess of strength, but they still stung upon impact. Tough, blunt, fuzzy balls that should be cursed out of existence.

Izuku tried to sense where they were coming. At first, he thought he might be getting the hang of it, his ability to dodge the balls increasing by the minute. But then he realized that he was just focusing
on the sound of the balls flying at him, and he could only hear the balls because Popsicle was currently in his wolf form, which enhanced Izuku’s sense of sound. Izuku had to ask Popsicle to shift into snake form, since that form couldn’t help Izuku hear or predict anything.

Popsicle hissed at him and went to bask in the sunlight next to the window.

Having his familiar separated from him actually helped Izuku concentrate better. Forty-five minutes (and double that number of bruises) later, Izuku had a breakthrough. That feeling in his gut from the day before, that hook in his navel, reappeared. At first, Izuku tried to follow its sensation, but then he became too internally focused and couldn’t sense the balls coming at all. So instead of focusing on the hook, Izuku mentally grabbed hold of the thing in his gut and then willed the sensation outward.

The world seemed to buzz around him, almost like static. Everything around him tingled, goosebumps trailing over his arms, as he cocked his head and—dodged. A ball aimed for his right shoulder missed, while Izuku laid his weight on his left arm with his right shoulder edged away from the blow. Izuku shivered with the knowledge that another blow would be coming, although he didn’t know where from—to the left!

Izuku dodged again, leaned toward his other side. It wasn’t very easy to dodge while sitting on the ground, so Izuku stood up halfway to kneeling. His eyes still blindfolded, Izuku cocked his head. He tried to listen to the buzz and the static, a metaphorical hand still on the hook in his navel, guiding the sensation, linking into the knowledge, keeping open that door—

Minutes passed with only one out of every three balls hitting him, the queasiness of that hook in his navel building and building. Izuku felt off-balance, even though he was on all fours. The feeling of something coming, something imminent, grew stronger and stronger—but before it could pop or burst inside of him, before it could take Izuku to somewhere new, Sir Nighteye’s voice called out.

The pro-hero congratulated Izuku and told him that he could remove the blindfold. He said it was time for meditation, and then lunch.

Izuku begged off the meditation, saying that he didn’t feel well. He asked to do a repeat of their earlier tai chi exercises, which had helped Izuku’s energy feel more settled in his body. Sir Nighteye narrowed his eyes and seemed to be considering something. Whatever it was, he let it go and proceeded to lead Izuku through a stabilizing kata.

Izuku felt better by lunch.

That afternoon when Izuku sparred with Mirio, he asked the other teen to start out slow. He explained how he had started getting the hang of dodging during the ball-throwing earlier. He thought he could use that same hook-in-the-navel sense during sparring if only he could have a moment to prepare and try to link to sensation like before.

Mirio agreed, although he pointed out that he wouldn’t take it easy on Izuku after the first couple of minutes. That wasn’t what they were here for, after all, and Mirio would never get anything out of sparring together if he was always slowing down for Izuku.

And honestly, while it could never be said that Izuku moved from zero to hero in no time flat, he definitely improved over the course of two hours of sparring. Once Izuku got the hang of tapping into that hook in his gut (or forcing a foot into the opening of the metaphorical door), he was able to sense the world around him. At first, it seemed like a combination of Popsicle’s wolf form and his snake form, since the wolf form gave Izuku better reflexes and the snake form allowed him to sense vibrations. Izuku felt twitchy, the world vibrating around him and seeming to give off increased vibrations in an area where an attack would come from. But just because Izuku was able to sense
where the attack would come from didn’t mean he could successfully dodge it.

For most of the session, Izuku was able to accurately pinpoint where Mirio was going to appear next. He just wasn’t quick enough to dodge the blow, uncertain whether an attack would be coming from below or up high. Izuku tried to focus harder, to figure out the height of the blow rather than just the general direction it would be coming from… but that required him to wedge his metaphorical foot deeper into the door and open the gap wider.

The wider the door, the sicker it made Izuku feel. That falling sensation hovered on his consciousness while he dodged left and right to avoid Mirio’s attacks, stumbling every now and then as nausea churned in his stomach. Izuku wished that he could do more than dodge. He wished that he could predict where Mirio would be well enough that he could use it to his advantage, and possibly even land a strike of his own.

Izuku spent the last thirty minutes of their sparring session trying to land a hit. He would sense Mirio coming in from the left, so he would feign to the right and lift his right leg in a kick to where Mirio’s side should theoretically be. Only he overshot the kick and left his foot dangling in the air as Mirio appeared farther left, enough to come up in Izuku’s blind side. Izuku would scramble away and try to predict where Mirio would appear next. The other teen phased into the floor, and Izuku closed his eyes to try to sense the direction he would attack from. Then Izuku would wait for the last second, feign another kick, and then fall to his hands to change the trajectory of the kick once Mirio had solidified and tried to knock him down. Mirio had to phase Izuku’s foot through his stomach in order to avoid the blow, and Izuku had a couple seconds to be proud before his feet and legs fell to the ground through Mirio’s body.

Long story short, Izuku failed to hit Mirio every single time, but he satisfied himself with the knowledge that he would have landed more than one hit if Mirio hadn’t seen it coming at the last second and phased Izuku’s fists or feet through his body.

When he finished sparring with Mirio, Izuku was left feeling more nauseous and dizzy than not. Nevertheless, a proud smile wouldn’t leave his lips as he stumbled after Mirio to get some water. The older teen congratulated him, seemingly surprised that Izuku had picked that up as fast as he had. (Although to be fair, Izuku had been doing savate and judo for years using three out of his five senses, and he was simply trying to add a sixth sense on top of all that; if he could just learn to listen to it, he could treat it as another sense to guide his motions and reactions during a fight. Izuku just needed more practice.)

Mirio laughed when Izuku mentioned this and promised to go even harder on Izuku tomorrow.

Anticipation shuddered its way through Izuku’s chest, making the world seem brighter even though his muscles felt exhausted from moving in ways that Izuku hadn’t trained in months. If he was going to be moving like this in fights, then he really needed to keep up his muscle training and his old katas. Maybe add in some of the tai chi sets he was learning.

Somehow, Izuku got Mirio to stay for the evening meditation session (although Izuku couldn’t swear that Mirio was awake for the whole thing). By the end of that meditation, Izuku’s body had relaxed from the earlier sparring and gotten rid of most of his dizziness. The nausea, however, remained, and Izuku couldn’t seem to shake a lingering feeling of unease. But it had been a long day of dodging and meditating, and Izuku was honestly tired enough that dinner seemed to pass in a haze. He chatted with Mirio about how he was trying to use the sensing ability and what it felt like. Mirio called it Izuku’s ‘spider sense,’ but Izuku argued it was more like a ‘snake sense’ than a ‘spider sense,’ and Popsicle agreed. Mirio joked that Izuku just liked snakes more than spiders, which Izuku wasn’t able to deny.
The exhaustion of the day caught up with Izuku after dinner. As he walked Mirio from the cafeteria to the front of the agency, Izuku wondered if he would be too tired to dream.

That would be nice. The nightmares had been pretty constant, recently, and it was too overwhelming to use the meditation stone for more than a couple seconds. Izuku figured that was probably because he spent five hours a day meditating, now, and the tengu’s meditation stone was just too much for his mind on top of that.

Izuku was waving a final goodbye to Mirio when it happened. That feeling from earlier, his stomach lurching, the hook and the tether… it came back in full force, jerking Izuku’s hand to his chest as he stumbled backward, eyes zeroing in on Mirio as the other teen turned back toward Izuku, concerned. Izuku shook his head, trying to understand what was happening. A pause, his body reeling back into place, standing once more on two feet. Then the images tore through his mind in a torrent, and for the first time in weeks, the first time since Tensei and the Sports Festival, Izuku saw with vivid clarity what was about to happen.

He had been right. Izuku had seen the signs coming. The circle on the moon. This morning, in the shower. The man with hands—that was Shigaraki. The purple portal—Kurogiri. And the red scarf fluttering in the wind, the knife in the floor—that was the Hero Killer. The Hero Killer was in a bar with Shigaraki and Kurogiri, and they were fighting, a disagreement over something. Then the Hero Killer was going to appear in Hosu City.

_Hosu. Where Tenya was._

Izuku shuddered past a wave of fear and his mind went there-but-not, Todoroki seeming to appear beside him, but when Izuku looked up he wasn’t in Sir Nighteye’s agency anymore, instead he was with Todoroki and Endeavor, and Endeavor was saying “We’re going to Hosu City, to catch the Hero Killer, Stain,” and Izuku knew it was real, he knew it wasn’t just a vision. And then Izuku was back in his body in the lobby of Sir Nighteye’s agency.

The world swam around him, robbing him of his ability to focus. Tenya was in an alleyway, bobbing his head to some order that a pro-hero was giving him. Izuku shook his head, shoving it away.

Izuku took a deep breath, the world coming together in a series of jumbled images, aligning themselves like a film so that his mind could make sense of them. There was going to be a fight. Izuku had to be there. He had to be there. Izuku had the feeling that, if he didn’t make it, then everyone in that alley was going to die. Two pro-heroes.

Tenya.

_**Tenya.**_*

The next day, Izuku won’t be able to recall to Sir Nighteye or the police what was going through his head or how he made his way from grabbing Mirio’s arm to banging on Sir Nighteye’s private study. He won’t be able to explain how he knew where the pro-hero would be located (he should have been in his office, how did Izuku know to go to the study, Sir Nighteye hadn’t even told Izuku where his private study was).

But according to Togata Mirio, Izuku kept muttering the whole way to Sir Nighteye, little bits and pieces that Mirio was able to put together into a whole story. He relayed what he’d learned to Sir Nighteye, even as Izuku looked at a wall and through it, to somewhere he couldn’t see.

“That’s the direction of Hosu City,” Sir Nighteye told Mirio under his breath. “Midoriya is quite literally seeing where it’s happening.”
Mirio peered up at his mentor. “Do you think you can help him?”

Sir Nighteye walked over to Izuku and touched his arm, looking him dead in the eye. A couple seconds passed, his quirk activating, seeing all the possible futures ahead of Midoriya, searching through the futures of the next couple of hours. Going with Midoriya and joining the fight against the Hero Killer. Making Midoriya stay at the agency while Sir Nighteye went to Hosu. Going with Midoriya but leaving to join another fight, one against creatures called Nomus that were terrorizing the streets and the skies. How many would die, in each iteration? Which decision and range of actions would save the most lives?

A nightmare awaited them. A thousand choices that there simply wasn't the time to make. Heroes that there wasn’t the time to call. If only Midoriya had told him before.

Eventually, Sir Nighteye stepped away, a resigned look in his eye even as he obviously debated his next words. “No, we can’t help him. But we can help someone else.”

Less than an hour later, they were all three in Hosu City.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, folks!

I apologize for the length of time it took to get this chapter out... but it honestly took me two weeks just to get Sir Nighteye's personality down, and then I had to figure out what I wanted Izuku to learn while interning. I also had to make some decisions about Izuku's training that will impact how the Hero Killer fight goes, so advanced prepping made writing slow down significantly.

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter! Let me know what you did/didn't like. Next chapter will probably come out quicker, because it's just an interlude from Iida's perspective. But then the chapter after that will be the Hero Killer fight and, if that doesn't grow too long, the fallout afterward. I'm of two minds about the whole fight and the fallout, so I have to make a decision before I can write it.

Let me know what you're looking forward to! And let me know if you've guessed where I'm going with the Hero Killer fight, yet. I'm not sure if I've left enough breadcrumbs.
(Interlude) Tenya's POV in Hosu City

Chapter Summary

Hosu City was supposed to be a safe area to train. Tenya hadn't meant to get involved in this.

(Iida reflects on bits of his past & what it means to be a hero. Then he meets Hero Killer Stain.)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Tenya Iida signed up to do his field training underneath the pro-hero Manual in Hosu City, he hadn’t been looking for trouble. To be honest, until recently, Hosu City was considered one of the safer zones of Tokyo.

(All until he came, Stain, Hero Killer; serial killer, psychopath, villain, or something in between.)

Tenya wasn’t specifically looking for knife fights or bank store robberies or protection detail. He wasn’t looking for any more trouble than he would be prepared for as a first year intern from U.A. He was in Hosu City for his brother. Tensei Iida. Who was still being hospitalized in the middle of that district, two weeks after being nearly killed in an alleyway along with two others members of his team.

(Tenya had promised his brother he wouldn’t take any unnecessary risks, that he would think things through. He’d promised his brother that the next time a kid with too many freckles and curly green hair begged him to be careful, the next time that shaky hands and tearful eyes came to warn Tenya that there was danger around the corner, he would listen and do everything in his power to prepare, because sometimes small kids with freckles and tears knew what they were talking about even when there wasn’t an obvious reason as to why or how they could know any of what they do.)

Hosu City, a district in west Tokyo, had a crime rate well below the national average, and this was largely due to the two renowned pro-hero agencies that protected it. Team Idaten was an off-shoot of the larger Iida family agency that had been run (until recently) by Ingenium, the Iida family’s eldest son. The agency took care of villain situations that needed more planning and less brute force to solve. They had a team of experts in surveillance, tracking, reporting, and maneuvering that served them well. In contrast, the pro-hero agency championed by Endeavor was a well-known agency active in Hosu City. Endeavor was the Number Two hero, and he was notorious for having the most resolved hero cases in the entire hero industry that he finished through whatever means necessary. Which was typically straightforward violence.

Between the off-shoot of the Iida family agency and Endeavor’s own personal brand, Hosu City should have been a safe area to learn the hero skills that Tenya needed during his internship without putting himself in an unnecessary amount of danger. Tenya had chosen to do his field training with the pro-hero Manual, not expecting to gain much practical experience fighting villains. ‘Learning heroics from the ground up,’ that had been his theory. ‘Train with a pro-hero about how to patrol the streets and look out for the common good.’
He hadn’t intended to encounter the villain that had mutilated his brother and killed various other pro-heroes. He had promised Tensei—he wouldn’t endanger the Ingenium name by putting himself in situations he wasn’t yet prepared to handle.

But sometimes, those aren’t the sort of promises you can control.

Monday and Tuesday had both been relatively slow days in Hosu City. The attack on Team Idaten had caused more heroes to be called in to patrol the area, and so villains were keeping themselves (and their antics) scarce. Tenya spent most of his time following Manual around and learning what it meant to act as a ‘Sidewalk Symbol of Peace’. (Manual always had a fond, soft smile whenever he called their hero duties that. Tenya hadn’t worked up the nerve to ask his mentor what that phrase meant to him.)

Having pro-heroes walk the streets, smile, hold open doors, patrol the edges of empty alleyways—every small action of a hero’s day had its own part to play in making the city feel safer. Tenya learned how to walk with his back straight and his face relaxed into a friendly smile, rather than the stern seriousness that usually remained stuck on his face from years of trying to get his fellow classmates to abide by school rules. He found out that the armor of his costume wasn’t very well suited for reaching between tree branches or reaching down through grates. He made sure to note future costume improvements in his internship journal, determined to make the most out of his internship.

At night, Tenya was allowed to stay in an overnighter apartment at the agency, to get a feel of what it would be like to occasionally live day-in and day-out at a pro-hero agency. Yet every night, he found himself leaving that apartment. He found himself walking the three-and-a-half blocks to the hospital where his brother had officially been moved out of intensive care. He found himself at the door of his brother’s hospital room, knocking on the metal doorframe and checking on the shadows in his brother’s eyes. He did his best to chase them away by discussing what he’d learned that day and asking for Tensei’s input into what he could do better. Tenya wasn’t about to slack off during his internship, after all, and technically speaking he had two sources of insight and information about the pro-hero industry: Manual and his brother Tensei himself.

(“Two internships in one, eh, Tenya?” And Tensei had been smiling. Indulgent. Proud.)

With his arms making discrete chopping motions in the air, Tenya would fervently detail the cat in the tree, or the old lady who recognized the design behind his costume. Then he would hunch over in his seat, staring at his brother’s propped up form on the hospital bed, as he talked about how quiet the streets seemed, and how he wasn’t sure whether that should make him feel uneasy. He wasn’t certain what was normal, or what he should be worried about. Tensei would only grin weakly back at him and say that’s part of the job. Not knowing. Never being sure. Preparing as much as you could, and doing your best to keep people safe.

(“There are no hard and fast rules,” Tensei said. “Every future hero has to learn as they go.”)

Tenya hadn’t meant to track down the Hero Killer. Sure, a certain part of him wanted revenge (who wouldn’t? Stain had paralyzed his brother, surgically removed his ability to work as a pro-hero and to live up to the aspirations of those around him. Stain had destroyed Tenya’s faith and ideals, his hopes and his dreams, all in one hour; who did that villain think he was, what right did he have—). And yet whenever Tenya lay in bed thinking about the villain that did this, he found himself staring blankly at the edge of his pillow and being forced to reconcile himself with the fact that the blame wasn’t entirely on Stain. Tensei held some of the responsibility as well. His brother had been warned in advance of what was coming. He had followed up on the information, but never called another team in, someone who might be better suited to handling Stain’s abilities. His brother had been given
a potion that could heal his injuries and allow him to continue working as a hero, but Tensei had demanded that they use it on someone else. That was a noble sacrifice, and Tenya honored his brother for it… but sometimes Tenya would catch a glimpse of himself in the mirror, anger contorting his features, a flush of red on his cheeks and a glossiness to his eyes, because he couldn’t for the life of him understand his brother’s decision. He could respect it, but his mutated aspirations wouldn’t allow him to accept it.

Tensei would have been able to save more people as a pro-hero than the kid who he demanded that the potion be used on. It was illogical to use that potion on someone who could do less good in the world, so why did he…?

Izuku had brought the potion to save him, and his brother was so close to resuming his role, upholding the Ingenium name, and maintaining their family legacy and ideals. So why wouldn’t Tensei let them heal him?

Tenya tried not to be angry. There was no use in the anger. It was Tensei’s choice. All of it was a confusing slew of Tensei’s own decisions and the bad luck of him ducking into the wrong alleyway with a villain who had a power in direct opposition to Tensei’s own.

(“He has some paralytic quirk. He cut me, and then I just… couldn’t move. I only ever learned how to fight if I could move. That was my failure as a hero, Tenya. You have to be better than me. Promise. Promise me that you’ll find a way to fight, even when you can’t move.”)

When he wasn’t too busy struggling against the anger in his chest, the reflexive clenching of his fists, or the static that buzzed between his ears when he tried to shove all his doubts away, Tenya focused on channeling the whole situation into a lesson to be learned.

Lesson #1: Always be prepared.

Lesson #2: You didn’t have to be a pro to be a hero. No matter what other people said, to Tenya, Tensei was still a hero. Tensei would always be noble in his heart, even if he couldn’t patrol the streets and use his ideals to protect the populace. A true hero didn’t have to don a suit of armor in order to showcase the heroic standard.

The second lesson was a surprisingly difficult one to contend with. Tenya still had a lot to learn on what it meant to be a hero, inside his heart, rather than just seeming like a hero to his peers. He felt like he constantly fell short of the mark. Tenya wanted other students to follow the safety protocols, whereas a hero would focus on wanting them to be safe. Tenya wanted to do well on the entrance exam to prove his capability as a hero, but a true hero would have focused on saving people in need regardless of whether an exam was taking place. (Tenya had seen the zero-pointer robot destroying the street, he’d seen that Uraraka was injured and couldn’t move, but he didn’t—he didn’t even try—what kind of hero could Tenya become if he didn’t even…?) Tenya didn’t want to feel the guilt of leaving her behind, so he blamed it on the circumstances. It was always the fault of the circumstances. Not Tenya himself. If he had imagined that the danger during the exam was real, rather than some contrived fiction for them to fight through, then he would have done something different. He would have been a hero, when it counted.

(Tenya had once asked Tensei what he was most afraid of, and his brother had stared down at his hands. “Selfish choices. Like… trying to keep myself safe rather than protecting someone else’s life, and having it haunt me. I don’t want to be someone who makes that choice.” And a young, bright-eyed Tenya had ingrained it into his brain: To be a hero was to be selfless. To be a hero was to save lives.)

When he thinks about it later the next day, after the Hosu attack, Tenya will consider that maybe he
was meant to run into this alleyway of death. Maybe he was meant to see the flutter of Stain’s scarf disappearing around a corner. Maybe he was meant to warn Manual that it seemed like someone was in danger. Maybe he was meant to follow Manual into that alleyway and try to save a hero from the same villain that had attacked his brother.

Maybe this was simply the world’s way of showing Tenya the true purpose of being a hero. Past making people smile. Past saving cats from trees. Past patrolling the streets to make people feel safe. It was about putting your life on the line, to protect the lives of others. It was about thinking, moving, and reacting quickly enough that you could prevent bad things from happening to good people. It was about doing whatever you had to do, in order to make that dream a reality.

It was almost ironic; he couldn’t even register at first that the villain halting halfway down the alleyway was the Hero Killer. Covered in black leather, metal spikes, bandages, and sheathed knives that lined his torso from hip to neck, with a red scarf and a white mask that hid most of his features from view, Tenya wasn’t able to tell whether alleyway man had a nose, much less that the villain had characteristics similar to the villain that attacked his brother. Tenya eyed the sword in alleyway man’s hand, wondering what his quirk was, waiting for Manual to tell Tenya how to act. Interns weren’t supposed to move to act without their mentor’s permission. It was in the handbook. But there was a man with a sword, standing over a collapsed man on the ground. He looked like the pro-hero Native.

In that first split second of rounding the alleyway, Tenya didn’t know what to do.

(“I think hesitation is what gets most of us, in the end.” The shadows in Tensei’s eyes were darker today. “Hesitating, or moving too fast without thinking. The best pros can think and move at the same time, but with how fast our quirk allows us to go... I never felt like I did that bit right.”)

