That girl never could exist in Shouta's life in a way that was convenient. She had a defiant smile, and the subtlety of a category four hurricane, and hell, her very own set of complications, but goddamn if she didn't have a way of waltzing into his life and making herself comfortable like she owned the damn place.

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This is enormously self-indulgent and you probably won't like it if you don't like OCs. I finally decided to fart this out because nothing fucking matters and because I need to get this poo-poo out of my head and because I have no standards for my behavior.

ABANDON ALL HOPE, YE WHO ENTER HERE.
Inconvenient

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Her pace slow, almost reluctant, she strode away into the distance, her glossy, steel-blue hair swept across her back by the same breeze that stole petals from the cherry trees, swirling them around her in a halo of youth, until she faded from view, shrouded by the springtime haze. Though her visage had waned, the sticky-sweet fragrance of her perfume, and the vivid memory of her defiant smirk, of her glittering gaze, promised to linger here for a long time.

Aizawa Shouta gasped as he was jolted awake from his light sleep, sitting up with a start. He leaned over limply, pressing his fingertips to his forehead where perspiration had begun to bead, heart racing as he groaned in irritated confusion. The image of his subconscious flashed through his mind once again, and he shook it away, messy, black hair falling across his face. A dream? Shouta hadn't thought about that person in a long time. Perhaps he hadn't permitted himself to do so. Pushing the image back into the dark hole from whence it came, he reached for his phone, checking the time; he'd only been sleeping for maybe an hour after a late night of hero work, and he'd have to be up again in a couple more in order to make it to work on time. Principal Nedzu had planned to have a staff meeting before classes this morning, and Shouta knew better than to turn up late.

He made an annoyed sound as he dropped the phone back down, turning back over in hopes of maybe getting some real sleep this time.

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Moriyama Tsukiko's eyes flickered open slowly as her phone skittered across the nightstand, vibrating as the alarm sounded. She reached over gingerly to tap the "stop" button, her heavily-lidded eyes peeking over the quilt to check the time. 6:00. Tsukiko sat up in bed, the sleeve of her nightgown slipping down her shoulder, and she yawned loudly, not quite accustomed to rising this
early in the morning. She'd have to get used to it, she supposed; perhaps she should start going to bed earlier. Stretching her arms above her head, she shook her head before reaching over to turn the blinds open slightly, bathing the room with the light of dawn. Her feet hit the floor with a dull thud, and she padded off to the kitchen to start her day, footsteps muffled by her thick, fuzzy socks.

First things first, Tsukiko needed caffeine; the complex neural network associated with her quirk operated most efficiently when focused. She dumped a few spoonfuls of black-brown powder into the electric coffee maker and pressed the power button, stepping back into her bedroom to wash her face while her hot beverage brewed.

After rinsing the foam from her face, she dragged a brush through her short hair, obsessively shaping the pieces framing her face to look somewhat professional. Tsukiko could hear the coffee maker beeping from the other room, and she went to make a hasty cup, still having quite a few things to do before starting her new job later this morning. Twenty minutes to put on makeup...ten to get dressed...another ten to pack a lunch... A ten minute walk to the train station, plus a thirty minute train ride, plus ten minutes to walk from the station... I should be arriving ten minutes early.

Mug in hand, Tsukiko thumbed through the items hanging in her closet, trying to decide what would be most appropriate for her recent vocational change. After spending a year post-university working as a counselor for professional heroes, she'd been offered something a bit less high-profile, but enticing nonetheless. The promise of guiding aspiring young heroes appealed to her more empathetic virtues, as Tsukiko knew as well as anyone how difficult this transitional period could be. Furthermore, the students at UA had recently dealt with far more than any high school student should ever have to endure. When Principal Nedzu had reached out to her, citing both her academic qualifications and the way in which Tsukiko's telepathic quirk aided in diagnosis and treatment, she'd accepted almost immediately, needing little time to arrive at a decision.