Hesitation didn’t stop his mentor. Manual had been prepared, managing to drag along several gallons of water from a nearby fire hydrant. Two seconds into that alleyway, Manual had finished verifying that Native was still alive on the ground next to the trash bin. Manual immediately used his water to attack the villain, nodding his head at Tenya while he aimed three different jets of water from different angles at weak points in the villain's armor. Tenya assumed that he’d received permission to help, so he fired up his engines and rushed forward to get Native out of the danger zone.

He had only just started running when he realized that water didn’t seem to slow the villain down. The villain was fast, much too quick, his speed almost rivaling Tenya and his family’s engine quirks. A black and red streak came arcing toward their end of the alleyway, and then Manual was down on the ground, the villain licking his blade. Silver-white eyes raised to stare at Tenya, who was still halfway up the alleyway, continuing to head toward Native to carry him away from the threat.

Tenya’s feet started hesitating and slowing down as he realized that Manual wasn’t getting up. His mentor was paralyzed, his pupils flitting around his eyes in a haze of panic, and it was only then that the recognition hit Tenya like a bullet train. He was mid-step, engine quirk activated, running straight toward someone who needed help, when Tenya realized that he knew exactly who the villain was (“He has some paralytic quirk,” and Tensei seemed haunted), of course that’s who the villain was (a blood-red scarf, armed to the teeth with blades), of course it wouldn’t be someone else in a back alley attacking heroes and dragging them away from the light.

Stain. The Hero Killer Stain.

Anger and guilt combined and curdled in Tenya’s gut, but he pushed the emotions away. He stumbled to a stop, trying to make a plan as fast as his brain could process his surroundings and the danger he was in, that both of the heroes were in. Tenya braced his feet against the ground, planning to aim his trajectory for Native and come back for Manual.
His mentor croaked from the ground, “Iida, run, get help—”

Then Stain shoved his blade deep in Manual’s leg to shut him up.

Panic surged through Tenya. He couldn’t let two pro-heroes get hurt in front of him. He couldn’t leave them here even if he was being told to run. That wasn’t what heroes did.

(To be a hero was to be selfless. To be a hero was to save lives.)

Hero Killer Stain had a paralytic quirk. If Tenya ran away now, it didn’t matter whether he found another pro-hero to help. These heroes would be dead before he could get back. Manual, a simple man who had become a hero so that he could be a ‘Sidewalk Symbol of Peace’ and protect the common person on the street, who had offered to mentor him out of pure sympathy for Tenya’s situation with his brother. Manual was a good person, Tenya couldn’t leave him here alone.

(Tenya had once watched a newsreel of All Might. His brother’s arm was around him on the couch, and he was too young to really get what heroes were, but All Might was standing tall and smiling at the camera and evading answering a question about how his quirk worked. He said, “Your quirk doesn’t define who you are as a person.” And Tenya told his brother about how the other kids at school seemed to all define themselves by their quirks, and they said that good people had good quirks, and bad people had bad quirks. Tensei shuffled Tenya’s hair with a smile and said, “Well, you know who that is? That’s All Might. The greatest hero there is. And he’s probably trying to give hope to all those kids out there that are unsure of themselves because of their quirks, no matter what their quirk looks like or what it does. It’s the job of a hero to give people hope.”)

Tenya took a sweeping glance of the alleyway in front of him, looking for leverage. Looking for anything that would give himself and the heroes some semblance of hope in this fight. There were two pro-heroes down, one trash can, two loose trash bags, one student in a suit of armor, and a villain whose blades could almost certainly cut through steel. Tenya was still far away, but he could close that distance swiftly.

Could he cross it quick enough to shove the Hero Killer out of the way, grab one of the paralyzed heroes, and escape? But then he’d be grabbing one and abandoning the other.

There wasn’t the time to consider plans and contingencies. There was only the time to rush in, use his speed against the Hero Killer, and aim to save both heroes at once.

Plus Ultra.

Tenya whispered a quick apology to his brother under his breath (“You have to be better than me. Promise...”) as he rushed toward the Hero Killer. He saw the blade raised seconds before he arrived, more than enough time to pivot and kick the trash can to the opposite alley wall, the Hero Killer dodging to the side as though he expected the kick to hit him instead. The villain raised his sword to slash Tenya’s kidneys through the back of his armor, only for Tenya to change his angle of momentum with his engines and kick the Hero Killer upside the head.

The Hero Killer stumbled forward, slightly stunned, right before the ricocheted trashcan hit him in the back, its force causing him to fall to his knees. Tenya had a few seconds to celebrate his victory and try to use his engines’ momentum to hurl Manual far away from the fight, and then the Hero Killer was behind him, another cut almost slicing through him by a hair’s breadth.

Tenya barely had time to strategize that his back was to the wall, the hero Native lying several feet away with the Hero Killer between them. Tenya had a brief thought that, if he could use Recipro Burst to take advantage of the ten seconds of burn in order to get Native to the other side of the
alleyway near to Manual and the main street beyond, then he might just have a chance.

("There are no hard and fast rules. Every future hero has to learn as they go.")

Decision made, Tenya charged up Recipro Burst, its incredible speed too fast to follow; he curved in an arc to pick up Native while avoiding where the Hero Killer stood poised in the center of the alleyway prepared to stop him.

And then—

Tenya won’t have words for it, later. That elation. The moment where he managed to think that he might be good enough, he might be able to save both of them.

He won’t have words for how fast the Hero Killer was able to move, outpacing Tenya, seemingly three steps ahead, goring Native into the wall with one of his blades while throwing a perfectly aimed kick of his own and shoving a boot spike through Tenya’s armor and into his back, Tenya’s helmet knocked off with the force of a disarming blade that came out of nowhere.

Between one second and the next, Tenya stumbled and fell, trying his best to land on top of Native in the vain hope of protecting the pro-hero’s body with his own.

("You have to be better than me. Promise.")

The Hero Killer clucked his teeth above Tenya’s paralyzed body, and all that Tenya could see were black leather boots moving into his field of vision, metal knee pads suddenly lowering as the man bent down, a calloused hand tilting up Tenya’s chin.

Tenya’s face was angled high enough that he was forced to stare into the Hero Killer’s silver-white eyes, his body incapacitated inside a metal armor shell that could do nothing to stop the villain’s blades.

The Hero Killer seemed to growl and hiss at the same time, like something was caught in the back of his throat. “You’re just a kid. What’re you doing here…”

A knife dangled in front of Tenya’s face, but it never slit his throat.

Chapter End Notes

Hello folks!

I wanted to thank everyone for your comments. I can get a bit lost about whether this story is useful for anyone other than me and my weird BNHA needs, so I’m glad that others seem to be up for the ride as well. Your reviews have definitely been helping me get through these past few chapters. (All the action and heartache for the characters can be difficult to write.)

I hope you liked the chapter! I wanted Iida to have his own POV chapter mainly because his character has a pretty large divergence from canon, for this arc, and I wanted him to have his own time to show you that. Plus, I got to insert a bit more Tensei, even if it was in flashbacks. Tensei is a friggin’ GEM.

Hopefully, I will have the next chapter out in a couple weeks. It should encapsulate all
of the Hero Killer fight and, if our teen heroes deserve it, maybe some hospital scenes. The Hero Killer fight is going to go much differently than canon (as you can see from Tenya's POV above), so I'm crossing my fingers that you all will enjoy it.

What do you think--do you prefer chapters ending in cliffhangers, or chapters that have some resolution post-battle?
When Izuku rushed off the train in Hosu City, he was ten steps toward a direction that just felt *right* when Sir Nighteye grabbed his arm and wheeled him around. Izuku stumbled to a stop, the hood of his black sleeveless vest falling down to reveal Popsicle, whose red eyes flashed as he hissed in indignation around Izuku's neck. Mirio caught up to them instantly.

Sir Nighteye narrowed his yellow eyes at Izuku. “We have discussed what you are going into—”

“I have to go now—”

The pro-hero’s grip tightened on Izuku’s shirt. “We have discussed what you are going into, but I do not think you fully understand your limitations yet. You are a first year student who does not have a provisional license. You cannot *intentionally* engage with a villain and use your quirk to subdue him.”

“But I don’t have a quirk—”

Sir Nighteye cut Izuku off, his warning fast and to the point. “Your explosion ability is currently licensed as a quirk. If you use it to subdue the Hero Killer, you will be expelled from U.A., a mark will be placed on your record, and you may never be able to obtain a hero license. Ever. Do you understand me?”

Izuku’s heart raced, his mind still caught somewhere several minutes ahead in an alleyway that he was being told he couldn’t fight in. His eyes flitted around the train platform looking for a weapon, something, anything that could help him fight in a legal way. It was hard to remember which laws were which, everything getting jumbled up in his head as the adrenaline raced through his veins.

*Tenya, he had to save Tenya.*

Izuku’s head nodded automatically at Sir Nighteye’s warning even while his mind whirled.

*He understood that he couldn’t attack the villain. He just didn’t know what his alternative was.*

Sir Nighteye’s grip loosened on Izuku’s vest. “You cannot use your quirk except in self-defense. But if your familiar were to fight… he would only be protecting you, correct? And there is no law that
allows me to explicitly order a familiar if its bonded is in danger. He can defend you. To a certain extent."

Izuku’s eyes widened, their vivid green glow still bright from his vision before the train ride. “So Popsicle can fight him, and I can… I can predict his movements, fight him physically. That’s allowed, right? If it’s to protect someone?”

“At most, you’ll get tagged with a misdemeanor,” Mirio offered. His eyes looked worried, but his mouth was all smiles. “Good luck with your friends—”

“I’ll send someone when I can,” Sir Nighteye finished for him, seconds before screams echoed down the tunnel and the train station shook, the sound of an explosion reverberating around the room. All three of them ducked, looking around to make certain the station’s foundations were unaffected. Nothing seemed to be crumbling.

Izuku took a deep breath; he barely allowed himself time to wonder if someone outside the station had an earthquake quirk before he forced himself to focus.

Izuku firmed his shoulders back, face set but eyes worried, as he raised his gaze toward Sir Nighteye. “I won’t be alone. I’ll figure it out. We all will.”

Sir Nighteye nodded back, his yellow eyes hooded with unvoiced concern. Then he turned in the opposite direction and gestured for Mirio to follow him at a run. Other citizens on the train platform were huddling together, some of them trying to rush on the nearest train while others debated if getting on a train was safe or if they were like to fly off the rails. It wouldn’t be the first time that trains were a primary source of collateral damage for a villain attack.

A feeling rushed through Izuku’s gut, telling him that he needed to do something.

Izuku looked back at the train he had exited with Sir Nighteye. Popsicle cawed next to his ear, having transformed into a raven sometime during Izuku’s conversation with Sir Nighteye. Izuku closed his eyes and raised a hand to pet Popsicle’s feathers, breathing deeply and focusing on the train to his left.

That train felt safe. It wasn’t going to be harmed.

Izuku opened his eyes and nodded his head at Popsicle. His familiar took off with another caw, his raven form growing larger as he flew higher and higher above Izuku’s head. Eventually, his massive form and shrill caw drew the attention of the frantic passengers surrounding them.

Izuku gulped and raised his voice, knowing he was too small to stand out above the crowd but hoping he could at least project his voice loud enough. “The Yellow train is safe! If you get on this train and head away from the city, you won’t be hurt!”

Silence reigned on his corner of the platform, while a whole slew of people whipped their heads from side to side, uncertain what to do. Izuku’s heart was racing. His gut was telling him to stay put, but he couldn’t waste much more time here. He needed to get to Tenya…

A couple more seconds passed before, as a cohesive mass, the people on the platform took his suggestion as an order and began boarding the train. Some citizens standing around other platforms rushed over and began forming lines to get on the Yellow train instead.

His gut relaxed. Izuku held his elbow aloft and called Popsicle back to him as he began running toward the North exit of the station, following instinct and the sixth sense that was pointing him like a compass toward the alleyway where Tenya was likely already fighting for his life. He was almost
at the escalator when a man with fox-like features stopped him. By his uniform, he looked to be a local guard for the Hosu City station.

“What did you mean about that train being safe?”

Izuku inched closer toward the escalator, something in his chest telling him that he had to run, he had to leave now. “The Yellow train, it’s not going to be attacked.”

The guard looked sharply over at the train and the three other trains in neighboring platforms. He jerked his head in their direction. “And what about them?”

Izuku didn’t have time. He didn’t have time he didn’t have time he didn’t have time.

But he also couldn’t just leave these people here, on this dangerous platform, if he could do anything in his power to make them more safe.

He took a deep breath and tried to relax himself. This city was being attacked by things Izuku didn’t yet understand. There were explosions, panic in the streets. Of course people would want to leave. If he could figure out which trains were safe, then more people could leave the city quicker and get to safety.

Izuku closed his eyes, Popsicle fluffing his wings on Izuku’s shoulder. He focused on the feel of Popsicle’s claws sharply digging into his clavicle. He turned his mind’s eye away from a blue light flickering amidst the shadows of an alleyway, some pro-hero surrounded by water, Tenya standing beside him. Instead, Izuku centered his mind on the feeling of a doorway in his gut, something that could be opened the slightest bit more in order to predict further ahead. Izuku focused on the here and the now as he put a hand to his gut and thought about the other trains, one safe and three in question.

Seconds later, Izuku’s hand fell from his stomach, and he looked back up at the guard with a determined nod. “The three on the left are safe; the one on the right isn’t.”

To his credit, the guard didn’t hassle Izuku any further. He headed off to direct the frenzied people away from the unsafe train and toward the other three platforms that they should board. Living in a quirk-based society had its upsides sometimes, and having people in positions of authority listen to a small freckled boy that could sense the future was one of them. In the haze of panic, Izuku hadn’t even needed to show credentials. The guard had simply listened to his predictions and acted accordingly.

Izuku hoped he hadn’t led the guard astray.

The flash of the alleyway barreled through Izuku’s mind like a migraine, rushing hard and fast with the force of a train. Izuku braced himself against the ground, reaching once more with his mind toward Tenya. The blue light of the alley. A figure on the ground. A dark figure with a sword, red scarf fluttering as he turned.

Izuku pivoted around and booked it up the escalator and out of the platform. His feet drove him toward the needle on his internal compass.

Tenya, Tenya, Tenya…

The closer he got, the headier the feeling in his gut became. Like danger, trouble, and something that had the slightest tang of Fate.
Izuku felt like he was almost there when he stopped mid-run and almost ran into a pole. His body swayed, his vision swam in swirling tones of grey, and his gut felt strange. Off-kilter but settled.

_Todoroki._

His green eyes flashed up to look at Popsicle. The raven’s red eyes stared back, before he bobbed his head and took off in the opposite direction of where Izuku had been running. Popsicle flew toward the direction that Izuku could feel, in his gut and in his chest, that Todoroki was standing.

Izuku moved to circle around the pole, not having any more time to waste. Popsicle would be back soon with Todoroki. Izuku just had to last until Todoroki could get there. Maybe if they were lucky, Sir Nighteye would be able to send someone, too.

Izuku took off once more in the direction of the alleyway, sensing more than knowing that he had three more blocks to go. His fists clenched as he ran, fingers digging into the pads of his fingerless gloves. His yellow kneepads pinched at his legs, and Izuku tried to drag his mask up to cover the bottom of his face, but it kept falling down. Cars and alleys passed by in a daze, shop fronts blurring next to lamp posts and neon signs.

Two more blocks to go. The hood of his sleeveless vest covered his green hair, so if his mask would stay up, then the only physical features that the villain would be able to recall would be Izuku’s eye color. And Izuku would prefer to not have more people after him than he already did, why wouldn’t the mask stay up—

One more block.

Izuku tried to sense how far away Popsicle was, wondering if he could gauge how long he needed to last in this fight on his own, with only his fists to protect him. And a pocketful of stones in case shit went sour.

The entrance to the alleyway loomed closer, the dark shadows seeming almost like a beacon in the night. This section of the street was mostly empty, the attacks happening several blocks away having driven most of the populace toward the trains or into their homes. Anywhere that was off the streets was the right place to be.

Which meant that there was no one around except Izuku to hear the pleading scream echoing down the alleyway.

“Please! He’s just a teenager. Please let him go…”

Izuku’s gut clenched, and fear made his saliva taste sour and metallic.

_Tenya Tenya Tenya…_  

Izuku rounded the edge of the alleyway. The blue lights of a loading dock halfway down the alley served as a light source, enough to see two pro-heroes on the ground and one Tenya Iida laying atop one of bodies. He was holding one of the pro-heroes, as though he had tried to escape with him before being knocked down. The Hero Killer was kneeling next to Tenya’s metal armor, swinging a knife back and forth and pulling at the edges of his own shaggy black hair.

Izuku could hear his raspy voice from the edge of the alleyway, and the image sent shivers down his arms. It wasn’t like walking into a nightmare. It was his nightmare, come to life, not settling for
haunting his dreams. Sir Nighteye said it best. Seeing the future was worse than living it. Once you were living it, you could take action. Until then, visions could only haunt you.

And the Hero Killer had been haunting him for weeks.

None of that, however, explained why Izuku felt frozen in front of that alleyway, as though he was waiting for the Hero Killer to reveal himself, one way or another, before he stepped forward and interfered. As if three unmoving bodies weren’t proof enough. Izuku waited at the edge of the shadows, wanting to judge for himself the verdict.

*The Hero Killer was a villain, but villains were humans; they could be saved. Could he?*

Crouching on the ground next to Iida, every part of the Hero Killer looked jagged and worn. The fluttering red scarf that Izuku had been seeing in his visions—ripped. Stained bandages wound around his arms, and he didn’t seem to have a nose, white linen covering the section of his face where a nose should be. Even his voice sounded rough, raspy, like something torn apart or unused.

Izuku watched the Hero Killer sheathe his blade and grab hold of Iida’s arm. Izuku prepared to do something drastic at the first sign of Tenya’s life being in danger.

Instead, he heard the Hero Killer begin monologuing as he picked Iida up off the cement. “You knew you were outmatched, but you didn’t hesitate to try to save them. I respect that.” Iida’s body lifted higher. “But if you get in my way again, I’ll have to stop you, and I would have to target a more vital organ to keep you down.”

The Hero Killer stood up and straightened his back, a long jagged shadow being cast behind him by the blue loading dock lights. He had Iida’s elbow in his hand. With a single arc of his arm, the Hero Killer lifted Iida off the ground and threw him against the other wall of the alleyway to land in a pile of trash.

A soft landing for such a heartless throw.

Why the Hero Killer had moved Iida from his spot on the ground at all… that was a larger question.

“Stay down, boy.”

Stain turned around to deal once more with his prey, but the slow slide of his head jerked short at the visage of the main street’s lights haloing Izuku’s figure at the alleyway entrance. Stain paused at the sight of another intruder. There was a brief second of Stain’s eyes raking over Izuku, measuring him up, determining age and gender. Izuku’s face was in shadow, but he was small, always had been. There was no way he could be confused with an adult.

Stain scowled, his silver-white eyes flashing in the blue lights of the alleyway. His voice echoed down the alley, raspy and worn. “This is no place for children. Leave, before I consider you a threat.”

Izuku took a step forward into the darkness, away from the streetlights. His eyes stuttered to Tenya’s prone form atop the trash before returning to the Hero Killer’s predatory gaze. Izuku licked his lips, trying to find words. All the breath in his body felt like it had been torn out of him, leaving in its place a vacuum. A cold sweat. A strange sense of tension that built between him and the Hero Killer with every heartbeat until he swore he could feel this stranger in his bones.

The Hero Killer took a step forward, head tilted down and eyes glowing up at Izuku. A swath of light from the alleyway illuminated his eyes as he squinted, his head cocked as though he was trying to listen to a far-off sound or discern what Izuku was doing here. His mouth opened to speak… only
Izuku shivered, goosebumps prickling out over his arms as his heart raced.

Izuku hadn’t felt like this in years. Like Fate had reared her blind head and decided to slam two people into a meeting, regardless of the consequences.

It wasn’t just his bones. Izuku could feel this stranger in his soul. A feeling of familiarity so ripe that he almost reached out a hand to touch the darkness.

There was an instant of the Hero Killer seeming disoriented as well, as he turned away from Izuku and toward the wall. Stared down into the shadows. Held a hand to a blade at his hip as he ground out another warning. “Don’t come in here, kid. Run home.”

As if Izuku had a home. As if he wasn’t still searching for one.

Izuku shook his head to dispel the feelings of fear and Fate as he took another step forward, gesturing toward Tenya. “That’s my friend over there, and those two men are bleeding. I can’t just leave them here.”

Stain’s eyes narrowed back to slits as he turned sharply toward Izuku, responding to Izuku’s challenge. He took a step forward, eyes glowing even brighter in the reflection of the blue alley lights. His shoulders seemed to grow broader, lips curling back as he growled, “Last. Chance.”

Izuku licked his lips, regretful. He didn’t understand what he was about to walk into. He knew this place as a nightmare, but the Hero Killer was giving him an out. He wasn’t attacking or moving to harm anyone who passed by. He’d taken down Tenya, but then moved him away from danger. Izuku’s heart was jackrabbiting offbeat as he debated what to do. How to get the pro-heroes and Tenya away from the Hero Killer. How to talk the stranger down. How to predict what Fate had in store for this moment and why his feet weren’t already moving to intercept danger.

Was it because he knew, in his gut, that he would lose?

Izuku took a deep breath. He might not understand what Fate had to do with this, but Izuku knew what his response had to be. When facing a threat like this, Izuku had only ever learned a single response to danger threatening a friend in front of him.

“I can’t let you hurt them.” Izuku’s voice sounded small and sad to his ears, but Stain didn’t respond to the implicit pleading in his stance.

Stain scowled, teeth bared, embers lighting in his eyes. “Can’t let me?”