Though she didn't regret her choice in the slightest, she still felt a little hesitant about how her first day would unfold. She hadn't worked with adolescents previously, at least not professionally. The closest thing she had to that sort of experience was a few hours of observation time while still studying for her degree. Tsukiko did her best to shrug off her nervousness, trying to spin her anticipation into excitement. Of course there would be a bit of a learning curve, but these students would likely be dealing with some of the same worries and traumas as professional heroes, albeit within a less-mature context. As for the normal teenager stuff, well, Tsukiko had been young once, too. Perhaps she could pass on some of the same wisdom she herself had received as a high school student.

Finally dressed and ready, she dropped a protein bar and a bottle of kombucha into her bag before tugging on a pair of light pink trainers to match her linen button-down in the same color, not really one for wearing heels. That's just asking for plantar fasciitis. Tsukiko threw open the front door of her apartment, smiling gently as the soft, early morning sunlight hit her face. She had a little spring in her step all the way to the train station, amplified by her cushy footwear and her lemony-gingery fermented tea beverage. Her train would be late by a couple of minutes, she knew, due to a bit of villain activity a few miles down the tracks, but it wouldn't push back her itinerary too much. Once the train did arrive, the young woman luckily managed to find an empty seat, sinking into it and digging through her bag for a book of logic puzzles and her glasses case. After all, how could she guarantee peak performance if she didn't keep her mind sharp?
Inevitably, Tsukiko's mind drifted back to her new job, to UA, and to everything surrounding that. Mostly, she wondered what had changed since she'd graduated from the school, and what had stayed the same. Some information could be gathered from news reports, such as the hiring of the Symbol of Peace, All Might, and which teachers had been involved in the incident at USJ, but other things remained a mystery—curriculum, testing standards, student conduct policies...the banalities of high school life. Tsukiko stuffed her book back into her bag and reached for the protein bar instead, not wanting to start the day on an empty stomach. Besides, it wasn't as though she'd be able to concentrate on her puzzles anyway. She knew she'd be seeing at least a couple of familiar faces today, and she wasn't quite sure if she felt prepared for that.

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Finally arriving at UA's gates, Tsukiko was very nearly mowed down by a student striding toward the school at a brisk pace. Homeroom wouldn't start for another half-hour, but as UA did bring in the best and the brightest, she supposed it wasn't too surprising that some students would show up early. Hearing a familiar, cheerful laugh coming from inside, she turned to see Principal Nedzu coming out to meet her. "Bit of a strange welcome, isn't it?" he quipped, amused as the student turned back to apologize profusely.

"I suppose you never can really know what to expect at UA," Tsukiko responded, still a little shaken by the sudden encounter.

"I think you'll find that a lot of things never change. It's good to see you again, Miss Moriyama." Nedzu motioned for her to follow him into the building. "We're glad to have you back with us."

"I'm excited to be here."

Nedzu gestured down the hall. "Your office is down there, near Recovery Girl's clinic. It should be completely set up and ready. I'll show you to it and give you some time to settle in before this morning's staff meeting."

Tsukiko looked up to see one of UA's pro-hero teachers approaching them, a striking woman in a skin-tight bodysuit and red cat-eye glasses. "Principal, is this the guidance counselor you hired?"

"Ah, Miss Midnight. Allow me to introduce Miss Moriyama Tsukiko. Miss Moriyama, this is Miss Kayama Nemuri, one of our teachers. You might know her already as Midnight, the X-Rated Hero."

Midnight clasped Tsukiko's hands warmly. "She's so cute! Where did he find you?"

"I actually graduated from UA five years ago. My former employer recommended me for the position when the Principal contacted him for suggestions," Tsukiko explained.

"Well, I'm glad he did. I look forward to working with you, Miss Moriyama."
Tsukiko smiled. "Likewise." If the rest of UA's faculty was as friendly and welcoming as Midnight, things were sure to go smoothly.