Between one second and the next, Stain was halfway across the alleyway and right in Izuku’s face. Izuku’s pupils dilated in shock, but he couldn’t get his hands up in enough time to block Stain’s attack. There was a punch to the gut, an elbow to the head. A final forceful lifting of Izuku’s upward, followed by a slam that ended with Izuku’s back on the ground, all the breath knocked out of him. Stain peered down at Izuku, lanky hair shrouding in his eyes, before he picked Izuku up by his calf and threw him across the alleyway, all the way from the entrance to the end of it.

Izuku skidded across cement like a skipping stone on a lake. He lay shuddering on the ground. His arms were scratched up, and his head rung from temple to teeth. Izuku tried to drag in a deep breath, but his body seemed frozen in shock. He felt like he’d been hit by a car.

How strong was this man?
The Hero Killer stalked toward Izuku’s reeling form before veering off to head toward Native, who was lying slumped against the wall halfway down the alley, one of Stain’s knives already impaling him through the shoulder. Stain picked up Manual’s foot on his way up the alley and lugged him to Native’s side, plopping him down next to the wall.

Stain ripped a knife out of his hip sheathe, intent on carrying out his task. Only to pause as Izuku stumbled to his feet, arm held against his chest, his voice pleading. “You’re a good person, aren’t you?”

Stain stopped, distracted from the kill, and turned to face Izuku. He obviously hadn’t expected for Izuku to get back up after a throw like that. Or maybe he just wasn’t used to his victims taking a beating and coming back for more, regardless of their own health.

Izuku took a step toward Stain, rolling his shoulder to test its movement and wincing in pain. He licked gravel off his lips. “Somewhere inside you… there’s a good person. An evil person wouldn’t try to keep children safe, wouldn’t warn them to leave or go away.”

Stain blinked. His face scrunched up beneath the bandages, as though he was trying to figure out why this boy was trying to reason with Stain instead of attack him. His eyes lit up in pleasure at the departure from his expectations. A smirk formed at the corner of his lips. “You got balls, kid.”

In response, Izuku took another step forward.

Stain’s eyes narrowed. He sheathed his knife and drew his katana instead. He lazily pointed the tip of it at Izuku, smirk gone as his lips raised in a snarl. “Final warning.”

Izuku raised his hands up in surrender. He paused, very obviously not taking another step. “I hear you, I hear you. I’m just talking. I just… I want to help them. And I want to help you.”

“Izuku, get out of here!” Tenya’s eyes were wild and frantic as he lay paralyzed atop several trash bags.

Meanwhile, Stain burst out laughing. The sound was grating and uncomfortable, as though the man didn’t know how to laugh or hadn’t done so in a long time. It kept going, longer than it should, the initial cackle turning into a mad chuckle and then rolling off his lips in a rasping fit.

The sound of it silenced Iida.

Izuku licked his lips and took another step forward. His hands were still raised in surrender. “Because you’re not an evil person, right? And if you aren’t evil, then you can be saved.”

Stain cocked his head, his interest and curiosity dulling down into displeasure. “Saved? Think we’ve got a difference in ideology, kid.”

Stain stared down the length of his sword at Izuku, who stopped several feet away, sensing that Stain was growing more serious about his former threat.

One of the pro-heroes, Izuku wasn’t sure which, interrupted their conversation. “What are you doing?! Leave and get help! He’ll kill you!”

Izuku shook his head. He stared up the Hero Killer’s sword, from tip to base. Worst case scenario, he could always pause time; however, without a stone circle the size of a city block, that would probably summon demons to them. Thankfully, Izuku had another plan in mind.

His eyes moved toward the pair of heroes on the ground. He soothed his tone to a consoling murmur,
hoping to assuage their fears. “He can’t kill me, and I won’t allow him to kill you. I promise.”

Stain snarled, eyes flashing. “Allow me?”

He crouched, raising his katana and preparing to lunge toward Izuku.

Izuku smiled somewhat bashfully and apologetic, his hands still raised in surrender. “Also, I was waiting for backup.”

Stain’s eyes widened, and he hesitated for the half a second it took for an enraged wolf to drive him into the ground, his katana clattering away from reach. Popsicle had been silently barreling down toward Stain at peak velocity, and the raven had transformed into a wolf seconds before impact. His paws were planted in Stain’s shoulders, and his teeth were bared directly above Stain’s neck, canines puncturing the skin in warning.

The Hero Killer snarled and flipped himself over on his back, body-checking Popsicle into the ground. Popsicle yelped and growled, trying to gnash his teeth closer to Stain’s neck, but Stain twisted quickly away, scuttling on all fours to bare his teeth at Popsicle. Izuku’s familiar returned the expression in kind.

Stain eased his way up to standing, all the while drawing two knives out of their sheathes as he squared off with Popsicle.

Meanwhile, Izuku blinked away his shock. He felt assurance coming through the bond with Popsicle, suggesting that Izuku could leave this to his familiar for now. Izuku nodded his head at thin air and dropped his hands, rushing off to help Todoroki as the other teen made his way past the edge of the alleyway. Izuku’s heart thrummed with gratitude.

They made it they made it they made it.

Izuku didn’t think he’d ever wanted to hug Todoroki this hard, but now was not the time. Popsicle was fighting, and Todoroki and Izuku needed to get Iida and the pro-heroes out of the alleyway as fast as possible.

Izuku headed away from Popsicle’s fight as Todoroki created some sort of ice slide that slid Manual toward him. Native didn’t budge, the knife through his shoulder sticking him into the cement wall. Izuku rushed toward him, eyes worried, and tried to get a good look at the wound. The knife was in deep, but it wasn’t near a vital organ. If they could get him out of here, then he would probably need surgery; but he would live.

Izuku stumbled to a stop next to Native and took hold of the knife handle. He began pulling, but the blade wouldn’t budge. It was a longer blade than Izuku expected, which meant more of it was in the wall. Maybe half the blade was in Native’s shoulder and the other half buried in cement?

Shit shit shit.

Izuku reoriented his grip on the hilt of the blade and tried to pull again, to no avail. He put one hand on the wall to use as leverage, pulling again, but the blade remained stuck.

A snarl, confusion, blood. Izuku reared backward away from the wall. His senses felt muddled, cold cement beneath his paws, the tang of blood on his teeth, and a feeling of horror and fear and uncertainty all rushed into one.

Popsicle?

Distracted, Izuku turned toward his familiar.

Popsicle was somehow managing to fend off Stain on his own. His familiar had grown in size to his
bulkiest wolf form, his shoulders at roughly the height of Izuku’s chest and his teeth nearly on the level of Stain’s neck. Popsicle hadn’t fought in this large of a form in a while because, while sturdier, it was also slower. But this wolf form managed to block Stain from moving past him in the alleyway.

Izuku furrowed his brows, trying to sense where the blood he’d smelled was coming from and what was causing the fear thrumming through their bond. Popsicle bared his teeth and growled at Stain, gnashing his teeth as the villain began approaching him, two knives abandoned on the ground behind him. Izuku saw it, then, the blood. Popsicle had drawn the Hero Killer’s blood and had the remnants of it on his teeth, but Izuku could feel his familiar’s confusion past the snarl on his face. He could feel Popsicle’s hesitation.

Izuku had the sudden foreknowledge that, if he didn’t do something, Popsicle was going to get hurt.

“Midoriya, focus!” Todoroki shoved in next to Izuku, his breath a welcome balm against Izuku’s cheek, as two hands wrapped around Izuku’s in a struggle to get the blade out of Native’s shoulder. The cold-yet-hot feeling of his hands distracted Izuku from what he’d been considering.

*Why wasn’t he pulling on the blade, again?*

Izuku shook his head. He’d forgotten what he was doing.

*NATIVE. HE WAS TRYING TO SAVE NATIVE.*

Izuku grit his teeth and refocused his strength on pulling out the blade. Popsicle was in wolf form, which made Izuku stronger and faster, gave him better reflexes. He definitely needed those enhancements, right now.

Todoroki and Izuku pulled harder, trying to wring the blade out of the cement wall. Just a bit more, they needed to pull just a bit more…

When the blade came loose, several things happened in succession. Todoroki and Izuku stumbled backward, blade clattering to the floor between them. Native groaned as his body slid down the wall and onto the ground. And Popsicle yelped, loud and pained. The world felt like it was burning.

Izuku shivered as his head swerved toward the last place he’d seen Popsicle. His eyes sought out his familiar in the blinking light at the end of the alley.

*Something hurt. There was pain. Pain, somewhere across his back.*

It stung, and Izuku eyes watered.

*Popsicle?*

His eyes finally found his familiar lying in a heap at the opposite end of the alley. Stain was standing in the middle of the corridor, not far from Izuku. From the pain stinging Izuku’s back and ribs, the Hero Killer must have gotten a good hit in and thrown Popsicle. Izuku hesitated, waiting to feel the cement beneath his paws as Popsicle rallied and rejoined the fight.

Only, Popsicle didn’t stand up. He just lay there, limp; his jaw looked unhinged, and he… he wasn’t moving.

Izuku shoved back memories of nightmares of Popsicle laying in a pool of blood and Stain standing over him.

*And Izuku thought he could save him?*
Izuku shook his head. No. Popsicle was alive, Izuku could feel it in his chest, their bond was still there…

In the next second, cold chilled his bones, and Izuku was almost afraid that he was wrong, that something had happened, that Popsicle, he wasn’t going to get up, he was hurt, something had happened, the knife had cut too deep. *Witches always felt cold when their familiars died—*

Except it was Todoroki tugging on Izuku’s arm. Todoroki. His classmate had created another ice slide and gotten Native to the front of the alleyway, next to Manual. *The cold feeling was Todoroki. It was just Todoroki.*

With his eyes wide and focused on Todoroki (*ice and fire thrumming through Todoroki’s grip, swimming in Izuku’s mind*), Izuku didn’t see the Hero Killer rush up behind him, lips stained red and knife raised aloft. Before Stain could slash Izuku across the back (*in the same spot as Popsicle; Popsicle, Popsicle answer me, Popsicle get up, please get up!*), Tenya appeared, having recovered from whatever forced him out of commission, and he kicked Stain out of the way.

Iida’s engines stuttered to a stop as he put himself between the Hero Killer and his friends. Stain flew several meters away into another wall and fell to the ground, coughing upon landing but otherwise seeming more annoyed than harmed. He snarled up at them, blade still gripped tight in his hand.

Izuku took a step backwards, mind racing, half with fear and half with a morbid sense of curiosity. Popsicle had been fighting the Hero Killer for awhile, now, and had been hurt trying to protect them… but still, the Hero Killer seemed unphased. Izuku couldn’t see any wounds, and the man wasn’t breathing heavily. How could he have fought this long without wearing down his stamina? What would the three of them have to do in order to stop him?

The three teens stood at the midpoint of the alleyway. The Hero Killer stumbled to his feet, a mere meter away from Popsicle’s prone form. The two pro-heroes, Manual and Native, were safe at the front of the alleyway while the Hero Killer and Popsicle were at the end of it. If Izuku could just get Popsicle to the front of the alleyway… they could all escape safely. The Hero Killer wouldn’t be likely to follow them all the way out into the main street. Right?

All three boys shared a look before firming their stances and squaring off against the Hero Killer.

Stain leveled a second freshly-unsheathed knife at Tenya and Izuku. “If you’re going to keep getting in my way, I will make sure you don’t get back up.”

Izuku shivered but stood tall. You didn’t bare your neck to the enemy, even when your instincts suggested it might be a good idea. He especially wouldn’t stand down when Popsicle was in danger. *Popsicle Popsicle Popsicle.* Izuku wasn’t going to lose his mind, not like the Sports Festival, but he wasn’t about to leave Popsicle here alone with the Hero Killer.

Todoroki’s voice was a deep whisper next to Izuku’s ear. “Midoriya, will he be alright if we leave him?”

Izuku shook his head. He didn’t know. The Hero Killer might get angry; he might hurt Popsicle more; he might kill him. Izuku couldn’t leave him, he wouldn’t, *he didn’t know how to.*

Todoroki nodded back. “Iida, do you think you could get both of them out of here, while we distract Stain? Go get help?”

Iida’s bangs clouded his eyes, but they could both feel the glare that Iida sent them. “I won’t leave you here, you don’t know what he’s capable of. If he ingests your blood, he paralyzes you.”
All of a sudden, Todoroki yelled, “Watch out!”, as he shot out a swath of ice that took up the width of the alleyway.

Izuku took a step backward, having seen Stain get up and start running toward them. The ice was blocking Stain’s way forward, but it was also stopping them from seeing Popsicle. Izuku tried to sense whether Stain was near his familiar, but Popsicle was unconscious. He couldn’t sense anything to send back to Izuku.

Izuku’s heart beat like crazy, and he began rushing toward Todoroki’s ice.

_Popsicle... Popsicle!_

He tried to focus on that feeling in his gut like he’d practiced with Sir Nighteye and Mirio, hoping to predict whether he was planning to attack them or if he was planning to hurt Popsicle while he had the unfettered chance.

Listening to his gut probably saved Izuku’s life.

He felt Stain moving toward him before he appeared over top the ice, and Izuku had just enough time to dodge out of the way of Stain’s blade. He sensed Stain’s other hand coming up to grab him and dodged that as well, but Izuku slipped on Todoroki’s ice before he could get a solid hit in against Stain. Tenya rushed in behind him, engines at full speed, and managed to jump into the air and kick Stain into a wall, bypassing the ice. But the man recovered faster than before, foregoimg the knives that had clattered to the ground as he shoved himself off the wall and charged toward Iida at an insane speed. Iida fumbled on an area of the ground that was half-ice and half-cement, raising a leg to kick Stain again. But the Hero Killer barreled forward and shoved a shoulder into Iida’s gut, twisting his neck around Iida’s waist like a snake and licking the blood that gleamed off his armor.

“Tenya!” Izuku shouted Iida’s name but failed to catch his friend in time as Iida fell to the ground, paralyzed once more.

Izuku slipped forward on the ice as tried to reach for Tenya, only to have his friend ripped away from him as Stain grabbed the suit of armor and flung it at Todoroki. And Todoroki didn’t want to hurt Iida with either his ice or his fire, so he tried to catch Iida with his bare hands—

Only for the Hero Killer to jump on top of Iida’s body, right as it collided with Todoroki, and to slice at his cheek. Todoroki didn’t have time to dodge or put up a defense, allowing Stain the opportunity to slice through skin and lick up the blood in the span of the three seconds it took for Iida’s body to hit Todoroki, Todoroki to stumble under the weight, and both of the teens to fall to the ground.

Izuku finally got off the ice and onto the cement, just in time to rush up behind Stain and stop him from further harming his friends. The Hero Killer turned around, sensing his approach. A knife flashed in his right hand as Stain raised the blade to slash down at Izuku, but Izuku reached a hand across his body to grab Stain’s wrist. He used his other hand to grab Stain’s elbow and twist, until Stain’s elbow was locked in place behind his back, his body forced forward by Izuku’s hard shove of Stain’s elbow forward as his knife clattered to the ground. Stain’s left hand swiftly pulled another blade out of a hip sheathe and angled it backward at Izuku, but Izuku caught his wrist in time and twisted it to join Stain’s other arm behind his back. Then in a single motion, Izuku ripped the metal zip ties out of his wrist bands and tied Stain’s wrists together, effectively handcuffing him, while kicking out one of Stain’s legs and forcing him to fall to the ground.

The good news was: Izuku managed to handcuff the Hero Killer and force him to the ground, all without using a quirk.
The bad news was: Izuku spent too much time focusing on his debilitating his opponent, and he forgot about how strong and fast Stain truly was.

After falling to one knee, the Hero Killer slammed his head backward and into Izuku’s face, breaking Izuku’s nose and causing him to reel back. Impossibly agile, Stain turned his chin around over his own neck and bit Izuku in the arm, tearing his teeth through and getting to Izuku’s blood without a single slash of a knife.

Stain’s teeth clamped tight, and Izuku had enough sense of mind to remember “oh yeah, if he drinks your blood, he can paralyze you” before Stain smirked up at him, blood smearing his mouth.

“No, IZUKU!”

Izuku stumbled sideways before falling to the ground, his eyes wide and his body paralyzed. Stain’s smirk dropped from his face as he keeled forward, hands still tied behind his back, as he spit blood out of his mouth and stared in horror at the ground, then up at Izuku, then down to the pool of blood and spit.

Izuku heard the sound of the metal ties snapping, then the Hero Killer loomed above Izuku, his silver-white eyes gleaming among the bandages like twin moons.

Izuku stared back at him, disoriented and unable to move. His body was faced toward the Hero Killer, unable to look away as silver-white eyes leaned forward closer to his own. There was still a fleck of blood on the man’s upper lip, and his eyes were hooded. He wiped away the blood with the bandages on his arms and stared at Izuku like he’d seen a ghost.

An echo of Izuku’s confusion appeared in the subtle furrowing of Stain’s brow as he rasped, “What are you doing here?”, sharp teeth flashing too close to Izuku’s neck for comfort.

(Don’t bare your neck to an enemy. Baring your neck means submission, and you don’t submit to someone outside the pack.)

If Izuku wasn’t trapped in a paralyzed body, he would have scrambled away. But he couldn’t move. He couldn’t move, and Tenya and Todoroki were several meters away from him, and neither of them could move. And if none of them could move, none of them could protect the adults who were bleeding out at the front of the alleyway; and no one could protect Popsicle, who was still on the other side of Todoroki’s ice wall, abandoned, not answering, somewhere too far away for Izuku to see or reach.

There was so much blood around them. So much blood. More blood that the Hero Killer would apparently be able to lick and… what, paralyze them with? If they ever even managed to move again?

A calloused thumb rubbed harshly against Izuku’s cheek, and his heart almost gave out, drumming erratically beneath his ribcage. Silver-white eyes frowned once more at Izuku before the Hero Killer pushed himself away from the ground, stood up, and walked away from Izuku. The Hero Killer loped past the paralyzed bodies of Iida and Todoroki. He stalked almost gracefully toward the prone form of Native at the front of the alley, grabbing his katana, which had been knocked out of his hand early on in the fight, on his way.

“No more interruptions now.”

The Hero Killer hefted his katana upward, shifting his grip, as he approached the two pro-heroes, neither of which had moved since the beginning of the fight.
Izuku shut his eyes, a wail building up somewhere inside his chest. *This can’t be happening, it can’t be happening, Popsicle get up—*

Izuku wrenched his eyes open as he heard Tenya and Todoroki yelling at the Hero Killer and trying to distract him from his prey. Izuku had a perfect view of the Hero Killer nearing a meter away from his targets. Izuku’s mouth opened to call out, to do everything he could to change the Hero Killer’s mind. *You don’t have to do it. You don’t have to become this. There’s another way. There’s good in you, I saw it. You can leave here and we can figure it out together—*

Only for a voice to appear, suddenly, out of the wall beside Izuku. “Sorry I’m late, but it’s fine now…”

One second. Mirio’s face passing by Izuku and falling into the ground along with his body, his clothes a puddle on the floor.

Two seconds. “Why?” His face popping up out of the ground. Naked form rising up.

Three seconds. The Hero Killer turning to look at the new voice, his katana rising up in a defending slash—

Four seconds. “Because I’m here.” Mirio was three feet from the Hero Killer, poised and ready for a fight.

Five seconds. Mirio’s arm arced toward Stain, two fingers prepared to plunge through Stain’s eyes. The katana that should have cut Mirio’s arm off passed straight through, as Mirio phased the sword through his arm. Stain raised his other hand to block the fingers coming toward his eyes, but the fake attack phased through his hand and stopped inches from his face.

Six seconds. Stain staggered backward as a solid punch slammed into his gut, then that same hand turned upward to uppercut him in the jaw.

Seven seconds. Stain’s katana clattered to the ground, and before he could regain enough breath to pull out a knife, another punch landed in his stomach and slammed him several feet away into a wall.

Eight seconds. The Hero Killer’s body implanted into the cement, crumbling bits of the alleyway wall behind him. His body began falling to the floor, only for Mirio to rocket upward out of the ground and deliver a final uppercut to Stain’s jaw.

Nine seconds. The force of Mirio’s repulsion from the ground caused the Hero Killer’s body to fly upward and away in an arc, eventually falling back onto the cement mere feet from Popsicle. Mirio had thrown Stain across the alleyway with a single punch.

Ten seconds. And the Hero Killer was out cold.

Izuku stared in wide eyes at where the Hero Killer almost killed Native, at where Mirio was standing tall and looking over his shoulder, prepared to continue the fight.

Todoroki, Iida, Izuku, and Popsicle had been fighting Stain for well on ten minutes. During that time, the Hero Killer had not once begun breathing heavily or gotten hurt beyond a scratch. He’d been kicked into walls, without bruises. He’d had his arms twisted, with no sprains. He had been nearly set on fire, with no burn scars or blisters.

And yet ten seconds after Mirio appeared, the Hero Killer was unconscious.

Izuku had a new level of respect for this boy who had been helping train him. This boy who—even
among pro-heroes—was one of the closest to the top.

“Is everyone alright?” Mirio’s voice rung out from the front of the alleyway.

Izuku closed his eyes and prayed to the Spirits that the Hero Killer would stay down.

Over the span of the next ten minutes, all the pro-heroes and teenagers in that alleyway regained the use of their limbs. Izuku and Todoroki were the first (they theorized it had something to do with them both being Type O blood), followed by Iida and Native, then finally Manual and Popsicle.

Mirio watched over them all, even as he kept a wary eye on the bound-up form of the Hero Killer, whom he had dragged to the front of the alleyway.

Izuku slowly approached the pair, his steps hesitant. The fight was over, but he still felt out of place. The adrenaline had died down after he verified that Popsicle was okay (just paralyzed, thank you thank you thank you). He was left with the same feeling of earlier, before the fight and the fear and the rushing to do whatever he had to do in order to keep everyone safe.

Whatever would follow after the next few minutes, Izuku knew, would haunt him for years. He just didn’t know why.