"Please excuse me. I have a few things to take care of before the meeting." The teacher ducked away, leaving Tsukiko and her new supervisor to continue on their way.

Nedzu unlocked the office door and pushed it open before passing the key off to Tsukiko, following her inside. The office was small, but cozy, with an armchair for her and a couch for students. A desk and a small storage closet had been positioned next to the window, along with an electric kettle and a french press. It seemed that UA had made every effort to create a comfortable environment for her, allowing her to do her job to the best of her ability. "We'll be having our staff meeting in the main conference room in ten minutes. I'll introduce you to the rest of the staff at that time. Until then, please excuse me."

Alone, Tsukiko placed her bag on the floor behind her desk, taking a few minutes to explore her new space. She switched on the computer on her desk, the screen flashing to life with a low hum. She opened the storage closet, which remained empty for now, save for a single hanger on a hook in the back. Tsukiko wondered if maybe she should bring her hero suit to the office, in the event that the school was attacked again. A file cabinet next to her desk contained information on the students in her care, some of the files larger than others. Some of the names stuck out as familiar, either having been mentioned in the news or lauded as exceptional during the televised sports festival.

She closed the drawer, leaning back against the desk and drumming her fingers on the surface. A little bit of time remained before the staff meeting. Tsukiko grabbed her bag, digging through it for a bottle of vitamins and a ceramic mug she'd bought to keep in the office from which she retired momentarily, heading for the faculty lounge that she'd seen before, where she knew a fresh pot of coffee had just finished brewing. Somehow, she managed to make the trip to and from the lounge without running into any more staff members, which seemed odd, but she shrugged it off. They were probably all busy making preparations for the day. UA boasted an impressive roster of pro-hero teachers, but most of them were unfamiliar to Tsukiko; she hoped that she could get along well with everyone.

The clock on the wall read five til eight. Time to get hustling down to the conference room, Tsukiko supposed. She smoothed her clothing and pushed her glasses back up the bridge of her nose, popping out a small mirror to make sure she didn't have anything stuck in her teeth. *You only get one chance to make a first impression!* Tsukiko cringed at the cliche, having heard it so many times over the years from her grandmother that she could scream. She took her coffee mug with her, along with a pen and a notepad, heart speeding up as she still felt a bit nervous about her very first staff meeting. If her memory served her correctly, she'd be seeing that person again for the first time in five years. So many years had passed, *so why did she feel so anxious?*

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Tsukiko cringed outwardly as the door to the conference room creaked loudly as she attempted to
let herself inside as quietly and as surreptitiously as possible. Mildly self-conscious, she held her notepad up over her face, and the teachers already waiting inside seemed amused by her feigned bashfulness. Midnight nodded a greeting, and the other teacher, who Tsukiko knew to be a professional hero, Present Mic, stood up to introduce himself.

"WELCOME TO UA. IT'S VERY NICE TO MEET YOU. MY NAME IS YAMADA HIZASHI, BUT MOST PEOPLE KNOW ME AS-

"As Present Mic, yes."

The teacher beamed, seemingly pleased to be recognized. Tsukiko could tell that he was the kind of person who liked to be noticed, though not in an arrogant sort of way; he was just extroverted, thriving on social interaction. "YES, THAT'S RIGHT. AND YOU'LL BE WORKING WITH US AS OUR NEW GUIDANCE COUNSELOR, MISS...

"Moriyama. Moriyama Tsukiko."

"It looks like you're finding your way already, Miss Moriyama," Principal Nedzu commented as he entered the room, followed by an absolute mountain of a man, dressed in a lurid yellow suit, a broad smile plastered on his face. No doubt about it; this had to be the Symbol of Peace himself. All Might's hands dwarfed Tsukiko's own as he clasped them in greeting, his booming baritone echoing off the walls as he offered his almost-unnecessary introduction, not quite as loud as Present Mic’s, but close, allowing the rest of UA's faculty to slip inside, unnoticed. Something loomed in the forefront of All Might's mind, Tsukiko could tell, but she didn't dare use her quirk on a colleague. It just wouldn't be proper, as much as her curiosity nagged her

As the meeting began, she peeked around the room, trying not to make it obvious that she wasn't quite paying full attention. Another splash of yellow drew her eye, and she glanced over quickly. You've still got that same nasty-ass sleeping bag, huh? Mr. Aizawa had hardly changed in the five years since Tsukiko had last seen him, save for a few more eye bags and a gnarly-looking scar under his right eye. Additionally, he'd managed to fall asleep in the five or so minutes since entering the room. Some things never change. How many times did you fall asleep in homeroom, Sensei? You really should start drinking more coffee... Tsukiko took a swig from her mug.

"Next up," Nedzu continued, "I want to introduce our new guidance counselor, Miss Moriyama Tsukiko." The young woman stood up a little bit stiffly, anxious about being the center of attention. She never had been too fond of that. 'I'm sure you'll get to know everyone a little more closely as time passes..." the principal cast a pointed glance down to the end of the table, "...even if they're not aware at the present moment.

Present Mic took this as a cue and whacked Aizawa on the back of the head. "WAKE UP ERASER."

Shouta jumped as he was jolted from his peaceful sleep for the millionth time today, but he quickly realized that he couldn't exactly be pissy about it, considering that he'd passed out in a staff
meeting. "Sorry..." he mumbled, laying a hand against the side of his head and grimacing slightly. "What did I miss?"

"I was just introducing our newest staff member, Miss Moriyama."

*Moriyama.* Hearing that name felt like a punch in the gut. Shouta's head snapped up, searching the room, eyes finally landing on the young woman standing at the other end of the table. Familiar lavender eyes glittered as her intent gaze devoured him from behind a not-so-familiar pair of black frames. Her professional clothing almost disguised her, but the color of her hair gave her away. She'd had it chopped short, but the steel-blue remained the same as ever. *No doubt about it.* This was her- Moriyama Tsukiko, the most inconvenient person to ever appear in Shouta's life.

*You've always been a pain...you know that?*
Another Place, a Better Time

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Even after the staff meeting had ended, Shouta remained seated, cocooned in both his sleeping bag and his own thoughts. Moriyama was suddenly here, at UA, and he didn't quite know how to feel about that, much less how to react. He knew that he should probably go and greet her, as everyone else had done, and that failing to do so would probably send the wrong kind of message, but at the same time, the prospect of actually speaking to her, after all this time, seemed even more awkward. What would he even say? "Hello" would probably be a good place to start. Beyond that, words would probably fail him. Still, he would eventually have to say something to her, especially considering the temperaments of several of his homeroom students. The longer he waited, the weirder it would be when that time finally came. "Hello. It's nice to see you again." It was that simple. Just do it.

By the time Shouta made up his mind to speak, Moriyama had left the conference room, and he chided himself internally for waiting too long. Now he'd have to make a special trip to her office for the sole purpose of speaking to her, and he couldn't simply offer a mere "hi-and-bye" in that scenario. If only he'd known about this ahead of time, he could have been prepared for this, to see someone he'd never expected to see again. Maybe that was silly, considering that she'd been a pro hero at one point in time; they were bound to run into one another being in the same line of work. At the same time, he really hadn't anticipated it. In fact, he'd hoped for the separation to be permanent. Things were easier that way.

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Alone in her office once again, Tsukiko leaned against her desk, briefly reflecting on her first staff meeting. It had gone well, she thought; all of her colleagues had been plenty welcoming. Aizawa-sensei, it seemed, had been the only one to not speak to her. Though, she didn't take any offense to this. He'd always been somewhat...eccentric. Besides, she didn't even know what she would have said to him. Five years spent apart had a way of negating relationships of any sort. Neither of them
were the same people they'd been then. "Hi. You got old." Furthermore, the way they related to one another would change out of necessity- they were colleagues now, the gap in seniority closing despite the age difference that remained.