Mirio smiled up at him from his vigil on the wall next to Stain’s prone form. “Hey,” and his smile really was blinding, “Sir told you he’d send someone.”

Izuku’s responding grin was much weaker, a warning anticipation still thrumming in his chest. “I’m glad he did.”

His eyes shifted down toward Stain, looking for injuries. He seemed unconscious but otherwise fine. Izuku peered back up at Mirio. “What now?”

Iida and Manual appeared a couple feet behind Izuku, Manual’s hand gripping at Iida’s shoulder as he limped next to him. “Now, we call it in. I’ve already got a squad headed to our location.”

“I’m sorry for the trouble,” rasped Native, whose shoulder was wrapped in several layers of bandages. Todoroki’s hand was applying pressure to the wound, compressing against it and trying to stem the bloodflow. He had offered to cauterize the wound if the bleeding didn’t slow, but he seemed just as disturbed by the idea as Native.

Native hadn’t taken him up on it, but if the pro-hero didn’t get to a hospital soon then he might have to.

A couple minutes of silence passed, all of them preparing to fight at the slightest twitch from Stain. The screams from several streets away had mostly died down, but there were still sirens echoing off the storefronts. Izuku wondered what had happened over there, and how much worse it was than what had happened here. Sir Nighteye had made it sound dangerous, but if he had sent Mirio back to help them… then some other pro-hero must have been able to take care of things.

As it turned out, Manual’s squad wasn’t the first backup to appear. A group of pro-heroes ran over, each of them in varying states of roughly up. From the way they were talking, another pro-hero had
sent them this way.

The man at the front, who had bandages wrapped around his neck and face, spoke up. “Are you the ones who needed backup?”

With Native’s shoulder bandaged and still visibly bleeding, Manual limping around a bandaged leg, and the various gashes and bitemarks littering the rest of the teenagers… their group looked quite a sight.

“Are those kids?”

“Oh shit, Native?”

“Quick, call for an ambulance!”


“Wait, I know you! You’re Mirio Togata! I watched you during last year’s Sports Festival!”

“Stop gossiping, Lorelai.”

Izuku ignored the newcomers, all his focus still on the Hero Killer and Popsicle. His familiar lay at his side, whimpering on every other exhale. Izuku ran a hand down Popsicle’s head and shoulders, keeping away from the wound on the side of his back. Todoroki had tried his best to bandage Popsicle, but none of them quite knew the differences in applying first aid to wolves versus humans. Still, a wolf was easier to treat than a snake or a raven, so Popsicle stayed in his current form.

Izuku switched his gaze between Popsicle and Stain. It was hard to think that, out of all three teenagers and a familiar, Popsicle actually might have kept up his fight against Stain for the longest amount of time. The rest of them fought together, or only lasted thirty seconds on their own.

“Wait, is that…”

“That’s the Hero Killer!”

“Hello, we need an ambulance…?”

“Who needs the most immediate medical attention?”

The Hero Killer wasn’t moving, his body crumpled on the ground where he lay tied up in rope that Mirio had found near the trashcan in the alleyway. Izuku’s eyes trailed over the rope, his gaze falling to the bloodstained bandages, then lifting back up to look at black shaggy hair. The Hero Killer wasn’t moving. He wasn’t moving, and it felt odd. Wrong. Like a stone settling in Izuku’s gut.

This is no place for children. Leave… run home…

Why had the Hero Killer tried to send a witness away, rather than silence him? Because Izuku wasn’t an adult?

“Izuku… are you alright?”

Izuku peered up at Tenya’s hushed voice. It was the first time his friend had spoken to him in weeks, but he could barely muster up the energy to respond. He felt old and worn, like something had been scooped out of him without his permission, destabilized and bound to fall over any second.

Or maybe that was the exhaustion speaking. Izuku had a long day of training, followed by visions
and an endless quest to save his friend, a tense first meeting with a probably-villain, a battle.

_Popsicle. Izuku almost lost Popsicle._

The feeling of emptiness and disorientation continued.

“The ambulance should be here shortly.”

“Native, you should lie down. Conserve your strength.”

“Hey, kid, what’s your name?”

“Todoroki.”

“Well, Todoroki, you’re doing a fine job of applying pressure. I can take over from here, I promise.”

“He offered to cauterize the wound…”

“Oh, is that right? Got a little bad-ass here?”

The teasing, chattering voices swam past Izuku and Tenya as they sat on the ground near the Hero Killer. Watching. Waiting.

Tenya cleared his throat as he ventured to break the second silence between them. “I am certain he will stay unconscious until transport arrives. If he awakens, then he is outnumbered. It would be foolish of him to fight.”

Izuku shook his head, lips pressed against his kneecaps as his hand continued petting Popsicle’s fur, soothing their bond. “That’s not what I’m worried about.”

“Then what is it?”

Izuku continued staring at the ropes, the bandages, the tattered red scarf. Replacing his nightmares with reality. Just an immobilized man in torn up bits of fabric who couldn’t hurt him anymore, couldn’t hurt any of them anymore. His friends had made it out safe.

Thoughts swam around his head as Izuku reflected back on all his mistakes during the fight. Getting distracted when Popsicle was hurt. Not rushing to help him. Slipping on ice. Not being able to catch Tenya. Tenya being ripped out of his grasp. Capturing the Hero Killer, but not trying to sense far enough into the future to predict him escaping. Too much reacting in the present and not sensing enough ahead.

_Sir Nighteye would be disappointed._

Sure, Izuku only learned to access his ability to sense the future this morning, but still… still… he should have been able to do more.

Tenya reached out a hand between them but hesitated, laying his hand on the ground rather than touching Izuku’s arm. His voice seemed far away. “What were you doing here?”

Izuku stayed silent.

“That day when you came to my house… is this what you meant, when you said the Hero Killer was going to hurt me?”

Izuku’s gaze slid to Iida’s back, where he could barely see the dried blood on his armor.
“Izuku… we survived. You don’t have to be afraid anymore.”

Izuku’s eyes stung, and he pulled his legs up closer to his chest. He felt cold again. Cold and worn and out of place and definitely, definitely afraid.

*_Stain’s eyes, looking as though he’d seen a ghost. ‘What are you doing here?’*_

Izuku couldn’t figure out what he’d meant by that. The words kept echoing in his mind as he worked through the fight in his head. Guilt curled in his gut next to the confusion and the fear and the wish that Kacchan was there to soothe him. Or Kirishima or Sero or anyone other than Tenya and Todoroki, who he had failed to protect and failed to save, what was wrong with him, Popsicle got hurt, it was because of him, he’d hesitated, he hadn’t barged in, he hadn’t tried to do something, he hadn’t done enough—

Popsicle whimpered on another exhale, and Izuku reached a hand out to pet his back, wishing he could soothe his familiar further.

Izuku closed his eyes, tuning out Tenya’s words, too far off the mark and not enough, never enough, as he focused on his bond with Popsicle. *It’s going to be alright. I promise. You’re going to be alright.*

Popsicle’s head lulled to the side, eyes opening blearily to look up at Izuku; a grin lifted the edges of his mouth. *Back together… happy together… protect together…*

Izuku smiled back in solidarity. *Yeah, I know, we’ll protect them. We’ll figure out a way to keep everyone safe. I’ll get better at this. I promise. I promise…*

*_Pack… together?*_

Izuku nodded his head. *Yeah, we’ll keep our pack together.*

*_Pack hurt…*_

Izuku’s eyes fell to the cement, a frown appearing as he curled into himself further and clenched his hand in Popsicle’s fur. He thought of Iida’s back, of Todoroki’s cheek. *They’ll heal. Everyone will heal.*

*Sad eyes-lonely-packmate—* Popsicle whined on another exhale, and Izuku winced in sympathy — *no more alone?*_

Sad eyes? He must be talking about Tenya. Izuku wondered why Tenya would be sad… maybe because of Tensei? Maybe the fight reminded him of his brother? Popsicle was better at picking up on that stuff than Izuku.

Izuku tried to smile bravely down at Popsicle, focusing on a feeling of calm assurance that he shoved down their bond.

*No one has to be alone anymore. We’ll make sure of it.*

The Hero Killer shifted, unnoticed, several feet away from them, as though he sensed something coming.

Izuku was too distracted to do the same.

A scream came from Izuku’s left. “What is that…?!”

Another person shouting, “Get down!”
Izuku raised his head in response to that, but he couldn't see what was coming. From behind him and to the right, a winged nomu tore its way down through the sky to pluck him up off the pavement like a particularly tasty morsel. As sharp talons dug into his hip and lifted him upward, Izuku gasped and reached a hand out toward Popsicle. Tenya's eyes widened, and his engines revved as he stood up. But neither Izuku's familiar nor Iida had enough time to stagger to their feet before Izuku was lifted away, his other hand clamping in a vice onto the claw at his waist, afraid to be dropped from twenty feet, thirty feet—now fifty feet above the ground.

“Izuku!”

“He's got a kid!”

“Another one? Where's Endeavor?! How'd he let—”

A red blur sped past the front line of stunned pro-heroes, followed by a tongue licking a drop of the nomu’s fallen blood off the cheek of a woman. In the same instant that blood met tongue, the creature holding Izuku stopped flapping its wings, and Izuku found himself in freefall as the creature loosed its talons and began plummeting to the ground. Another gasp worked its way out of Izuku’s throat as he turned around mid-air and tried to use his reflexes to land in a better position on the ground, hoping to protect his spine at the cost of his limbs—

Only for the breath to be forced out of him on impact, as he was caught five feet from the ground by strong arms and the scent of metal and blood.

“The Hero Killer…?”

“Oh no, he's got a hostage!”

“I thought he was tied up?”

The arm around Izuku’s waist tightened as he was placed feet-first on the ground and held by another arm against a firm chest. Izuku could hear a growl behind him as his head was forced to the side, his neck bared. Teeth sunk into his neck in a display of dominance that Izuku wasn’t sure any of the pro-heroes gaping at them would understand.

Izuku’s body stiffened, his pupils dilating.

In fact… how did the Hero Killer know about werewolf dominance rituals?

A feeling of lead settled in Izuku’s gut, his body breaking out into a cold sweat, as his neck remained in the grip of his protector’s teeth. Protector? No, predator. In the grip of a predator’s teeth.

Izuku’s hands clenched fistfuls of his costume, and his gaze waivered to stare several meters away at the panicked form of Todoroki, whose face was pale and whose hands were raised, as though uncertain whether he should freeze everything in front of him.

Izuku loosened his fists, his mind whirling.

Was the Hero Killer… a werewolf?

Stain growled again, the sound reverberating up Izuku’s neck and into his ears, jarring his brain. That sounded like a wolf growl, but it had been so long since Izuku had heard one.

Izuku’s mind raced, trying to recall what his mom had told him about the other wolf packs in Japan. There were three in all, weren’t there? And she’d just visited the one in the far north.
Izuku relaxed his posture, not fighting against the claim against his neck. To fight against it would be to court death. That was the rule of pack.

The pro-heroes continued to gape in uncertainty and fear as they wondered how to save the hostage teenager from the villain with a blade at the boy’s hip and teeth at the boy’s throat. A couple seconds later, Endeavor arrived on the scene in a fiery explosion that created a dent in the ground, but the gaggle of pro-heroes barely batted an eye, too afraid to move and set the villain off.

Endeavor took a step forward, all rage and fire… but even he noticed the precarious position they were all in. A villain and his hostage. This sort of situation could ruin any pro-hero’s career, if they played their cards wrong. Ruin your career, and haunt your conscience. If a hostage died… if that hostage was a kid…

Endeavor narrowed his eyes when he realized that the hostage kid in question was Izuku Midoriya.

Stain drew his teeth out of Izuku’s neck. He hadn’t bit deep enough to draw blood, but purple bruising in the shape of his teeth stood out starkly against Izuku’s freckled skin. A rasping, rattling sound escaped Stain’s mouth as he glared across the street at the supposed pro-heroes, too weak to do what needed to be done. His knife dragged threateningly across Izuku’s hip, but Izuku was the only one who knew that Stain wouldn’t hurt him, not if he had just marked him, not if Izuku didn’t fight back.

Still, Izuku felt too paralyzed by uncertainty to attempt escape.

“You’re all a sham… petty heroes, empty villains, all your ideals as weak as your abilities. You’ll be the doom of society if I let you!” Stain’s teeth gnashed next to Izuku’s ear, the villain gripping his neck tightly as Izuku refused to move. Stain’s eyes glowed red with bloodlust for the first time that night. “My purge… it must continue… until heroes are restored to their true purpose. Until that day comes, I won’t be stopped, and I’ll use the night to bathe your world in blood, cull the weak from the strong.”

The Hero Killer bit down once more into Izuku’s neck, his eyes glowing up at those that would capture him. More pro-heroes had gathered on the other side of the street, boxing Stain in from both sides.

His mouth lifted to Izuku’s ear, the harsh growl sending a shiver down Izuku’s back. “The day was long, but the night is here. And the night is where we’re free.”

Izuku stiffened, his mouth falling open, his eyes widening further.

*That was… his old pack’s saying, but that would mean Stain…?*

Stain bared his teeth at the pro-heroes in front of them. “Come try me, you fakes! I won’t be stopped by lambs… as weak… as you!”

And then Izuku was shoved to the ground as the Hero Killer rushed toward the pro-heroes in front of them. Endeavor’s flames took over his body, and—

Black.
Izuku woke up several hours later in a hospital bed. The first thing he saw upon opening his eyes was Mirio’s smiling face, which looked somewhat haggard and blackened with what looked like soot.

“Mirio?”

Mirio leaned forward, his elbows on his thighs. “Hey there, troublemaker. How you feeling?”

Izuku blinked around the bright white of the hospital room. He mouth felt dry and full of cotton. Mirio noticed and passed him a cup of water with a straw in it, which he gulped down in relief. The cold water made his teeth ache, but the sensation served to wake him up further. “The… Hero Killer?”

Mirio’s eyes softened as he assuaged Izuku’s fears. “They got him. He was captured and taken to Tartarus. I heard Endeavor guarded his escort.”

Izuku’s eyes felt heavy as he tried to scan Mirio, making sure the other teen was okay.

Mirio chuckled in response, his grin still lighting up his face. “Oh, I’m fine. Not much happened after that alley fight. Which… well, you’ll probably hear about tomorrow.” Mirio paused, his smile dimming, as he tapped his forefinger on his elbow in contemplation. He raised a hand and placed it on Izuku’s shoulder. “I just wanted to make sure you were alright. That was quite a fall.”

Izuku didn’t know what to say. His head felt fuzzy and confused. He blinked his eyes as he tried to force himself to be more awake.

Mirio looked down at his watch and then up at something on the wall. He cast another assuring smile at Izuku. “Alright, it’s late. I should probably let you rest. I’d like to continue sparring with you, when you’re better.”

Izuku nodded his head, his lips cracking open in an attempt at a smile. “I’m not sure I’ll be much of a workout.”

Mirio chuckled. “There’s always something new to learn, in every fight. I bet you’ll keep me on my toes.” Mirio’s eyes fell to the purple bruising on Izuku’s neck before standing up. He patted Izuku once more on the shoulder, his hand warm and heavy. Then he offered a wave to Izuku and strode out of the hospital room, closing the door behind him.

Izuku peered around the white walls at the back of the room before he swerved his head to the front, where he found Todoroki and Tenya each lying in their own hospital beds and watching him.

Todoroki offered a half-smirk at Izuku, his tone dry. “New friend?”

Tenya just stared at him.

Izuku flushed. Then shrugged. “We spar together at my internship.”

Todoroki simply nodded his head and rested it back against his pillow to stare at the ceiling.

Silence reigned.

Izuku shivered in his bed, feeling cold and alone. Bruised teeth marks pinched at his neck in a familiar hurt.

*Wait… it still hurt…* Izuku lifted up his head, looking around in paranoia. *Where was Popsicle? Was
he alright?


Soulbond tired?

Oh, there he was.

Izuku relaxed at the feel of Popsicle’s scales slithering up his arm. He was surprised that Popsicle had felt well enough to transform, but he supposed that Popsicle might heal faster in snake form than as a wolf.

Izuku shifted to look down at his familiar’s black scales. He licked at dry lips, focusing on their bond. Popsicle, the Hero Killer, he was—

Sad eyes-lonely-packmate. No more alone.

Izuku’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. He vaguely remembered Popsicle saying something similar, back after the alley fight. Izuku had thought Popsicle was talking about Iida and Todoroki. He… you were talking about him? But he attacked you!

Decision maker-crushed heart-protector.

Izuku sighed, his head falling back against the pillow. His familiar tended to speak about people in terms of descriptors, and they were typically spot on. But Izuku didn’t know how ‘protector’ could label someone like the Hero Killer. And he was pretty sure Stain had harsh eyes, not ‘sad’ ones. Izuku tilted his head to peer down at his familiar. Popsicle, I don’t understand.

Soulbond safe. Soulbond protected.

Izuku shook his head. He’d talk to Popsicle more later, preferably when he didn’t feel the heavy weight of Tenya’s gaze on him and the cold uncertainty of having no idea in the seven spiritual circles what was going on.

Izuku turned his head to peered back at Tenya, who didn’t even move his head to pretend he hadn’t been staring at him. Izuku’s eyes grazed over the white lump in a hospital bed that made up the rest of Iida’s body. Iida’s hand was folded against his waist, and it made something deep inside Izuku ache. Memories flowed through his mind of laying on Iida’s bed and watching videos, Iida’s hand on his neck, Iida’s presence by his side. And then after the Sports Festival, all of that had changed. Iida wouldn’t talk to him, he kept turning away, and Izuku didn’t know what he had done wrong. And now this, the fight with Stain, the ending, how they all made it out alive but Izuku still felt like he had failed them.

Popsicle slithered up higher, curling around Izuku’s collarbone, black scales in stark contrast to the white hospital gown.

Izuku turned over in his bed and put an arm beneath his head. He’d failed him he’d failed him he’d failed him. He stared back at Iida, only half of him feeling brave. He wet his lips, whispered, “Are you going to talk to me now?”

Tenya nodded back in an unspoken promise that Izuku managed to hear loud and clear. Tenya’s eyes were serious, but the weight of them held concern.

Izuku didn’t understand why everyone kept looking at him so concerned.
The teeth mark bruises on his neck burned.

Izuku didn’t know what to feel as he watched Tenya staring back at him. He felt cold and empty and confused. He felt guilty (he’d failed he’d failed). He felt like he should apologize, like he should explain (Stain’s a werewolf; he spit my blood out because it’s poison to him; I think he’s connected to my old pack, and I think that’s why I hesitated in the alley, why I didn’t want to attack him, why I didn’t rush in to protect you like I would have, I promise, I would have if it was someone else). But what could he explain, really? Izuku barely understood what happened in that alleyway himself. It all felt muddled together. Even as it was happening, Izuku had felt the weight of it all, and he only now understood why.

_He was meant to meet him, wasn’t he?_

Izuku turned over onto his opposite shoulder to face the window. It was dark outside; there were probably hours yet before dawn. Moments passed as he tried to breathe deeply past the cold feeling in his gut and tried to focus on the feeling of Popsicle (alive, he’s alive) against his neck.

_Why was Popsicle calling the Hero Killer ‘pack’? He’s not pack. He’s… he might have been part of the old pack, once, but that was before us. That was before… he’s not my pack… he can’t be… he kills people… I don’t want my pack to kill people…_

The bite mark on Izuku’s neck continued to burn as the hospital bed dipped behind him, a hand coming to rest atop his shoulder.

And then it was Tenya’s voice, deep and formal and _him, so very him that it couldn’t be anyone else_. “I’m sorry. I was… trying to get stronger.”

Izuku shook his head into the pillow, as he grasped the thin bedsheet to his chest. He figured that was Tenya’s way of apologizing for not talking to him for the last few weeks, but he wished that Tenya had spoken to him about that beforehand. Izuku would have understood. And then he would have argued otherwise.

Izuku bit his lip. “We’re all trying to get stronger. But we get stronger _together._”

Tenya nodded his head as he began to awkwardly pat Izuku’s shoulder. He really wasn’t good at this sort of thing, Izuku remembered, so he turned around to nuzzle Iida’s hand, soft and slow (that’s how you show forgiveness). Then he nuzzled his head up under so that Iida’s fingers were splayed across his curly hair, tangling in the strands (that’s how you show acceptance).

Finally, Izuku peered up at Iida, his look baleful but his tone firm. “Don’t leave me again.”

Iida shook his head back, another promise. “I won’t.”

Iida’s gaze felt strangely heavy.

Todoroki turned over in his bed and clenched his hands in his sheets.

Izuku sensed the movement and leaned up on one elbow to peer over Iida at Todoroki, who was now facing the opposite wall. He looked lonely.

“Hey, Todoroki!” Izuku whisper-shouted across the room.

Todoroki didn’t move.

Izuku slumped down, leaning forward to prop his chin on Iida’s arm. Iida’s body stiffened from
where he was already lying awkwardly beside Izuku.

“Todoroki… come here…”

Iida stared down at Izuku’s curly hair as Izuku tried to cajole Todoroki out of his hospital bed. Iida probably would have winced at the pressure Izuku put on his torso, since the wound in his back had only been partially healed by the doctors; but he was doped up on enough painkillers that he barely noticed the pressure. Barely. He still noticed. But Izuku had been bitten by a villain who held a knife to his gut, so Iida would do almost anything to keep him smiling.

Across the room, Todoroki sighed aloud, acting very put upon as he rolled over in his bed and fixed Izuku with a stare. “What is it?”

Izu smiled back at him. “You should come over here.”

“Why?”

Izu frowned. Touching Iida, if only for the past minute, was already helping him calm down, helping him warm away the cold and the empty and the guilt that had been swirling inside of him. He knew that if Todoroki came over, it could help him, too. And he knew Todoroki. The other boy didn't speak about the things that were bothering him, and he always turned over in bed when he was sad.

It was possible that Izuku shouldn't know these things about him, but he supposed astral projecting or whatever they kept doing had its perks.

Izu tilted his head to rest his cheek against Iida's arm as he raked his eyes over Todoroki's taciturn features. “Because last night happened, and none of us should be alone.”

It took a couple more minutes. More cajoling. Izuku accidentally elbowing Iida in the gut. But at the end of it all, Todoroki was awkwardly sitting somewhat on the hospital bed with them, half draped over Izuku and staring with a dry mouth and clenched hands into Iida’s eyes. He kept shifting his eyes away, as though he wasn’t certain where to look or how to act.

Iida could sympathize, but he at least was projecting an aura of confidence in the situation (that he most certainly didn't feel).

Izu hummed between them, happy, curling Iida’s arm around him from the right and Todoroki’s arm around him on the left. The warmth from both sides replaced the cold, and made something in Izuku feel whole again. Settled. Balanced. Right.

“See?” Izuku murmured, “It’s nice.”

Todoroki stared away from Iida with a light flush on his cheeks. He wouldn't quite say that it felt 'nice’… but he wouldn't say it was bad, either. Unexpected. And a bit too close… but that was Izuku for you. At least Izuku wasn’t placing his hand on Todoroki’s chest and leaning over him while they sat alone on Todoroki’s bed in Todoroki’s room at Todoroki’s house. That had been much more strange.

Todoroki huffed and stared at the wall, hand tingling from where it was wrapped around Izuku's hip. He could swear that it felt like some sort of string was connecting something in his chest to Izuku and Iida, but when he looked there was nothing there. Just a hospital gown, pale arms, a faded burn scar. His eyes shifted over to look at Izuku's hopeful grin.

Part of him wanted to escape this moment, leave, go back to his own hospital bed, far away from two
boys who'd been on opposite sides of the classroom for the past few weeks and were now, what, was this called cuddling? Holding each other on a hospital bed after almost being killed by a villain.

Another part of him wished he could allow himself to enjoy something as simple as a comforting hug.

He wondered what was wrong with him, that he was still having to learn how. He could probably try to blame his father for it, but his father wasn't in the room right now making this decision for him. That was all Todoroki. If he left, if he walked back to his bed, that was all on him. And he'd already failed them enough for one night. A feeling of protectiveness surged through his chest as he looked at Izuku, then raised his gaze to Iida. In the light from the window, huddled together in hospital gowns, both of them looked soft. Fragile. He knew they could both fight. He knew they could protect themselves. But after the fight against Stain… Todoroki felt much more aware of how easily that could all be disrupted, how something could go wrong even when you thought the fight was almost over.

His throat felt too thick to swallow.

“Yeah… it's nice.”

He would make sure to go back to his bed before morning.

Chapter End Notes

Hello, folks!

So this chapter took a month to write because I kept making Stain too likeable. I'm not very good at evil characters, apparently, so I staged a couple fights with my bf, went to medieval sword practice, learned disarming moves, and hopefully gave you something pretty realistic in terms of a fight. I also wanted to give Izuku a couple minutes of downtime, so I threw in the hospital scene at the end.

Hopefully, the long chapter and lack of cliffhanger makes up for it being a month since the last update. Thank you all for staying with me!

Next chapter, I have very few plans. Mainly: the hospital aftermath (talking to police), maybe wrap-up of the Hero Internship, then our future heroes head back to UA. Or Izuku heads home. Or something along those lines.

Feel free to throw some ideas up, if you want anything covered next chapter!
The Fateful Fallout from the Fight with Stain

Chapter Summary

Inko reflects on Izuku's childhood and their agreement about his schooling. Meanwhile, Izuku, Iida, and Todoroki face the repercussions of their fight with Stain.

With a surprise guest appearance by... *spoiler*.

(Back from Hiatus)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Inko Midoriya knew what listening to the Fates could do to you. It was all over Aunt Mezue’s journals, hidden between the lines, in every whisper that followed a paragraph’s end. Aunt Mezue couldn’t seem to stop herself from interfering. For every vision she saw, she thought the Fates were speaking to her, thought she had to get involved. Yet each journal entry was followed with pain or sacrifice, because that is what the Fates brought with them. It’s all they knew how to bring.

Inko had always hoped Izuku wouldn’t inherit that power, and that hope only grew when she saw how enamored he and young Katsuki were with All Might and the idea of becoming pro-heroes when they were older. When it was revealed that he had a more active power, to speed up or slow down time in limited areas, Inko had been ecstatic. And then the Pack had happened. Popsicle had appeared. Izuku had gained a familiar and been surrounded by another family that would support him and help guide his way when she couldn’t be there.

Then the fire. That family gone, between one moon and the next. And his powers…

Inko would never know how to explain it, perhaps because her son refused to speak about it. But something must have happened in those woods that night other than the pack dying, because Izuku came out with a new ability and a deeper bond with his familiar. He came out traumatized and screaming in his sleep, with an emerging habit of rushing toward danger rather than away from it. He began using the visions of Fate as a guide, and Inko did what she could to stop him, to warn him, to make him aware of the consequences of rushing into things that weren’t his problem and shouldn’t be his problem. But he… her precious son, he wouldn’t listen, and then—

They don’t speak of it. What happened. She doesn’t think Izuku ever will. But he agreed, afterward, to bind his new powers until he was older. To tie them to his familiar and push them down so far that they would only be able to find him in his dreams.

Time moved on, and Izuku forgot.

Inko never forgot.

They moved in with the tengu. They moved on. They went from village to cave to hut by the sea. Different nightmares came. Izuku never acted on them. The mermaids tried to steal away her son, and Inko and Izuku fled away from the ocean and back toward the land. They moved on. Another village, another town, another tent in the woods. More nightmares. Her son getting up in the night
and coming over to sleep next to her. They didn’t discuss it. There was nothing to discuss. This power of his had awakened too soon, and she had done all she could to help him manage it. The rest was up to him.

They moved on. That was how they lived: they moved on.

If Inko had her way, they would have kept moving. They would have never stopped. *(It wasn’t safe to stop.)* But Izuku had wanted so badly to join Kacchan and become a hero. And he had promised her, he had promised to keep their secrets safe, to run away from his new commitments if the danger to him and Inko became too great. Inko was appeased by that. She was soothed by his promises, convinced they could be safe as long as they kept to their secrets and didn’t cause too much of a stir.

But then Izuku’s visions returned… and how was she supposed to know if he didn’t tell her? How was she supposed to warn him to run away from the visions, unless he wanted to turn out like her Aunt Mezue? An instrumentation of the Fates with no control over her own destiny, being led like a dog on a leash from one tragedy to the next by visual snippets of events she would never be able to control.

Inko didn’t wish that for her son. She wanted him safe. She wanted him happy…

If only those two things weren’t so contradictory, where her son was involved.

Watching the news reporter describing the events in Hosu City on Aizawa’s television screen, Inko’s precious son in the arms of a villain who had saved him from a winged demon before plunging sharp teeth into his neck, giving some speech about hero society with Izuku clutched tight in his arms… Inko didn’t know what to feel, other than terrified. She had seen the sketches Izuku had drawn and left by his beside. Red scarf. White bandages. Black hair.

Her son had known this man was coming, Inko was certain of it.

And he hadn’t told her.

He hadn’t tried to run from the danger.

Everything Inko had thought was safe and controlled… was a lie.

When Izuku woke up the morning following his encounter with Hero Killer Stain, his heart was pounding. His eardrums echoed with the screeching of a car and the tinkling of broken glass, but he didn’t remember where those sounds had come from. Izuku sat up in bed, pulling his legs up to his chest as he rubbed at his eyes, trying to rid them of shadows; but the shadows remained at the edge of his vision, hiding in the corner just out of sight, mocking him.

*Who had he been dreaming of?*

Flashes of red and white swam in the darkness behind his eyelids. He squinted up at the sunlight streaming through the window, his hand falling to rest on his mouth.

*Was it Stain?*

Izuku swallowed back the taste of blood as he tried to even his breathing. Popsicle slithered around
his neck, and Izuku tilted his head in response to his familiar’s concern. He was fine. He’d just had a bad dream.

One of many.

“You’re awake.”

Izuku moved his hands away from his mouth. Todoroki was standing by the window, his face turned slightly toward Izuku. From Izuku’s position on the bed, he could only see the red of Todoroki’s hair, the scarring around his left eye, and the soft skin of his chin.

*Red hair. White hospital gown. Had Izuku been dreaming of Todoroki?*

Izuku cleared his throat, searching for something to say. He looked around the room, but Iida must have returned to his own bed in the night because he was still asleep several feet away. Izuku turned back to Todoroki. “Uh, what are—you doing awake?”

His throat felt thick and clogged with something that couldn’t be swallowed down.

Todoroki shrugged dismissively. He turned toward the window, ignoring Izuku’s shifting form on the bed. “I am used to waking early.”

Izuku didn’t even know what time it was, so he was bound to agree with the other teen and move on. *Except… except… why did Todoroki look so disturbed?*

Izuku rubbed at his chest, where a hollow empty feeling resided. He felt like something was wrong, or would be wrong, but he couldn’t pinpoint what it was. It tickled on the edge of his consciousness even as he yawned, trying to wake himself up. The feeling in his throat remained, so thick it was hard to swallow.

Izuku tilted his head as he continued analyzing Todoroki. “You look like something’s bothering you.”

Todoroki’s eyes shot over to him once more. Turned away from him once more. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned against the wall, his body angled away from Izuku. Almost as though he was trying to distance himself.

He shrugged, this time so casually that Izuku barely noticed it. “Neither of us was significantly harmed last night.”

Izuku furrowed his brows. “And that… worries you?”

Todoroki made a noise in the back of his throat, almost like humming. But it was darker. It held an edge to it that Izuku didn’t understand. “We weren’t hurt. So why did the police bring us here? Perhaps your bite mark was strange, and we had all experienced something traumatic, but that’s no reason to send us to a hospital, all three of us in the same room.”

Todoroki’s spine stiffened up from its previous slouch, and Izuku could hear his teeth grinding from several feet away as the other teen shook his head.

“They want us in one place. But why? To control the damage? Limit the exposure of details about last night’s attack? Or are they worried that the Hero Killer will escape and target us?” Todoroki huffed, his eyes shifting once more to the window. “I feel like we’re in a cage. Or detention.” His eyes shifted to the upper corners of the room. “They didn’t provide us with a television so we can’t
stay apprised of information. They took our phones, so we can’t watch the news…”

Izuku nibbled at his lip as he stared worriedly at his friend.

“Perhaps they aren’t quite sure what to do with us,” interrupted a voice behind them.

Todoroki and Izuku both swerved their heads to look at Iida, who had propped himself up on one arm in the bed beside Izuku’s. Izuku wondered when he woke up. Or had he been lying in bed awake this entire time?

Iida’s face looked stern, his body stiff. Izuku parroted his eyes between his two friends, wondering why both of their hackles were raised so badly.

Iida sat up in his bed, his legs forming sharp mountains of the hospital blanket. “We did break the law last night, after all. None of us had Provisional Licenses, yet we all engaged a villain.”

Izuku shook his head. “But we shouldn’t get into trouble for that! I mean, Sir Nighteye said it was legal for me to fight as long as I didn’t use my powers. And Tenya, you were there because of Manual, right? So it wasn’t your fault you got mixed up in it!”

“And me?” interrupted Todoroki. “I shouldn’t have been in that alleyway at all.”

Iida looked away from Todoroki, pursing his lips as he stared at his sheets.

Izuku’s mouth opened and closed as he tried to find a legitimate reason for Todoroki to have been there. “But I… we needed you. We couldn’t have done it alone.”

“Are you sure of that?” Todoroki asked, his gaze piercing into Izuku.

Izuku’s expression remained firm. “Yes. Without you there, we wouldn’t have escaped that alleyway. Not with everyone alive.”

Todoroki shrugged. “The fact remains—none of us should have been there in the first place.”

“But we were always meant to be there,” Izuku said. His hands clenched into fists, his face earnest. “It was always going to come to that.”

“And how can you know that?” Iida asked, his blue eyes seeming so vivid without his glasses on. Without the frames to hide his eyes, he looked like a younger Tensei, another Ingenium before his prime.

On Izuku’s shoulder, Popsicle transformed into a raven, as if to say ‘This is why. This is how we know.’ He let out a shrill caw, and Iida shivered on his bed while Todoroki narrowed his eyes.

Izuku looked up at his familiar and then back at Iida, nodding his head in agreement, his expression intent. He didn’t have to say anything else for his friends to read between the lines.

Iida shook his head. “Unless you are officially registered as being able to foresee the future and can attest to the fact that all of us were bound to end up there, then the authorities will not care what you think you know.”

“And your quirk only allows you to create explosions,” Todoroki pointed out. His eyes seemed to suggest that he knew that was a load of bullshit, but he wasn’t about to call Izuku on it.

Come to think of it, Iida’s eyes seemed to suggest the same.
Izuku hung his head and reached his hands up to wrap around the back of his neck, accidentally dislodging Popsicle in the process. His familiar squawked at him and flew down to the foot of the bed.

The bad feeling in Izuku’s stomach was getting worse. He tried to focus on breathing in and out, in and out, but his ears felt like they were being depressurized; they kept wanting to pop.

Iida shifted on his bed, scooting close enough to the edge that he could put his feet on the floor. “I think you are right to be concerned, Todoroki, but we can only hope for the best.”

Todoroki nodded his head in conjunction with Iida, but his face remained cold and impassive as he returned to staring out the window.

Izuku could still feel him worrying, somewhere inside his own chest, but he couldn’t think of anything that would make it better. They could only wait until the authorities arrived or the hospital staff released them to return to their internships.

Popsicle transformed into a wolf and hopped down off the hospital bed. He loped over to the window before lying himself down next to Todoroki, his head on the other teen’s feet. Izuku smiled at Popsicle and lifting his head to say something to Todoroki… but the other had his arms folded across his chest and his hands clenched into fists, the strain so tight that the skin was all white, no blood pumping through.

Iida lowered his eyes and stared at the floor.

As if from a long distance, Izuku heard the echoes of screaming, but he couldn’t pinpoint who they were from or why no one else seemed to be reacting to them. Izuku drew his knees up to his chest and put his head between his thighs and tried to hold on.

No one in the room spoke for a long time, each caught up in their own thoughts. Izuku, busy berating himself and trying to figure out escape plans. Todoroki, over-analyzing everything. And Iida, poor Iida, stuck in the turbulent throes of inevitability, feeling like there was nothing else he could have done.

The first person to walk through the door was a nurse, who promptly checked on the wound on Iida’s back. Everyone remained silent as she did her duties and then left the room with no more than a few pleasantries.

The next person to enter… none of them could have expected. With his black hair pulled up into a ponytail and a casual black long-sleeved v-neck shirt, their homeroom teacher shuffled his way into their hospital room with a bedraggled appearance and sharp eyes.

Izuku was the first to shoot up out of his bed, his eyes wide and concerned. “Mr. Aizawa? Is something wrong? Is my mom okay?”

Aizawa stopped two feet into the room, his gaze swinging from Iida’s bed to Todoroki’s frigid stance by the window. The bags beneath his eyes seemed to deepen as he scowled. “What are you two doing here?”

Iida sat up quickly, wincing as he pulled at his stitches. He covered up the wince with formality. “Sir,
I am not quite sure what you mean.”

Aizawa frowned at Iida’s wince, certain that something was amiss. He took another step into the room, his gaze pinning his students in place. “Midoriya was sent to this hospital following the attack by Stain. That doesn’t explain why the pair of you are also in hospital gowns.”

Todoroki faced his teacher with a straight face, his tone measured and careful. “We were… there as well.”

He didn’t give any more information than that, causing Aizawa to frown at him.

“And where was there?”

Todoroki averted his gaze guiltily, and Iida seemed a bit lost for words.

There was a moment of silence. None of the teens spoke. Izuku swung his head to look at Todoroki and Iida in turn, wondering if he should step in and say something. How did Aizawa know he would be at this hospital, after all? Not that Izuku wasn’t grateful! He was, in truth, happy to see his pack leader after the events last night. Just having him in the same room was having a calming effect on Izuku.

It wasn’t having the same effect on Todoroki, however. Izuku’s gut churned with Todoroki’s fear, even though didn’t know how he could feel it so clearly.

After several more seconds of silence, his students opening their mouths only to close them, Aizawa let out an offended sigh. “I could also expel you both for suspicious behavior and lying to authority —”

Iida quickly got to his feet. “No, sir! It’s just…”

He winced again, having gotten up too fast.

Aizawa narrowed his eyes, cataloging the frequency of his student’s pained reaction.

Todoroki shot a concerned gaze over to Iida before raising his chin toward Aizawa. “We haven’t been told anything since last night. We don’t know what’s going on.”

“Then you can begin with what happened last night. That is generally a good place.” Aizawa’s flat smile was deadly, a warning clear in his eyes.

Iida raised a hand and chopped at the air with his arm. “I should probably go first, then!”

The quick movement seemed to cause him some strain, so he lowered his arm with a grimace. He continued on, in the same tone as Manual used to give a report to a superior officer.

(Meanwhile, Izuku watched his friend intently, trying to memorize the protocol of communication playing out in front of him. Was this how you were supposed to address your pack leader, when relaying information?)

Iida’s face was emotionless, his story logical and clean of emotion. “I was the first one at the scene. My mentor Manual and I, we were patrolling the streets when we saw someone suspicious turn a corner in an alley. We followed the suspect and found the pro-hero Native paralyzed on the ground. Manual and I were planning to engage, and I was supposed to get Native out of there, but Manual was paralyzed and taken out of the fight too quickly. I tried my best to get both him and Native out of the alleyway on my own, but I was quickly overpowered and paralyzed as well. That is when
Midoriya showed up.”

Izuku straightened up from his slouch, trying to mimic Iida’s behavior and tone of voice. “Sir Nighteye sent me there after I had a, uh, after he saw something.”

He hesitated, hoping Aizawa could interpret that he meant Izuku had a vision.

“He told me I couldn’t use my quirk, but I was allowed to fight with my fists. I managed to distract the, uh, villain for a while by talking to him, but he eventually attacked me, and then Popsicle appeared. Popsicle had gone off and, uh, returned with Todoroki…”

Izuku trailed off, uncertain whether to cover the part about how he sensed Todoroki nearby. He and Todoroki were still trying to keep that bit under wraps from their teachers and families.

“Todoroki helped me get the pro-heroes away from the villain, and we were gonna run away, but Popsicle… he got hurt, and I tried to get to him, and then the next thing I knew Iida was defending me from Stain’s attack and we were all—

Aizawa cut in. “Wait. The villain in the back alley was Stain?”

Izuku realized they hadn’t clarified that bit yet. “Oh, uh yeah, that’s who we fought.”

Aizawa’s gaze seemed to burn into him as Izuku went to continue, clearing his throat for good measure.

“Anyhow, he managed to paralyze all of us in the end, and he was about to kill the two pro-heroes, but then Mirio appeared. He’s a third year at U.A., I think? And he beat Stain in seconds,” Izuku mimed punching someone, “managing to knock him out for a while. Then we tied him up and waited for more pro-heroes to arrive.”

Todoroki took over from there. “I was interning under Endeavor, who appeared not long afterward. He had finished fighting with Noumus who were attacking Hosu City Center, and had come in our direction to defeat the last of them. A flying Noumu attacked out of nowhere, grabbed Midoriya and flew off with him, and Stain—”

“He saved me,” Izuku butted in. “And then he bit me, and shouted at everyone? And then I don’t really remember the rest.”

Iida shot Izuku a short smile before turning back toward Aizawa. “There was not much more. There was a short battle, but between Endeavor, Sir Nighteye, and Mirio, the villain was quickly subdued. He was taken into custody, and we were all transported here and kept in the same room after questioning. We haven’t heard from the authorities since.”

Aizawa hadn’t moved since the start of their story, except the slight incredulity upon learning the identity of the alleyway villain they had fought. Now, he sighed, closing his eyes and raising a hand to his head in weariness.

Izuku felt a distinct urge to go over and comfort him, but he wasn’t certain if it would help.

Aizawa crossed his arms and raised his head to stare at the wall opposite of where Izuku and Iida had been sleeping, his gaze unfocused. “And how many of you used your quirks?”

There was another moment of silence, this one shorter.

Iida straightened his back, as though ready to weather a blow. “I used mine.”
Todoroki nodded his head and murmured, “As did I.”

Izuku’s eyes shifted between Todoroki and Iida, growing concerned. “I had Popsicle? But I didn’t actively use my quirk. I just tried to tie Stain up with the zip ties on my costume…”

Aizawa did something that sounded like a snort, mixed with the high-pitched sound of a dying seal. He kept a straight face, though, making Izuku doubt that he’d heard the sound at all.

“And did that work?”

Izuku grinned back at him happily, his expression all puppy dog eagerness as he leaned forward on the bed. “For a couple seconds, yeah! But then he bit me and licked my blood and spit it out and got real mad at me—”

“That’s… enough.” Aizawa ran a hand over his face again, before lifting his gaze back at his students, his gaze piercing each one of them.

Izuku’s babble ran to a halt.

Aizawa straightened his shoulders and shifted into teacher mode. “Alright, I’ve got questions for each of you. I’m going to go around asking them, but I don’t want you listening in, so go and sit on that bed over there while I get started.” He paused. “I mean it. This is very serious. Your answers will determine how this internships week ends for you.”

Izuku gulped. He reached a hand down to his stomach, where the feeling of Todoroki growing even more apprehensive was driving Izuku to feel slightly sick. He shot Todoroki a concerned glance, but the other teen looked away from him and strode directly toward the bed that Aizawa had told them to sit at.