Tsukiko shook her head, not wanting to dwell for too long on something so trivial. She was here to work, not for social hour. Though, she wasn't too likely to actually see any students today. It would take some time for the kids to find out that she was here, to realize that they needed to speak to someone about their troubles, to finally work up the courage to come and see her. Teenagers could be difficult, she knew, having been one at one time. They could be stubborn, and proud, and, far too often, they believed that they could solve anything on their own; sometimes to their own detriment. Tsukiko had learned that lesson the hard way.

In the meantime, there were other things she could do. UA's teachers had been keeping notes on their students'- their difficulties and triumphs, their fears and motivating factors. In addition to that, she'd been provided with hundreds of hours of training footage. Although Tsukiko's telepathic quirk wouldn't work on video, she could still psychoanalyze them according to her academic training, watching the students' strategies, and how they reacted to adversity. It would be beneficial to have some advance notes on particular students, should they choose to come to her in the future. After setting up a projector from the A/V closet so that it faced a large blank wall, Tsukiko began sorting through a small collection of external hard drives, each labeled by the footage it contained- entrance exam footage, Hero Course training exercises, UA Sports Festival, Hero Course end-of-term practical exam... The latter was probably the most recent content provided for her. It would be most sensible to start with the first-year classes and go in order, correct? Tsukiko connected the practical exam hard drive into her computer and opened the folder for Class 1A before starting a pot of coffee, hoping the dark, velvety brew would provide her with a much-needed pick-me-up.

UA never had the kind of school to go easy on its attendees. No other school with a hero course, to her knowledge, pitted first-year students against its pro hero faculty. UA forged its students in hell-fire, and they either crumbled under the pressure or rose from the ashes, glittering and victorious. This first big test could be used as a strong indicator of how a particular child leaned. Here, rough edges were exposed, making or breaking a young hero's fighting spirit. Some students showed immense promise, and powerful quirks, but still lacked the means to strategize or make difficult decisions in the heat of the moment. Others demonstrated incredible flexibility in how they approached a problem, formulating a last-ditch backup plan well in advance, should they be faced with unexpected adversity at the last minute.

Kids these days are hardcore. In class 1A, more of the two-student teams passed the practical exam than failed. Tsukiko couldn't help feeling a little bit bad for Ashido and Kaminari, who had been pitted against Principal Nedzu. That's just not fair... She could think of plenty of professional heroes who wouldn't be able to beat the genius headmaster. Despite the team's defeat, they still showed great promise, consistent with the rest of their class. They must have a good teacher. Tsukiko checked the staff roster to find that Aizawa-sensei had been assigned to that class. Well, that explains it.

A couple of students piqued her interest, and she made a mental note to study further footage for more information. Despite his team's victory during the practical, Tsukiko had doubts regarding Mineta's suitability for the the hero profession. The way it appeared, he'd lucked into a winning strategy, all the while bitching and moaning that he wasn't the one getting to lay his head on
Midnight's lap. According to the notes provided by Aizawa-sensei, this behavior wasn't unusual. Mineta regularly made comments of an overly-sexual nature, often involving his female classmates, and had indicated that his primary motivation for becoming a hero was the prospect of attracting women. *Gross.* Tsukiko, having the quirk that she did, knew that Mineta's attitude toward women wasn't quite as unusual as others would believe, but his classmates were certainly more altruistic. Even aggressive Bakugou, who had some kind of personal vendetta against Midoriya despite the latter's overwhelming willingness to cooperate, respected his female classmates, according to his teacher's notes.