Izuku looked over at Iida, who Aizawa had just walked up to. Izuku shot his friend a supportive smile before walking over to join Todoroki on the bed, where both teens pretended to look out the window while they tried not to listen in on Aizawa’s interrogation. Izuku casually slipped his hand into Todoroki’s, craving touch and wanting to offer comfort.

Izuku pulled his knees up on the bed to sit cross-legged as he gestured for Popsicle to come join him. The wolf hopped up on the bed between Izuku and Todoroki, his head tilted in question. Izuku shrugged his shoulders. He didn’t really know what was going on, or why Aizawa seemed to suggest that something could happen to their internships. Izuku wished that Sir Nighteye had gotten in contact with him. He wished he knew what happened. It sounded like Stain had been captured, at least, so maybe Izuku wouldn’t have to worry about the bite mark on his neck.

… that was a lie. Izuku definitely had to worry about the bite on his neck. It had been at least half a day since he’d been bitten, and despite Popsicle’s healing, the bite still burned. Izuku couldn’t be turned into a werewolf, his witch blood would prevent that, but the bite still itched and burned like an infection. If only he had some of Stain’s saliva, he knew he could get the burning to dull down… but if Stain was taken into custody, Izuku doubted he’d ever be able to get access to his saliva.

Izuku leaned back, sliding his hands beneath his butt as he considered his predicament. He tried to recall if any of his ancestors’ journals mentioned healing bite marks without the werewolf’s saliva… vampire blood could help, but that was even more impossible to get than the saliva. Izuku could find another werewolf to bite his neck in the same place, and then clean the wound, but the only other
wolves he knew of were the pack his mother had met up north. Had she mentioned how far north that pack was?

Izuku gnawed at his lip with his canine, his thoughts looping in on each other.

Aizawa broke him from his trance. “Mr. Midoriya?”

Izuku did a double take when he realized that his pack leader was standing right in front of him, gesturing for Izuku to get up and go over to the other side of the room. Iida stood behind Aizawa, his face betraying nothing of what he felt.

Izuku got up and walked over to Iida’s bed, sitting down in the exact spot that Iida had vacated. He could still feel Iida’s warmth on the sheets, and it was almost as good as a thick blanket and a warm fire, the smoke curling in his hair, the pups laughing and tussling together on the grass.

The familiar pang of loss barreled through his gut, and Izuku blinked away the stinging in his eyes. He swallowed, and tried to remember where he was.

He flinched when he saw Aizawa standing in front of him, hand hovering over Izuku’s neck where Izuku had removed the bandages to see how much had healed.

Aizawa retracted his hand as he stared at the ragged edges of the bite mark, the bags beneath his eyes making him look old and tired as he whispered, “These should have healed by now, shouldn’t they?”

Izuku didn’t answer verbally, but he looked over at where Popsicle had laid his head down on Todoroki’s lap. He bit his lip and nodded, afraid to say anything more with Todoroki and Iida in the same room.

Izuku did his best to kneel on the bed, tucking his legs under himself and baring the side of his neck Stain hadn’t touched. He looked balefully up at his pack leader. “Sir? What are you doing here?”

Aizawa folded his arms as he crouched down near the foot of the bed. “Your mother sent me here to check on you, after you appeared on the news captured and mauled by a villain. It took me awhile to find the correct hospital.”

Izuku felt another tingle race down his spine. His mother had seen that? Spirits, he was going to be in so much trouble once she found out Stain was a werewolf… and from their old pack, nonetheless.

Izuku felt the weight of Aizawa’s gaze on him, assessing, cataloging. He felt caught somewhere between frozen in place and a strange urge to prove himself worthy of Aizawa’s attention.

“Earlier, you said you saw something that led you to that alleyway. What did you see?”

Izuku’s heart raced in his chest, uncertain about where he should begin and how to word it without coughing up blood by saying too much.

“I’ve been… seeing it for a while. It just wasn’t clear until last night. Sir Nighteye, he’s been training me to see better, and I’d been seeing more and more each day. But then last night… I’ve never seen anything that clearly before. And Mirio and I went to warn Sir Nighteye about it, and then Sir Nighteye used his quirk on me, and…. there wasn’t another choice. I swear, there wasn’t a single other choice I could have made where everyone lived. Sir Nighteye made certain. This was the only one. And I didn’t use my powers, I promise—”
Aizawa shook his head, bringing Izuku’s excuses to a halt. “These visions you have... he’s been teaching you to control them?”

Izuku felt a chill race down his spine from the word ‘vision’ being used aloud. He couldn’t stop himself from checking the room for security cameras or other observers. Iida and Todoroki were both busy staring out the window on the other side of the room, and Aizawa had whispered it quietly enough.

Izuku shrugged his shoulders, shifting his position slightly. “He’s been trying. He’s also been trying to teach me how to use that ability actively in fighting situations. I was starting to get good at it before…” Izuku hesitated, looking back over at his friends before peering down at Aizawa, who was still analyzing him from the floor. “It’s bad, isn’t it? Todoroki and Tenya, they’re really worried.”

Aizawa’s expression didn’t change, but something around his eyes seemed to tighten. “By all rights, I should expel each of you from U.A.”

Izuku’s mouth dropped open, his voice a hushed exclamation. “Expel us?!”

Aizawa stared his student down until Izuku shut his mouth. “There are extenuating circumstances here. But Midoriya... heroes don’t break the law. They protect it. What allows us to be heroes is our strict adherence to society’s rules and regulations, one of which necessitates that only people with hero licenses or provisional hero licenses are allowed to actively use their quirks in public. Especially against another person, villain or otherwise.”

Izuku shook his head and leaned further forward, his whispered voice emphatic. “But that’s what we did! We just tried to protect everyone.”

“But you aren’t licensed to do that yet.” Aizawa argued. He followed it up with a sigh, the sound small and forced and full of suppressed anger.

Izuku’s hands clenched in his lap, eyes pleading.

Aizawa stood up from his crouch. “I haven’t made my decision yet. But I wanted you to know, these actions of yours have consequences. You cannot simply... act on everything you see. There are laws. They must be followed. That’s what it means to be a hero, and not a vigilante.”

Izuku’s eyes threatened to tear up again as Aizawa left to gather Todoroki. Izuku stumbled to his feet and went to join Iida on the other bed, passing Todoroki on his way to the front. Izuku’s gut clenched with nervousness not his own. Iida made space for Izuku on the bed, and Izuku crawled up next to him with a lost look in his eyes.

Iida gave Izuku a small smile but refused to sit any closer to Izuku. For a brief second, Iida reached out and patted Izuku’s head, but then he backed away on the bed and returned to peering out the window, unwilling to risk physical affection with their homeroom teacher standing several feet away.

Izuku wished he’d gotten a chance to explain to Aizawa that he was the one who told Popsicle to get Todoroki, that Todoroki wouldn’t have been there if it weren’t for him, but there wasn’t any time.

Before Aizawa had fully finished interrogating Todoroki, the door opened to reveal the Chief of the Hosu Police Precinct, Mr. Tsuragamae Kenji, who was dressed to the nines in a black suit with a dalmatian-spotted tie.

Aizawa took a step away from the bed where Todoroki sat, his student’s expression riding a thin edge between chastised and closed off.
Aizawa narrowed his eyes at the Police Chief.

The Chief opened his mouth to say something, then spotted Aizawa hovering near Todoroki on Iida’s bed. The Chief’s dog-like head tilted in curiosity. “Ah, are you the representative Principal Nezu said he might send from U.A.?”

Aizawa hesitated. “I… am their homeroom teacher.” Which wasn’t technically a lie, although Aizawa would need to have words with Nezu after he left.

The Chief nodded his head. “Then you would be best dispositioned to issue judgement from your school. I hope you will give them some leeway. It has been a trying night for them, I am sure.”

Aizawa seemed torn between standing in front of Todoroki’s slouched form protectively and backing away toward the wall.

“I am afraid these students had it Ruff!”

No one laughed in the silence after the Chief’s oddly worded joke. The door creaked opened again to admit Manual and Sir Nighteye. Upon seeing their mentors, both Izuku and Iida rushed to stand, while Todoroki rose to stand directly behind Aizawa.

Manual walked across the room to Iida. He put his hand on his charge’s shoulder, concern showing through his eyes. Iida straightened his back and nodded firmly at his mentor, trying to show Manual that he was okay. The injury on his back was still hurting, but the nurse had assured him earlier that none of his nerves were severed badly enough to need surgery. He only had to wait for the stitches to heal before coming back in for a final check-up.

Sir Nighteye settled himself near the doorway, his posture stiff and formal as his eyes flicked between Izuku and Aizawa, obviously wondering how the students’ homeroom teacher had found his way to the correct hospital.

Izuku furrowed his eyebrows while tilting his head at Sir Nighteye.

Sir Nighteye shook his head as though to indicate they would speak about it later, and Izuku nodded his head in return.

Aizawa catalogued away their silent conversation for later.

The Chief of Police harrumphed to himself. “Now, now, none of you need to stand up. I’m sure you are sore from your fight last night.”

None of them sat down.

There was another awkward pause as all the adults on the room eyed each other up.

The Chief tucked his human-like hands into his pockets as his dog ears flapped about his face. “So… you are the three students who helped Endeavor and the young student Mirio capture the Hero Killer! Definitely U.A. kids, alright. I suppose you are wondering what happened to him after last night’s incident. The Hero Killer held no serious wounds following his capture, so we ushered him immediately to a holding facility, where he awaits transfer to a maximum-security prison.”

The Chief cleared his throat.

“This is, I am afraid, where the good news ends. Although no one got a good look at your faces, the media is well aware that several students were present during the incident with Stain last night. As
such, it was our duty to notify your educational institution as to your wellbeing and whereabouts. Due to the nature of your interactions with the villain last night, and your status as unlicensed heroes in training… I am afraid that, if word gets out as to which students were involved, then I will be required to take judicial action to punish both you and your internship mentors. Do you understand what I am saying?”

Todoroki’s impassive mask dropped to a scowl of anger. “You’re saying that we’ll be punished for trying to protect someone in danger, sir.”

“Not… quite. I am saying that if this incident comes to light, then I will be forced to punish you. However…” the Chief hung his head at this. He shook his ears about for a few seconds, before raising his eyes to them all. “No, that is not quite right either. I am afraid Manual must be punished regardless, for directly engaging a villain without backup while he was directly responsible for the welfare of Mr. Iida. Sir Nighteye, of course, has an ongoing relationship with the police around matters such as this, due to his quirk, which explains Mr. Midoriya’s presence. However, the rest of you, that is to say you Mr. Todoroki, must keep quiet as to your involvement. If word gets out about your role in that fight, your father would likely lose his status as Number Two hero and be put on probation. You would then have a mark placed on your record and be forbidden from attempting a hero license exam for a minimum of five years.”

Todoroki’s eyes were blazing. “What?!”

Iida took a step forward, inserting himself before Todoroki could argue further. “And what about Midoriya and myself, sir?”

The Chief smiled at Iida. “Your role is of course understood, and Manual has expressed his deepest apologies and taken full responsibility for dragging you into such a dangerous fight without backup. As for Mr. Midoriya…”

The Chief hesitated, sharing a glance with Sir Nighteye, before turning back to Izuku with a smile. “We understand the extenuating circumstances around your involvement.”

Which didn’t explain anything at all, really.

Todoroki took a step forward, scowl firmly set. “So it’s just me then? I’m the only one in trouble?!”

The Chief held up a finger. “At the risk of getting into trouble, to be precise. However, as long as you agree to keep your role in last night’s incident a secret, then the police will not be issuing any further punishment about what led to your altercation. Of course, how U.A. decides to treat your actions is up to the decisions of your principal and,” he paused to sent a brief nod to Aizawa, “of your homeroom teacher.”

Todoroki and Iida shared a glance, as though to commiserate that having Aizawa decide their fates may potentially be worse than the decisions of the police. Izuku just stared at Sir Nighteye in confusion, wondering about his connection with the police and why they were so willing to accept Izuku’s presence in the alleyway last night.

Manual took that moment to step forward. “At any rate, I will be taking responsibility for my negligence as your supervisor last night, Iida. I reacted purely in my role as a hero and forewent my duties as your supervisor. As such, I put you into a situation that you shouldn’t have been in. After…”

Manual paused, the stutter in his voice belying how he was practically choking on the words. He
shook his head and continued, “After much consideration, I will be retiring from my duties as a hero —”

“What?!” Iida stepped forward, his expression aghast.

“—for a period of at least two years. I will also be stepping down from my role as a supervisor, for a period of at least five years.” Manual raised his eyes up to meet Iida’s, a weak smile on his lips and his tone full of regret. “I shouldn’t have dragged you into that.”

Izuku stepped forward, not understanding why any heroes would be punished. “But, but it was always going to come to that…”

“Midoriya!” Sir Nighteye sent a glare at Izuku, causing him to shut his mouth.

Izuku pursed his lips and looked over to Aizawa for back-up, but his pack leader shook his head.

Rage and unfairness began churning in Izuku’s gut as he tried to suppress his protestations about how it wasn’t Manual’s fault, about how Iida would’ve ended up in that alleyway anyway, they all would have, even if they hadn’t planned to. They were going to be dragged there by the hands of Fate herself, if they had tried to resist, and they shouldn’t be punished because they chose the best outcome out of a bag of traps predetermined to hurt everyone who entered they alley that night.

Izuku bit his tongue to stop himself from opening his mouth, and the bite mark on his neck burned. Popsicle bristled at his feet. Izuku shook his head at Popsicle to stop his familiar from growling in warning at the Chief of Police, at Sir Nighteye and Mr. Aizawa and the whole situation in general.

“Well,” the Chief trailed off, respectful of the tension in the room. “That is all I came to say. I wish each of you good luck in your internships for the rest of the week.” He paused, looking over at Iida. “Well, for those of you that still have internships. I am certain something can be figured out for you, Mr. Iida. Perhaps you could ask your family if they have any openings? Or your brother’s old company, perhaps?”

The Chief offered a brief smile before nodding them all a farewell and filing hesitantly out the door.

In the silence that followed the doorjamb clicking shut, Sir Nighteye walked over to Izuku. His eyes held a warning to remain quiet. “We will speak back at my agency, once you are released.”

Izuku looked up at him. “When will I be released?”

Sir Nighteye raised a sharp eyebrow, his expression impassive. “That is at the discretion of your doctor.”

Izuku shook his head, lost and confused and frustrated and not understanding anything of what was going on. “Why would I need to stay?”

“You are wounded,” the pro-hero pointed out, gesturing at Izuku’s neck.

Izuku gave him a no-shit look. “This wound isn’t going to heal. They can’t do anything for it.”

Sir Nighteye hesitated, his eyes probing Izuku’s for answers. Eventually, he offered a nod. “We will talk later.”

He turned around and left with Manual, who had finished offering one more round of his apologies to Iida.
The three teens were left in the hospital room, uncertain of what would come next.

Aizawa stared out at them all, his gaze conflicted, his expression stern.

They looked up at him in turn, each with their own questions in their eyes.

He didn’t have answers for them.

“I will contact each of you at the end of the week with my decision. Until then, work hard at your internships and expect that, at the very least, each of you will be facing several days of suspension upon your return to school. Iida, if you wish, I can contact your family’s agency as well...”

Iida nodded his head in acquiescence, and Aizawa promptly left the room.

And that, as they say, was that.

Three days later, on his way back to the station to meet his mom, Izuku felt a sudden sweeping sense of anguish coming across his bond from Todoroki.

Izuku tried to send back a feeling of concern and a question about Todoroki’s wellbeing, but he felt nothing else in return, just a large expanse of emptiness where the comforting presence of Todoroki usually resided at the end of the tether. Izuku shivered, reaching a hand out to brace himself against the wall. He sent another question. He received another absence of answers.

Izuku was about to close his eyes and try to visit Todoroki, to astral project or soul project or whatever it was he was able to do that allowed him to see Todoroki, when he caught sight of his mom waiting at the entrance to the train station he was planning to depart from.

She was meeting him here, rather than at Aizawa’s station?

Izuku tilted his head in curiosity as he walked over to greet his mom with a smile. He had missed her. He nuzzled at her arm in greeting as he shifted his costume briefcase over his shoulder.

She smiled at him and fluffed his hair, before dragging his hoodie up over his curls to hide his facial features from passersby.

Izuku furrowed his eyebrows in confusion as he peered up at her. Was something wrong?

“Come on, sweetie,” his mother smiled at him. “It’s time to go home.”

Izuku’s ears popped, then rang in the ensuing seconds of silence. He shivered, goosebumps rising on his arms.

Without explanation of how or why, Izuku felt his heart sink, dropping down past his lungs and falling into a deep crevice near his stomach. Izuku considered his mother's smile. She wouldn't smile like that, unless...

Izuku whined, and Popsicle shifted in concern at his feet.

Izuku could feel it in his gut. He wasn’t going home, not to Aizawa at least. His heart careened around and plunged upward, past his stomach and lungs and rushing up somewhere near his throat.
with such ferocity that he couldn’t swallow because his heart wanted to come out his mouth. The taste of blood pooled on his tongue, and the bite mark on his neck burned.

Without a doubt in his mind, Izuku knew exactly which ‘home’ he was about to go home to. He hadn’t wanted to call that place ‘home’ ever again. That ‘home’ was just a nightmare on repeat, and he couldn’t understand why his mom was smiling and soft and acting like everything was going to be okay. It wasn’t going to be okay. It couldn’t be. Todoroki was free-falling and nightmares were tracking Izuku down outside train stations and the bite mark on his neck burned and Izuku wasn’t going to know who he was, once he came out of this, he knew he knew he knew.

But he didn’t know how to warn her, or if there were any other options to escape to. Could Izuku truly give up his aspiration to become a hero, all to avoid a house?

Popsicle whined at his feet, helpless to stop the world from turning or Fate from spinning her wheel and having her way.

His mother's smile softened, unable to sense the danger, and Izuku started crying right there in the middle of the street.

His mother cooed at him. "It's going to be alright, sweetie, I promise. You'll see."

She patted at his head and rubbed at his back and told him how she’d already checked the place out and there were no dark spirits there and she conducted a seance with their ancestors and even his aunt said everything felt clean and she promised she promised she promised that everything was going to be fine the wards would never be broken again.

Ten miles away, Stain punched a hole through a window in an abandoned house, then climbed into the room. A bag fell down at his feet, and his eyes glowed silver-white in the darkness like twin moons.

"This place is as good as any."

The footboards creaked beneath each step, and villains all over Japan shivered as Death caressed her fingers down their arms and whispered Soon.

Chapter End Notes

Hello folks!

I apologize for the... 3.5 month long hiatus? I've had pretty terrible writer's block since my dog got sick, my bf got sad, and then my dog died, making my bf even sadder. It's been a rough bit of time.
However! I have recently started having a ton of ideas for this fic, and my writer's block has disappeared. So I should hopefully be back to regularly updating. Since my job and such takes up a lot of my life (and makes me only think about job stuff, damn my workaholic nature), updates will probably be every 3 weeks, but it shouldn't be longer than that between chapters anymore. I also may be writing shorter chapters, in order to make updates more often.

As a side note, this chapter was a really difficult one to write... I went back and forth on what the repercussions in Japan/BNHA would be from an incident like this, and I couldn't really write this chapter until I had planned roughly 3-4 chapters ahead. Good news is: that means I know (roughly) what will be in the next few chapters! Izuku is officially headed home (the house he grew up in, near Bakugou), so hopefully you folks will enjoy a bit more of a glimpse into his life there. Then Izuku will head back to school, have some fallout with Bakugou/Kirishima following the Stain fight, maybe some stuff with Iida and Todoroki, and of course more Aizawa-not-agreeing-with-Inko-on-parenting-techniques on the horizon. Oh yeah, and spoiler alert: Stain's definitely going to make a comeback, which will cause a lot of contention.

Amongst all that, I'm still trying to figure out how badly Izuku is going to fail at trying to date Kirishima, and how Kirishima becomes more assertive in that space without making Katsuki blow up a building. Any suggestions are welcome. :)

Anzen House

Chapter Summary

Izuku moves back into his old childhood home and deals with the emotions surrounding that.

Featuring: Izuku trying to be okay with things, Uraraka giving advice, Kirishima/Izuku hangout times, and Bakugou seeing through Izuku's mask.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The last time Izuku had seen the Anzen House, he had been running out the door and down the stairs, away from some woman who was trying to kill him. Away from a house frozen in time. The shrill scream of her anger as time resumed and he wasn’t in her grasp still haunted him.

Before that, the spirits used to protect them there. The house was settled next to a shrine that Izuku’s grandparents and great-grandparents used to care for. Statues of various spirits littered the only wooded area on this street of Tokyo, nestled under squat tiled roofs and settled around offering tables. Izuku’s gaze skittered past the stone statues, hesitant to stare too long. He knew what was inside them. He knew each and every statue from sketches in his ancestors’ journals. The 30-cm tall stone fox with thin eyes and tall ears, with a Kishara demon inside. The 53-cm stone fox that had wide eyes and a frown, with the spirit of the strange darkness that had swallowed half of Aunt Mezue’s kitchen before she bound its spirit to stone.

Two Komainu stood guard at the entrance of the shrine to ward off malevolent spirits from entering. Izuku had memorized the protective symbols engraved into their base, first created by Aunt Eza, which helped guard the entire shrine. Izuku had used those glyphs in several of his own protection wards over the years. It felt strange to pass by the Komainu, like walking past watchful eyes or brushing against a secret memory that was never meant to be spoken aloud.

The mangled limbs of the trees around the shrine seemed to form themselves into humanoid shapes, each of them telling a story of a spirit that awaited on the other side. Life on this side. Death on the other. Izuku knew that many shrines across Japan served as boundaries between life and death, but he’d never felt it so distinctly at the other shrines as he did here. Here, the spirits seemed to lick at his bones as he and his mother walked by.

Izuku shivered and kept his head down out of sheer respect.