Tsukiko started the next video: "Team Yaoyorozu and Todoroki vs. Eraserhead." Right away, it became evident that at the time of the exam, Yaoyorozu had been dealing with uncertainty regarding her abilities despite the all-purpose nature of her quirk. She was quick to let Todoroki decide their strategy, and when that strategy failed, she simply ran away. Tsukiko made a note. However, at some point, something changed inside the student. She realized something. She found some form of strength within and turned back to rescue her partner. Sometimes the best way for students to grow and become stronger wasn't to sit down with a counselor and hash out their feelings, but to put them in a situation that challenged them, forcing them to sink or swim. Yaoyorozu looked so proud of herself at the end of the exam; Tsukiko couldn't help feeling proud of her too.

At the same time, there were several moments where it seemed as though Aizawa-sensei could have acted on offense, but did not. It struck Tsukiko as strange; he'd never been the type to go easy on someone unnecessarily. There were times when he simply didn't use his erasure. Tsukiko's jaw clenched. It couldn't be that he was having trouble with his eyes, right? Had they been damaged during the attack on USJ? She remembered seeing the coverage on the event; she knew he'd been there. Despite Tsukiko's skepticism, there was a moment where Aizawa-sensei pretty deliberately avoided attacking when Yaoyorozu made a mistake. Tsukiko smirked. Maybe Aizawa-sensei had a prickly, stoic exterior, but deep down, really deep down, he did have a soft spot for his students.

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Even after notifying his homeroom class that they now had a new guidance counselor available to them, speaking Moriyama's presence into reality, Shouta couldn't quite wrap his head around the idea. Something didn't quite add up about the whole thing. What was she doing working as a high school guidance counselor instead of a professional hero?! She had such a powerful quirk... *Telepathy...minor clairvoyance...telekinesis...* There was no doubt that it could be extremely useful in her present line of work, but Shouta had seen what that girl...what that woman could do in a combat scenario, the way she could get inside her opponent's head, exploit every weakness... What the hell was she doing here?

It just wasn't like Moriyama to give up on her goals like that. Hero work had been her *dream,* and to just see her change gears like it was nothing? No. After everything she'd gone through to get into the business, to train herself so as to overcome the non-physical nature of her ability. *To go beyond...* After all the pain, the humiliation, the disappointment she'd endured leading up to her debut, and the difficult adjustment period afterward, she'd seemingly come out on the other side, shining and unconquerable. Moriyama Tsukiko was too damn stubborn to just walk away.
Then again, five years was a long time. Who knew what could have happened between then and now. Of course she wouldn't be the same person Shouta had known before. She was a grown woman now. Well, she'd been an adult then, too, when they parted ways for the last time, but only by technicality. In many ways, she'd still been a child, wavering somewhere between adolescence and full maturity. Despite her youth, there had always been a side of her that had aged too quickly, the unfortunate downside of her quirk educating her about the ugliness of the world, of mankind, earlier than was really healthy. At least now, she seemed to be coping well. She looked healthy, fit, and bright-eyed as ever.

Later, on the way to the staff room at lunch time, Shouta ran into Principal Nedzu in the hallway. Nedzu greeted him in his usual cheerful manner, and Shouta saw a brief opportunity to bring up the topic that had been nagging at him all day. "I'm a little surprised to see Miss Moriyama here again."

"Yes, it's been some time," the principal conceded, "but I assure you she's very qualified for the position."

"I don't doubt it. I meant that I'm surprised that she's working as a counselor, after having graduated from the hero course with such promising job prospects," Shouta explained.

Nedzu thought for a minute. "Maybe, but it might be that she found a career that suited her even more than hero work. It happens sometimes. When I offered her the position, she'd been working as a counselor for professional heroes."

"I guess so..."

"If you really feel that concerned about it, it might be best for you to ask Miss Moriyama herself."

Shouta sighed. "Maybe you're right. I'll think about it. Please excuse me." He turned and continued down the hall.

"Oh, Mr. Aizawa?" the principal called after him. "If you're concerned that her choice somehow reflects back to you, I wouldn't worry about that too much."