Between brief flicks of his gaze upward, Izuku noticed that the old shrine had become overgrown with vines. Greenery twisted and tangled its way amongst stone and tree, and Izuku could barely make out the red roof of the shrine as he and his mother passed by. Then came more greenery, nature overtaking cement, and the tall black gate that he knew led to his old house.

Anzen House.

He hadn’t been here in years, and it looked to have taken nature only a decade to swallow any sight of his house from the street.
If they wanted to hide what they were doing without drawing curtains over the windows… this was the perfect place to be.

And yet…

“Mom, what are we doing here?” He anxiously turned to look at his mother. “I thought we weren’t going to come back.”

Inko ran a soothing hand over his back as Popsicle sniffed the stone at the entrance to the gate, smelling for danger.

“It’s not how you remember it, Izuku. You’ll understand once you’re inside. You’ll be able to feel it.”

Izuku stood his ground. “Yes, but why are we here?”

Inko’s expression fell, her eyes casting about. Eventually, she attempted a smile.

“Well, I have been having a bit of… trouble, finding a new source of employment that can, well, afford something like our former apartment. I can… we can handle food, for now, and that’s what is most important. And the gas and electricity, of course, I’ll need to get those turned online soon. I’ve mostly been using the fire pit to cook, these past few nights.”

The fire pit. The one in the room next to the kitchen. It had a loose floorboard that hid a staircase to a small basement. When Izuku was younger, he used to climb down into the basement and giggle up through the cracks in the floorboards, specks of dust falling into his eyes.

Izuku shook his head to dismiss the memory. He clutched at his briefcase in one hand and his backpack in another. He tried not to let his feelings overwhelm him.

“You said… you promised we wouldn’t have to come back.”

“We don’t really have much other choice, Izuku,” Inko chided. “Safe havens don’t grow on trees, and well-paying jobs for nomadic witches don’t either. So… here we are.”

“Here we are,” Izuku muttered in return. His gaze settled on the front gate, the wrought iron an effective enough tool to keep evil spirits at bay. And that was in addition to the wards he knew were hidden on the stone inside. Only those who were invited in, would be able to enter.

Izuku swallowed. He was afraid to take a single step forward, as though attempting that much would make it real.

He didn’t want to stay here. There had to be some other option.

Izuku turned to his mom. “Why can’t we keep staying with Mr. Aizawa?”

Inko grimaced. “Your pack leader and I have… irreconcilable differences, in how we think you should be raised.”

“But why does that mean we can’t stay with him?”

“He’s not your father!” Inko’s eyes flashed at him, and Izuku shrunk back.

“I… I know that. But he’s… he’s my pack leader…”

His mother sighed and raised a hand to her head. “He’s not a wolf, either, Izuku. You let him take
these liberties, but they aren’t his to take. I’m the one in charge of your protection. I’m the one who has to keep you safe.”

Inko paused to take a deep breath, her expression both firm and pleading.

“And the safest place for you is here, at Anzen House. We will both be safe here. We won’t have to keep moving around… and that’s what you want, isn’t it? To stay near Tokyo and attend U.A.?”

Izuku stared meekly back at her. “Yes…”

“Izuku…” Inko let out an exasperated breath and shrugged her shoulders in defeat. “This is the only safe place I can think of. We can’t set up the appropriate wards at your pack leader’s apartment. The plaster walls won’t hold the seals for longer than a couple days…”

Izuku nodded his head, desolate. “Yes, mom.”

Inko reached out and rubbed her son’s back again. “Come on, it’s not as bad as you’ve built it up to be. I’ve strengthened the wards again, yesterday. There’s no way a demon will be able to pass this threshold, alright? No matter what kind of person approaches this gate, whether it’s a werewolf or a vampire or a ghost—they’ll all be stopped right here unless we specifically allow them entry, alright? We will be safe here. I promise.”

Izuku bit his lip and bobbed his head in acquiescence.

His mother smiled at him supportively and moved to open the gate.

“Izuku…” she waved her hand with a flourish toward the house. “Welcome back to your home. Welcome to Anzen House.”

Izuku shivered at her words. The Anzen House had always felt more like a fortress than a home. Protection spells upon wards upon binding runes upon blankets of secrecy. The air was choked with it, and charged with it, and Izuku could barely keep himself upright for the first few moments after walking through the gate. He stumbled to a stop at another mangled tree, the limbs carving out a brief mimicry of a woman warning them away, but Izuku knew she was only there to help them. He bowed his head in respect, shaking off dizziness at the deluge of spells washing over him.

“Mom… what is this? Why does it feel so strong?”

His mother smiled at him, a hint of pride in her eyes. “This, Izuku… this is a legacy.”

The creaking of the metal gate shutting behind him did nothing for his nerves.

By the time he set foot in the entryway, where Izuku had room to slip off his shoes before stepping up into the rest of the house, Izuku had taken enough deep breaths (and calming pets of Popsicle) that he hoped he could walk through the first half of the house without embarrassment.

He knew his mom thought that he was overreacting, but how else was he supposed to feel? This was the place that it had all started. This was the house where he used his powers for the first time. Where he’d encountered his first demon. Where he’d first been cornered and scared and hiding in his bedroom closet underneath his All Might onesie, hoping that a hero would appear to save them.
But no hero had come.

That memory, that moment, was what had driven Izuku’s desire to become a hero. Sure, he and Kacchan used to play around as hero versus villain, with Izuku’s mother the innocent civilian between them. They had dreamed up promises to become the greatest heroes in history, even stronger than All Might. But Izuku had been attacked before those dreams could solidify in his personality as anything more than a wish.

In contrast, the conviction that Izuku had found here, in this house, where he’d had to muffle his fears behind tightly pressed lips and an All Might onesie while trying to disappear in the back corner of his bedroom closet… the fervor to protect others from feeling like he did, that day, was as solid as stone. It kept him upright when he was scared. It supported him through kata after kata. It got him up in the mornings and convinced him to go to bed at night, so he could get enough sleep for the next day. It’s what kept him trying, harder and harder, to become the best hero he could be, even when nightmares plagued his rest and secrets sewed his lips shut and saying too much made him cough up blood.

The feeling of being part of a group, a pack, certainly helped drive him, as well. It gave him happiness and connection and a feeling, deep in his chest, that maybe he wasn’t alone in this. But pack didn’t make him want to be a hero. These memories did. This nightmare.

Izuku shivered in the entryway, the floor cold even through his thick socks.

Izuku turned to his mom and tried to widen his lips in a mimicry of her smile. Anxiety bubbled in his gut, but he breathed past it, focused on the small noises his mom made as she closed the door and put down her bag.

“How long have you been staying here?”

Inko took off her own shoes and helped Izuku with the briefcase that held his costume.

“Well, I think I lasted about… three more days of staying with your teacher? Long enough for him to come back after seeing you in the hospital. He actually helped me get all the important things from our old apartment.”

Izuku nodded his head, a small grin on lips. That would have been fun to watch. He wished he could have been there.

“And did you clean the apartment before you left?”

Inko’s smile turned secretive. “Mmm-hmm. You should have seen Mrs. Weilen. She could smell the bleach from three doors down, and she wasn’t too pleased.”

Izuku rolled his eyes. “You enjoy messing with her too much.”

His mom laughed. “Not too much. Just enough, I think.”

Inko nudged Izuku’s shoulder with her arm and picked up a box at the top of the steps.

“The good news is, I’ve had enough time to take care of the most obvious problems. I got the rodents out of the kitchen cupboards, the snakes out of the fire pit, and swept the floors of all the dirt and leaves.”

Izuku tilted his head in confusion, and his mom laughed.
“When we left, your bedroom window was still open. Some leaves got in, and I guess over the years the wind blew the leaves around the house. Oh, and I just finished cleaning the bathroom and kitchen last night.” She smiled down at him softly. “I was trying to get it ready for you, so it wouldn’t seem so frightening.”

Izuku hugged his arms close to himself. It did look more welcoming than a cave in the middle of an isolated mountain range, and he’d survived that. So that was a plus.

“You tried, and that’s what matters.”

Inko’s expression fell, dismayed. She turned away from the entryway for a few seconds before rounding about with another welcoming grin.

“Well, I didn’t think you would want any of the reminders of that room, so I put everything into boxes and dragged them into the living room. We can burn anything you want in the garden, later. For now, I’ve set up two futons near each other in my room, and our trunks are at the foot of our beds. We can decide what to do with that room later.”

Izuku nodded distractedly. “That sounds good.”

She didn’t need to specify further which room she was referencing.

His old bedroom.

Inko settled the box by the stairs that led to the attic, her figure blocking the hallway that led to Izuku’s bedroom. She pursed her mouth in debate as her hand tapped the stairway railing.

“Well,” Inko started. She seemed lost for words. “We can deal with that attic, later, as well.”

She hesitated again, watching as Izuku shoulders hunched even further as though he was trying to collapse in on himself.

The attic. The shadow behind him. His bedroom. His closet. The woman wandering in.

Izuku shivered.

Inko brought up another smile and clapped her hands. “How about lunch?”

They ate lunch while the trees creaked outside, welcoming them back. The wind whistled through the wind chimes, and Anzen House felt alive.

Izuku picked at his barbecued meat and tried to imagine a world where this house felt like home again.

Later, when Izuku was running his fingers over his futon bed and trying to figure out whether he needed to stuff his pillow with bergamot, chamomile, and thyme to help him sleep, his mother
kneeled down next to him. She offered up a small box and motioned for Izuku to open it.

Curious, Izuku took the box from her. It was small, no bigger than the size of his palm. He sniffed at the box and frowned down at it.

His mom laughed.

“Go on, open it. I was thinking of waiting until your birthday… but I figured you might need these before then.”

Izuku tilted his head at her, but she wouldn’t say anything further. Izuku cradled the box in his left hand while lifting the lid with his right, opening it up to reveal a pair of earrings.

“I used to wear these, back when I was around your age. My aunt blessed them for good luck. I figured you might be able to use more of that.” She paused, and her tone became wary as she continued. “You know, since you’ve started having your visions again.”

Izuku flushed from his cheeks to his neck. He could hear the slight reprimand in her voice, but he ignored it in favor of taking the earrings out of the box and stroking them with a finger.

“These feel nice.”

“They should. I did a seance the other night and channeled some of our ancestors to bless them even further. I won’t brag, but that is the best blessing I’ve ever cast on an object before. And I want you to wear them, at all times. I want them to help keep you safe.”

Izuku smiled up at her, slightly worried by the strangled sound of her voice. She must be concerned for him. Although whether that concern stemmed from her thinking something bad would happen to him or from her thinking that Izuku would be bring something bad upon himself… he couldn’t be certain.

He shook away those thoughts and tried to focus on the memory of a couple weeks ago, where he’d asked his mom if he could get his ears pierced for his birthday. He had been inspired by hanging out with Uraraka and getting to hold her earrings. He had loved the feel of them. Izuku vaguely remembered Uraraka saying he would look really cool with his own pair. Of that boys who wore earrings looked cool? Something like that.

“So how do I put them on?”

Inko laughed and explained that he would need to get his ears pierced, first, and she could either take him to a store to get them pierced or she could do it herself. But if she did it herself, she would just be using a thick needle, some alcohol, and a numbing poultice.

Izuku, rather expectedly, chose the at-home method. He didn’t flinch. Afterward, he traced fingertips across the edges of his ears, feeling lightly for the earring in the middle of the lobe. His mom cleaned up the supplies, and he went to bed smiling, thinking of what Uraraka would say. Thinking of Kacchan and Eijirou and Tenya and everyone else he couldn’t wait to see on Monday morning.

He woke up, screaming.
He didn’t remember what for.

He lay shivering in bed for several minutes, trying to curl up with his blanket, but the chill was somewhere deep in his bones, and he couldn’t get rid of it. Popsicle whined from his spot at Izuku’s feet, trying to heat Izuku’s toes, and told him to find somewhere safe and warm. Izuku slouched out of bed, stumbled out of his mother’s bedroom and into the kitchen, and veered left at the stove. He crawled into the fire pit and curled up with a pillow beneath his head. Popsicle jumped down into the pit after him, nestling on top of Izuku to help keep him warm.

Izuku didn’t have any more nightmares.

The next morning, his mother poked at his ash-covered sleep pants and tank top. She asked him if he had ever read the story of Cinderella.

Her tone was light and teasing, but her eyes looked worried. She didn’t say anything else, just pattered around the kitchen and peered into cupboards to scrounge up a breakfast that wouldn’t need to be heated up. They made quick work of a can of beans, Inko sitting on the bench by the fire pit while Izuku lay curled around his pillow inside. His pillowcase was covered in ash, now, and would need to be washed. Unless he slept here again. Then... what would be the point?

Izuku told his mother about his internship and what he had learned with Sir Nighteye. He told her about Nighteye’s theory that his precognition wasn’t a result of Popsicle turning into raven form. It was just inherently one of Izuku’s witch abilities. Izuku thought it might even be the passive ability that he had been waiting to receive. His mom had one active ability and one passive, so maybe this was his passive one. But passive ones were supposed to come after you were a teenager, so…

Inko listened to her son ramble, glad for him to be safe at home, somewhere she could keep her eyes on him. She kept her mouth shut, hesitant to mention that Izuku had this ability since the wolves died. They just suppressed it, along with his other powers, during that binding ritual with the tengu. It had been Izuku’s choice, and he seemed to have forgotten.

She didn’t know whether to be concerned or grateful that he didn’t remember having this ability many moons ago. Nothing good came of it, then.

Izuku accidentally threw his spoon at the wall while he was gesticulating about some fight move he learned during his internship from another student named Mirio. The name sounded familiar to Inko, although she couldn’t recall where she might have heard it before.

Izuku scrambled out of his fire pit to retrieve his spoon, then looked in dejection at the empty can of beans. He didn’t complain about still being hungry. Inko stared down at her own meal, and offered the can up to Izuku for recycling. She didn’t say anything, either. He left the room to clean up their breakfast, and Inko ran a hand through her hair. She stared into the kitchen at the cabinets, which were nearly empty after several days of Inko subsisting off of non-expired edibles like spam and dried beans.

They’d been nomadic witches for so long that Inko sometimes forgot what it was like to live in a big house with cabinets fully stocked with food. To have central air conditioning and hardwood floors, a well kept garden for rituals and poultices, indoor plumbing where the pipes weren’t yet rusted, and something other than scraps for breakfast.
Inko walked over to the kitchen and looked down into the recycling at the cans that comprised their first meal of the day.

She let out a sigh.

“I really need to go grocery shopping.”

After breakfast, Izuku went to use the bathroom and caught sight of himself in the mirror. His new earrings caught the light, and he smiled. He was glad his mom had pierced his ears. Whatever blessing she had put on them definitely brought him joy, a feeling like sunlight hovering above his shoulders. He hadn’t been able to appreciate it last night while he was sleeping, but now that he was awake… he could definitely feel it. Somehow, the earrings made his spirits lighter, and he felt less troubled by the fact that he was one hallway way from his old bedroom. He was still scared of that room and he was still wary of it, but he was… able to breathe? Which was nice.

Izuku ignored the glaring red bite-mark on his neck as he mused about how his mother’s blessing was different from the blessing he had placed on Uraraka’s earrings. Surely his blessing hadn’t helped Uraraka as much as his mother’s was helping him?

Izuku hummed, wondering how Uraraka was doing. Following an urge to call her, Izuku went down the hall and rustled through his bag looking for his phone. He hoped she would be free to talk. He wanted to tell her that he’d gotten his ears pierced.

Uraraka answered on the third ring. Her cheerful voice and laughter soon had Izuku grinning dopily as he wandered around the house in a daze, barely glancing at his surroundings. She was more excited than he thought she would be at the notion of him getting his ears pierced. She whined about not being able to wait to see him on Monday, before proceeding to grill him on proper ear care techniques.

Izuku asked Uraraka how her internship went, and she gave him a full run-down of all the cool stuff she got to learn. Eventually, Izuku ended up in the garden as Uraraka finished explaining some new fighting technique she learned from Gunhead.

Afterward, Uraraka asked him what he had been up to at his internship, and Izuku wasn’t sure what to say.

Was he was supposed to be lying about the Stain incident?

Before he could dig his own grave, Uraraka grew quiet and said, “Oh yeah, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have asked. I saw you on the television, with that villain Stain. Are you… are you okay?”

Izuku winced. He’d forgotten that he was caught on camera, held threateningly by Stain as the villain gave some speech about hero society being corrupted. The video had gone viral, according to Iida’s text on Thursday. And apparently everyone and their mother knew that Stain had bit him.

Evidently, villains didn’t tend to bite people on national television. Which made the non-healing bite marks on Izuku’s neck Exhibit C in the strangeness that occurred on Wednesday night for everyone who’d seen Izuku in the days following the incident, right after the Hero Killer’s speech and the weird Nomus that simultaneously attacked Hosu City.
And sure, Izuku had eventually gotten used to people at Sir Nighteye’s agency staring at his neck as he passed them in the hallway, but it was still a weird thing for other people to know about. It made Izuku feel twitchy. Even though most of them didn't understand the connotation of the bite, it still felt like one of his secrets had been laid bare to the public, and someone somewhere might be more likely to draw the line from 'bite mark' to 'werewolf' to 'magic exists and Izuku knows about it'.

Izuku was bound to get in trouble for it, somehow. He could feel it.

Izuku picked at the ash on his sleep pants and responded to Uraraka.

“It all turned out fine, I guess. My neck still hurts, but that’s about it. And I got to go back to my internship afterward, which was good.”

Uraraka cooed at him. “That seems so scary. I would have been terrified.”

Izuku stopped picking at his pants. His gaze slid to the sliding doors behind him, leading into the kitchen. He thought about his bedroom. The attic. The shrine next door, littered with demons inside statues. The veil between life and death feeling so thin, here.

He whispered, “Yeah, well… there are scarier things than that.”

There was a pause, and Uraraka’s voice became softer. “Was it as bad as the USJ?”

Izuku unconsciously clenched his hands into fists. He’d almost forgotten about the USJ. It got shoved somewhere in the back of his mind, something to move past and not focus on. Izuku took a deep breath and released it. He looked away from his house.

“It was… different. It’s hard to compare.” He rubbed the palm of his left hand with his right thumb. “There weren’t as many threats, but I felt more directly threatened? If that makes sense.”

“Yeah… yeah.”

Izuku stared at the garden, overtaken with weeds. He and his mom definitely had their work cut out for them, here, if they wanted to bring the herb garden back up to snuff.

The conversation lulled for a minute before Uraraka piped back up.

“By the way, have you talked to Kirishima?”

Uraraka’s voice sounded sly, and Izuku furrowed his eyebrows.

“Oh, no? Not since we said goodbye at the train station. Why?”

“Ohhh, no reason,” Uraraka said, her voice trailing off.

Izuku narrowed his eyes. “Whyyyy…?”

“Well, I mean, I was just going to say… if you did happen to be still getting over what happened, then it might be a good idea to talk to the guy you’re interested in… maybe? If you’re still interested in him?”

Izuku blushed. “Uh, really?”

“Yeah, definitely! It’s super romantic to be there for someone, and I bet Kirishima would love to be there for you. Ya know, if you needed it.”
Izuku laughed into the receiver, his eyes sliding away from a particularly nasty looking vine.

“Well, I could definitely use some help moving into my old house.”

“Wait, you’re moving into a house? That’s awesome!”

Izuku fiddled with more ash on his pants. “Yeah, my mom kind of, uh, surprised me I guess. She met me at the train station, brought me back here, and now I won’t be living in that old apartment anymore.” He looked around at the garden. “There’s still a lot of working to make it liveable again, but my mom’s trying to get it together for us.”

“Mmm, you should definitely invite Kirishima over then. That way, he’ll get to be there for you plus help you move in! He’d definitely think that’s manly.”

She said ‘manly’ in a gruff voice, and Izuku laughed at her impersonation.

After their phone call ended, Izuku called Eijirou.

As Uraraka had expected, Eijirou was ecstatic about coming over.

“You’ve got a house now? So cool!”

He sounded just like Uraraka.

After he hung up with a promise to see Kirishima soon, Izuku rushed into his mom’s bedroom to find a hoodie to slip on. He’d rather not have Kirishima asking questions about the glaring red bite mark on his neck. Izuku didn’t know what he would tell him. That it would go away? Eventually? If Izuku found some vampire blood or hunted down Stain and got him to lick it?

Yeah, no. Izuku was definitely going to avoid that conversation for as close to forever as he could.

________________________________________________________________________

The downside of Kirishima coming over was that it had been years since Izuku had met a friend at the front gate to Anzen House. Izuku had opened the gate and gestured for Kirishima to come inside, completely forgetting about the wards… so he was awfully embarrassed when Kirishima went to step through the gate and hit a physical barrier that he couldn’t see.

Kirishima stumbled backward and gaped at the invisible forcefield he’d just run into.

“What… what was that?”

Izuku froze in place on the other side of the gate, trying to think of an excuse, worried that Kirishima was going to be mad at him.

“That was… that was so freaking cool! Haha!”

Kirishima started laughing and hardened his skin as he tried to walk through the barrier again. And again. And again. He seemed to take it as a blow to his manly pride that he couldn’t walk through the front gate of his not-actually-boyfriend-yet.

Izuku eventually stopped worrying and started smiling at Kirishima’s attempts to force his way through. “Do you want me to let you in?”
Kirishima grinned at him, his hand reaching out to feel the edges of the barrier. His eyes sparkled as he aimed his shark-tooth grin at Izuku.

“How does it work?”

Izuku shrugged, his shoulders drooping as he tried to think of a way to answer.

“It, uh, someone set it up for us. It requires a passcode to get in.”

Kirishima placed both hands against the barrier, leaning forward with all his weight and cackling to himself. “So what’s the passcode?”

Izuku grinned up at him while he positioned himself directly in front of his friend. “Eijirou Kirishima, I allow you entrance into Anzen House.”

Kirishima instantly fell through the barrier, directly on top of Izuku who somehow managed to catch the redhead in his arms. Izuku looked up at him, a soft smile gracing his lips.

“Hey there,” Izuku whispered to Kirishima.

“Hey,” Kirishima grinned back, a full-fledge blush edging its way up his neck.

A second passed, and then Izuku was wincing.

“Also, uh, ow?”

Kirishima’s eyebrows furrowed in concern.

“What do you mean ‘ow’?”

Izuku lifted his arms a bit, and Kirishima looked down to see that—while falling—he had hardened his arms. Izuku had then caught him, and some of the rough spots on Kirishima’s hardened skin were digging into the soft flesh of Izuku’s inner arm.

Kirishima blushed and pushed himself off Izuku, patting his friend’s arms down with now-softened fingers. His hands hovered over Izuku’s arms, concerned, before he retracted them to sheepishly scratch at the back of his head.

“Sorry about that.”

“No problem,” Izuku grinned.

He gestured with his head for Kirishima to follow, leading the redhead several meters down the path to where the foliage first opened up to show his new/old house.

Kirishima looked up at the house behind Izuku and whistled. “Wow, man. Not as big as Bakugou’s, but this place is awesome.”

Izuku nodded his head, ignoring the compliment. He’d never been complimented on somewhere he lived, before. It was strange.

“Yeah, and Kacchan’s right up the street. We used to run over to each other’s houses and play after school, when we were kids.”

“Wait, seriously?”
“Yeah. Most of the time, we played at his house since his dad used to make us hero costumes? But he came over here sometimes, because I had the cooler garden and my mom always wanted to play the innocent civilian in need of our help.”

“Man, it’s hard to think of Bakugou playing hero as a kid. He’s always so serious.”

“Kacchan is definitely serious,” Izuku agreed. A slight blush graced his cheeks as he added, “But he has his moments.”

“… moments,” deadpanned Kirishima.

“Yeah.” Izuku smiled wistfully. “Moments.”

Kirishima didn’t believe him when Izuku told him that Bakugou took him camping two weeks ago. He did, however, believe the part where Bakugou had bought udon in a cup for dinner, for both of them.

“He’s always trying to make us eat,” complained Kirishima. But it didn’t sound an awful lot like complaining, especially since he had a fond smile on his lips. “Did I tell you about the time I stopped by to surprise him, and he was making cookies?”

Kirishima laughed and continued to tell a story about a growling Bakugou covered in flour and wearing an apron. Kirishima still had a burn from where he didn’t dodge Bakugou’s blasts in time to high-tail it out of the kitchen. He also had photo footage on his phone to accompany the story.

Izuku laughed and held Kirishima’s hand as he dragged him around the house to the garden. He wanted to eat Bakugou cookies so bad.

Kirishima ended up helping Izuku move the boxes from the living room to the garden, where Izuku and his mom were thinking of burning their old things later that night.

Clothes. Toys. Memories. Anything with emotional importance (or that could have some traces of their DNA) would need to be burned, to avoid those items being used in rituals against them. It was the same reason why Inko had bleached their old apartment, or why they typically just chose to burn the entire house down. It was easier that way. Nothing could remain that could point to them. It was too dangerous.

Of course, Izuku didn’t mention any of that to Kirishima. He just said they wanted the boxes out of the house, to get rid of later. He didn’t have to define what ‘get rid of’ meant.

No one else needed to know that. Just family.

Kirishima kept Izuku’s spirits up, despite the fact that Izuku continued to pass by his old bedroom on their trips indoors. The other teen made Izuku feel… comfortable. Warm. Kind of like his heart was racing, which reminded Izuku of jumping from tree to tree with the pups, that joyful stillness of swimming in a lake without his clothes on.

It was… nice.

He’d forgotten that being near Kirishima felt like this. He wished he could hold onto this feeling. He
wished Kirishima wouldn’t go back home, later tonight. Izuku didn’t want to be alone in this place. He didn’t want this feeling of joy to dissipate. He wanted to keep seeing Kirishima smile.

Kirishima made a noise, almost like roaring, as he flexed his arms above his head. He’d just finished carrying out the last of the boxes, and he wiped a bit of sweat off his brow with his arm. Kirishima grinned over at Izuku.

“So, what’s next? Got any more heavy things you need moved around?”

Izuku flushed. “Uh, no, I think that’s the last of them. But maybe you could help me in the kitchen?”

“Sure, dude! What’s in the kitchen?”

Izuku walked away from the boxes in the garden and motioned for Kirishima to follow him. He showed Kirishima the growing pile of trash and recycling, which Kirishima offered to carry to the road.

Izuku busied himself with opening cupboards and trying to get a tally of what edibles remained. Some things were too old and needed to be thrown out, but some of the canned goods and dried foods hadn’t expired yet.

“Oh, cool. You’ve got a lot of those.” He shook the jar to watch the ‘beans’ scatter before placing it back on the shelf. “Do you like to buy in bulk?”

“… yes. My mom likes to… buy in bulk…”

Izuku turned slowly back to a much-more-normal-contents cupboard and finished pulling the last pound of rice forward. He hoped Kirishima wouldn’t look at the top shelf of the potions cupboard, where Izuku’s mom used to keep the toad eyeballs and rat skulls and snake skins. Izuku tried to come up with explanations, in case Kirishima kept looking, but he was running out of ideas.

Kirishima pulled out a plastic baggy of what looked like small bits of hard, white candy. He moved them around in the bag and realized that… yeah, those were definitely human teeth. He put them back hastily and shut the door, deciding not to question Izuku anymore about that cupboard’s contents.

Izuku remained oblivious.

Meanwhile, Izuku had finished organizing the three main food cupboards. All in all, it seemed like the leftover edibles were: two more cans of beans, three jars of honey, five pounds of rice, two pounds of dry beans, a pound of sugar, and half a cupboard full of salt. Seriously, half a cupboard. There was sea salt, seaweed salt, table salt, salt from China and salt from Germany and salt from Australia, blessed salt, cursed salt, black salt, purple salt, Izuku-stop-asking-me-where-I-got-this salt, Izuku-never-touch-that-again! salt.
… their family owned a lot of salt.

Kirishima peered over Izuku’s shoulder and gaped at the salt cupboard.

“Okay, I have officially never seen this much salt in my life.”

Izuku closed the door before Kirishima could read the labels.

“Uhh… my mom has a sodium deficiency?”

Kirishima gave him a look. “Has she thought about just taking pills for that?”

Izuku shrugged. They did do normal cooking stuff with the salt. Occasionally.

“Salt-cured meat is really tasty.”

That turned out to be a good thing to bring up because it got Kirishima talking about his favorite kinds of meat, which then led to him talking about the best places to get meat-on-the-go and meals-on-the-go in general. He salivated over some ramen stands and told Izuku about his favorite place to grill meat on a stone.

Izuku was kind of curious about that one. Cooking meat on a stone? Why would you do that? And how would that work? Was the meat just, like, really thin?

Izuku finished tallying up the kitchen resources, and before he knew it, Izuku had agreed to go get dinner with Kirishima sometime next week and Kirishima had started blushing.

Izuku wondered if they should invite Kacchan, as well. Kacchan liked food.

The conversation wandered from there, as did Izuku. He paced around his kitchen and busied his hands. He went to the living room and rearranged furniture. He kept moving, anxious—even with Kirishima there beside him—to get near his bedroom or the stairs to the attic.

Kirishima tried to keep up with him. Going into the rooms Izuku went into. Offering to help lift or move anything heavy. At one point, Kirishima let Izuku climb on top of his shoulders so that Izuku could get rid of some cobwebs growing in the corners of the living room ceiling.

A couple hours after Kirishima first walked into the house, he finally ventured to ask Izuku about where his bedroom was.

Izuku briefly glanced in the direction of his old bedroom before shoving his hands into his the pockets of his ash-dusted sleep pants. He gestured with a small grin for Kirishima to follow him, and he led the other teen into his mother’s bedroom.

Upon entering, Kirishima looked perplexed.

“Why are there two beds?”

Izuku nibbled at his lips. He pointed at each futon in turn.

“That’s my mom’s bed, and that’s my bed.”

“Oh! That’s… cool.” Kirishima’s eyes wandered back toward the door. “So what’s in the other room, then? Is that your mom’s office or something?”

Izuku folded his arms over his chest, feeling prickly and defensive.
“No.”

Kirishima stared at Izuku, and Izuku hunched down to fiddle with the trunk at the end of his futon.

“Oookay…”

Izuku huffed. He sat huddled over his knees and glared at his bedspread.

“That… was my old bedroom. As a kid. It has bad memories.”

Kirishima’s eyes widened, and he waved his hands. “Whoa, dude, I didn’t mean to pry. I just… uh… there’s only two rooms in my apartment? Other than the living room. And the kitchen. And the bathroom. But uh, so, I have my bedroom, and my parents have their bedroom. So I just thought… that… you might have your own bedroom here? Since there are two rooms. God, I really need to shut up now.”

Izuku peered over his shoulder, a fond grin curling at the edge of his lips.

“I like your bedroom. And your bed. Your bed’s really nice.”

“Uh, yeah, it’s a good one! A good bed.”

Kirishima shifted back and forth, his feet not seeming to be comfortable standing in one place. Almost like he was stepping on hot coals.

Izuku stared at him in concern.

“What? Yeah! Yeah, of course I’m okay. You just… you don’t have a bedroom? For us to hang out in. Um, alone. Which is cool! That’s totally cool. I just wanted to hang out with you. In your bedroom. Uh, sometime. And I didn’t think it would also-be-your-mom’s-bedroom.”

Kirishima gulped. He felt like it was getting hotter in the room.

“Hey, do you think we should call Bakugou? I think it might be good for him to be here.”

Like a chaperone, Kirishima didn’t say. He also resolutely put all thoughts of sex cults and strange pack cuddles out of his mind. Man, he missed hanging out in Bakugou’s bedroom.

… Kirishima might have a thing about bedrooms, apparently.

Izuku seemed happy about the idea of seeing Bakugou, so Kirishima pulled out his cellphone and called him. He hadn’t actually been meaning that Bakugou should come over… except he kind of did? It was confusing. Kirishima just felt like maybe Bakugou should be here if Kirishima was gonna hang out with Izuku in his bedroom. That was also his mom’s bedroom. Which was… fine.

Bakugou answered on the third ring and, gruffly, agreed to be at the front gate in a couple minutes.

In the meantime, Kirishima meandered back out into the kitchen, through the entryway to get his shoes, and out the front door. Izuku loped behind Kirishima until he finally caught up with him and grabbed his hand. Kirishima looked back, askance, and Izuku smiled at him. He squeezed Kirishima's hand, bumped shoulders with him, and then started humming a strange tune. Almost like a lullaby.

Kirishima flushed from cheek to chest, and he nervously scratched at the back of his neck with his
free hand while his heart raced. He squeezed back on Izuku’s hand and tried to find something normal and not hand-related to talk about.

“So… do you like… rabbits?”

Kirishima was really fishing for ideas here. He wanted to punch himself for only being able to think about rabbits. Fluffy. White. Rabbits. With red eyes. Ughhhh.

“Rabbits are tasty. Popsicle loves rabbits.”

Kirishima missed a step on the stone path and stumbled. Okay. Not talking about rabbits then. Kirishima didn’t want to think about Izuku’s wolf/snake eating rabbits. Oh god. Or was it the bird form? Did it like to peck at them?

They continued walking hand in hand to the front gate so they could greet Bakugou, and Kirishima kept an eye on how getting a farther distance away from the house seemed to lighten Izuku’s mood.

About ten minutes later, Bakugou appeared. He jogged up to the gate with a towel around his shoulders, likely trying to get a good sprint in on his way over. Bakugou strode through the front gate without pause, shocking the hell out of Kirishima.

Izuku stood beside the gate and looked exasperatedly at Kirishima as the red haired teen gaped at Bakugou.

“But… but there was a barrier! Someone’s quirk’s barrier! How did you get in?”

Bakugou just raised an eyebrow back at Kirishima and casually shoved him with one hand into the wrought iron gate. “You saying I can’t come here when I want?”

Izuku snickered at the incredulity in Kirishima’s eyes. He leaned against a tree.

“Kacchan was invited in when we were kids. We never revoked his access.”

Which made Kirishima’s eyes bug out of his head.

Kirishima whistled. “Dude, how long has this forcefield been up? That’s some serious quirk, right there. Holy cow.”

Bakugou narrowed his eyes at Izuku, whose mouth gaped open as his eyes flitted around for excuses.

“Uhhh….”

“Drop it,” Bakugou growled.

He took another step toward Kirishima, and the redhead backed up further into the gate, hands up in surrender.

“Alright, alright. I’m just saying. Imagine if we had something like this at U.A.! Those villains at the USJ wouldn’t have been able to sneak in.”

Izuku’s fingers twitched. He looked ready to bolt.

“Errr, we told the principal about how to do something similar for U.A., after the attack. So there’s some new protections in place. Since then.”
Created by me and my mom, he didn’t say, but Bakugou narrowed his eyes as though he understood anyway.

Bakugou pushed off of Kirishima and left the other two teens to stare awkwardly at each other as he walked up the path to catch a glimpse of Anzen House. He remembered this place sometimes, very rarely, but his memories of it were hazy. He could remember playing with Auntie Inko and a young Izuku… but it was blurred at the edges, inconsistent, more a feeling that remained in his mind rather than an image. All of Bakugou’s good memories of Izuku were of that mountain, or the park, or his own house.

Everything here… was difficult to remember. Yet seeing the front door again was almost like having a blanket lifted on his memories, and Bakugou shivered. He imagined four-year-old Deku running out the front door of his house to meet him. He could almost recall that exuberant smile and the little dance he used to do when greeting Bakugou.

Was there some sort of memory spell on this place? Did it make him fucking forget?

Bakugou bristled, his shoulders hunching upward as he growled in the direction of the front door. Some people might say it was stupid to assert your dominance on a fucking domicile, but what did they know. This place had taken Deku from him and might even be trying to play with his mind. He could posture at it all he wanted to.

Izuku pulled up alongside Bakugou while Kirishima continued trying to extricate his hoodie from the iron gate, several meters back.

Bakugou turned his head as Izuku walked up behind him. He shoved his hands into his pockets and glowered at the house.

“Deko, you gonna be living here, again?” Bakugou asked. Bakugou kept his glare set on the front door.

“Yeah.” Izuku said. “Looks like it.”

Izuku didn’t sound happy.

He had been laughing a few seconds ago.

Bakugou’s eyes narrowed further. He leaned down, his breath ghosting over Izuku’s neck near where Stain had bit him, where the bite still burned, and Izuku shivered. When he peered up at him, Bakugou’s eyes seemed to pierce straight through Izuku’s thoughts, reading into his intentions and his fears.

“Thought you never wanted to come back here.”

“I didn’t,” Izuku whispered, his voice strained. The intensity in his eyes blazed. “I never wanted to come back.”

Bakugou hadn’t heard him use that tone, before. Not once. It didn’t sound like Deku was afraid. More like he was… reluctant or forced. Like he was putting up with something he didn’t want to, but he couldn’t seem to find a way out.

Bakugou ground his teeth together and looked away.

He didn’t like that tone at all.
A fire burned in Bakugou’s eyes as he scowled at the front door, the pieces clicking into place. “Your mom?”

Izuku pursed his lips and stared at the stone slab walkway that reached from the iron gate to the front door. “She does what she can.”

Bakugou sneered. “Kch. Doesn’t seem to be enough.”

Izuku didn’t have any response for that. He just kept staring at his feet until Kirishima cheerfully barreled into him and slung an arm around his chest. “So!” His shark-tooth grin gleamed in the sunlight. “Wanna have a barbecue?”

And, well… Izuku did love a good barbecue.

Bakugou and Kirishima ended up hanging out with Izuku for several more hours. They made a fire in the fire pit and barbecued some steak that Bakugou had marinated the night before and brought over as a housewarming gift.

Because apparently Bakugou marinates?

Izuku was very curious.

Bakugou wouldn’t fess up his secrets.

Kirishima kept groaning in ecstasy while scarfing down his food, swearing all the while that it was the best barbecued meat he had ever had, it was so delicious, oh god Bakugou, where did you learn to do this. Et cetera.

Izuku snickered, his head warm and comfortable in Kirishima’s lap. He felt happy and content. His belly was full, Popsicle was still licking his lips in happiness (which transferred over the bond to him), and he was warm beside the fire. Every now and then, Bakugou would lean forward, and Izuku’s feet would graze against Bakugou’s leg, sending strange flutters up through his chest.

*Pack-pack-pack.*

He had missed this.

Kirishima pouted at Bakugou for one more serving. Popsicle gobbled the swath of meat out of mid-air before Kirishima could grab it, and Kirishima whined at him in betrayal.

Izuku had missed this so much.

Bakugou held Popsicle’s snout shut as he handed another piece of meat to Kirishima. Their fingers brushed, and Kirishima suddenly started blushing again. Bakugou ignored him and pointed a chiding finger at Popsicle, before ruffling the fur on Popsicle's head. Bakugou's head swerved as he caught sight of something, and he poked Izuku in the leg.

"Hey, Deku. What's up with that pillow?"
He was pointing at the pillow covered in soot, which was hanging out in the doorway to the kitchen. Izuku decided that Bakugou probably wouldn't be happy with the idea of Izuku sleeping in the same place they were currently cooking their food, so he kept his mouth shut and just said 'it got dirty' and left it at that.

Izuku would wash the pillowcase later. Maybe. It wasn't that dirty.

Eventually, Izuku’s mom made it back from her grocery shopping, and Bakugou helped Izuku unload the bags into the pantry. She hadn’t gotten anything for the fridge, since the electricity still hadn’t been turned on, but they had a wider array of canned goods, bread, and fruit for however long it took for Inko to afford the first month of electricity and the fee for getting it turned on.

Speaking of… it was getting late, and Kirishima and Bakugou were finding it hard to navigate around the house without overhead lights. Inko lit some candles to make finding their way through the house easier, but both teens decided to call it quits and leave Izuku to finish things up with his mom.

Kirishima gave Izuku an extra long smile before heading out the door, and Bakugou rolled his eyes.

“Later, nerd.”

The sound of the door shutting behind them was oddly final, and a rush of coldness swept through Izuku’s lungs into his heart. He blinked away the emotion from his eyes and walked to the window to see them off. Kirishima’s red hair could be seen bobbing next to Bakugou’s blonde hair all the way to the ivy. And then they were gone.

When he turned away from the window, Izuku saw his mother holding up a large can of lighter fluid and some matches.

“Are you ready to say goodbye?”

They ended up burning all of Izuku’s childhood clothes in the garden, including his All Might onesie. Every toy that reminded Izuku of that night, the All Might duvet cover from his bed, even the coloring pencils he once used to make drawings of him and Kacchan as heroes… all of it was burned. Memories turned to ash. Memories, which couldn’t be used against them anymore.

It was their way.

Izuku shivered on a bench in the garden several feet away from the fire. He held a metal All Might lunch box in his hands, filled with small hero figurines that he once played with. Izuku didn’t want to burn these, yet. They might still come to use. They were the perfect size to inscribe protection and binding runes, to keep a demon inside.

His mom walked over to him, having finished tending to the fire.

“So… did you already have dinner?”

Izuku stared down at the fire and nodded his head, the lunch tin clutched tightly in his hands.

Burning the clothes didn’t make the memories completely disappear, but it helped.

It helped.

“Hmm… we should probably start on this garden tomorrow. What do you think?”
The fire made him think of Todoroki. Of that dream he had, where Todoroki was covered in flames and reaching his hand out to Izuku, but Izuku wasn’t able to reach back, his hands were tied down and he couldn’t move them and he was worried was Todoroki going to be okay? It reminded him of small fists beating against a heavy door, and his ice never being enough. Except that memory wasn’t his.

Izuku furrowed his eyebrows. He raised a hand to his chest and tried to follow the feeling back to Todoroki… but that strange sense of loss was still there. Like Izuku was grasping along a tether that just ended, with no explanation.

He wondered if Todoroki would answer, if he called him on his phone rather than just reaching out through the bond between them. Then he thought about it some more. And some more. And he realized he still only had six phone numbers in his phone, and none of them were Todoroki’s.

… he should probably fix that, next time he saw Todoroki. Or maybe Tenya had it? He probably had everyone’s number.

His mother hummed again behind Izuku.

“Oh, you said you were waiting for Aizawa to call, weren’t you? Did he call yet?”

Izuku frowned.

No, he hadn’t. And Izuku was starting to get worried. For all of them.

Silver-white eyes watched from a distance, perched high in a tree.

He had other targets tonight. Other potential sacrifices for his conviction. But he wasn’t done studying this kid yet, the urge to complete his claim thrumming beneath his skin. This had to be the witch. There was only ever one.

Hm.

He narrowed his eyes as the Protected of his old pack huddled on a stone bench, looking small and sad and alone.

He might let the mark fester for a while longer. It would bring the boy to him, eventually.

It was instinct.

Chapter End Notes

Hey folks!

I made it! My goal was to get out another chapter in 2-3 weeks, and I definitely slipped this one in right at the 2 week mark.
I thought about writing a bit more on this chapter... but I figured this was a good stopping point. That way, next chapter, we can start our first week back at school, complete with shenanigans and hangout times. I tentatively have theories about Izuku going over to hang out with Iida again (first time since Tensei got hurt), potentially the Kirishima/Izuku dinner that may or may not getting interrupted by Sero, and Todoroki dealing with some shit.

Let me know if you would be interested in a brief interlude with more Aizawa and Inko interactions. I didn't want to throw that at you all unless you were interested, but I have several paragraphs written already. Plus more Present Mic.

Also... does anyone have guesses about Aizawa's decision about what to do with Iida, Todoroki, and Izuku?

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!