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Mind made up, Shouta strode down the hallway toward Moriyama's office, hoping that he wouldn't be interrupting anything important. He'd seen her again in the staff room, having lunch with Midnight. He could have spoken to her then, but he preferred to have this conversation in private, now that he'd decided to have it at all. Is it still any of my business? Moriyama had never before been uncomfortable opening up to him, but could that still be true after all this time? Still, he'd made up his mind to ask, and if she didn't want to discuss it, he'd leave it be.
Her office door was slightly ajar, and Shouta pushed it open just slightly, sticking his head inside. Moriyama didn't immediately notice, her back turned toward the door as she stood, coffee cup in hand, watching practical exam footage projected onto the opposite wall—his students' practical exams.

"Aizawa-sensei," she acknowledged, never breaking her attention on the video in front of her.

"How did you know?" It was a dumb question, Shouta knew, but he asked it anyway, stepped inside the dimly-lit room.

Moriyama turned, smirking, lavender eyes glowing in the darkness. "You have to ask?" She paused the video.

Shouta smiled, shoulders relaxing. *Maybe she hasn't changed so much after all.* "How are you, Moriyama?"

"I'm well, thanks." She gestured for him to have a seat on the sofa. "Would you like some coffee? I just made a fresh pot."

"No thank you. Not much of a coffee drinker, really."

"You should get into it. Maybe you won't fall asleep in the staff meeting," Moriyama chided gleefully.

"Hey now..." Shouta pretended to offended before remembering his reason for coming here. He hesitated a moment before asking. "You came back."

"I did."

*I missed you.* Shouta caught himself and activated his erasure.

"There it is." Moriyama smiled, rolling her eyes.

"Is it really so bad that I don't want you digging around in my head?"

"You make it seem as though you have something to hide, old man."

"Maybe I do, Third Eye." Perhaps things hadn't changed so much. "In all seriousness though, you already know too much."
Moriyama’s expression changed from playful to solemn. "That I do. Anyway, you're surprised to see me in this line of work, right? That's what you wanted to talk about?"

"Did you use telepathy on me? I thought you knew how I felt about that—"

"I didn't need to. If something weighs heavily enough on someone's mind, I can't help seeing it. Remember?" Shouta did remember. Moriyama, for all of her sass, *had* always been respectful enough to not use her quirk on those who asked her not to. "To answer your question, I did work as a pro hero for a few years. At the same time, I studied for a degree in psychology- you know, to have a back-up plan in case things didn't pan out." Moriyama took a sip of her coffee, clearing her throat. "As time went by, I realized that while I enjoyed hero work, I didn't like being in the spotlight."

"You always did have trouble with that before."

She nodded. "I thought it would get easier, that I would get used to it, but I never did. At the same time, I found that I *really* excelled in a clinical setting, and that I enjoyed it. I found it fulfilling. So when I finished my degree, I switched to doing that full-time. Principal Nedzu offered me the job here, and I thought it would be a good thing to do."

"I'm still surprised you left hero work when you wanted that so badly before."

Moriyama cocked her head. "I didn't leave it completely. I left my agency," she explained. "I work part-time as a freelance contractor several evenings each week. I don't make much doing that, but it wasn't really ever about the money or fame. Not for me."

"I understand completely," Shouta nodded. "Honestly...I was kind of worried that something had happened to you, but if you found a job that you love, then I'm happy for you."

"Wow," Moriyama snarked. "I'm so honored to have your approval."

"Really. You should feel proud." A quiet moment passed, the energy in the room becoming a little awkward. It wasn't common for him to be so unequivocally complimentary. Shouta cleared his throat. "So, you've been analyzing film?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Thoughts?"

Moriyama grinned, gesturing to the students on the video. "I always swore I'd be the best student you ever had, but these kids are giving me a run for my money."
Six Years Ago

Making an irritated sound, Shouta brushed away a pink flower petal that had some nerve falling into his hair. He picked up his pace a little, thinking it ill-mannered to be late on his first day at this new job. How would it look for a teacher to be tardy on the first day of classes? He still felt surprised that he'd managed to land a position at UA, but, of course, it probably didn't hurt that he himself had graduated from the school. Shouta broke into a run, desperate to make his train, startling several bystanders who hadn't really expected to see some kind of off-brand ninja tearing through a busy street this early in the morning. He'd lingered a little longer there than he originally intended before coming this way, but it had been a while since his last visit. He never did quite get used to the feeling of being there; the rows upon rows of cold stones, some adorned with extravagant bouquets as if the occupants gave a shit one way or another.

Luckily, Shouta made it onto the train just as the doors started to close. He leaned against a railing, panting from the prolonged sprint, glancing around at the other passengers to pass time. Mostly office workers, one or two pro heroes, a handful of high school students... A familiar uniform grabbed his attention, a gray-and-forest green blazer with a red tie. What a coincidence. A teenage girl leaned casually against a pole, her long, grayish-blue hair falling over her shoulders, big lilac eyes staring off into the distance as she fiddled with the MP3 player connected to her oversize headphones. Shouta wondered what class she was in, but didn't dare bother her. No one wanted to be hassled by a strange man on the train.

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Tsukiko closed her eyes, trying to ignore everything going on around her, gingerly holding the pole next to her for support as the morning train went around a sudden curve. She pressed the "volume
up" button on her music player, drowning out the normal hubbub. She already felt more than a little annoyed today. Only a few days had passed since she'd found out that UA was switching out class 3A's usual homeroom teacher for someone brand new, since Nedzu-sensei had been promoted to principal. For two years she'd been looking forward to his class, knowing that he could be an awesome mentor, but that was out of the question now. No one had even told her who would be teaching her now, in this crucial final year of her training!

"Tsukiko!" Rin, one of Tsukiko's classmates, waved her over as she arrived at the 3A classroom, gesturing to an empty seat in the front row. "I heard we're getting a new teacher!"

Tsukiko sank into the seat, giving a playful grimace. "Yeah...I heard."

"Cheer up!" Rin, always the optimist, gave her a playful nudge. "Who knows, maybe they'll be the best teacher you ever had!"

"We'll see." Tsukiko raised an eyebrow. "I bet-"

"Good morning." The whole classroom turned simultaneously toward the door, giving a deer-in-the-headlights stare to the man standing there, his messy black hair tied back loosely, clad in a baggy jumpsuit, some sort of strap-like material wrapped around his shoulders. Tsukiko would normally have made some sort of snide comment to Rin, but her eyes widened as her own thoughts were overridden by the one thing plaguing this man's mind. She kept it to herself; she wasn't supposed to know this. Tsukiko hadn't even used her quirk purposefully, and yet she knew this thing now, when she didn't even know this man's name.

"My name is Aizawa Shouta. I'll be your homeroom teacher this year." The class continued to stare at him blankly. Well, this has been sufficiently awkward... Nedzu had assured him that third-year students were always the easiest to teach, having had the most experience in the field, the most time to develop their abilities, but Shouta hadn't quite expected...whatever this was. He cleared his throat. "Well then, let's not waste any time. Go ahead and change into your training clothes. You're going to be taking an aptitude test this morning to measure your physical abilities."

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Tsukiko arched her back, stretching her arms high in the air. "This is weird," she mumbled to Rin. "We've never had a test like this before."

Her friend shrugged. "I guess Aizawa-sensei just does things differently. He's a new teacher, so he probably doesn't know very much about us yet."

"Probably."
They looked up attentively as their new teacher joined them outside, Tsukiko staring him down intently, curiously. "Today you'll be completing ten different physical tasks to measure how effectively you can apply your quirks to different situations. You can use them however you like, as long as you complete each task." Aizawa-sensei held up a digital measuring device. "You will be assigned points based on your performance, and at the end of the test, you all will be ranked, from most points, to least.

"The student with the fewest points at the end of the exam will be expelled from the hero course."

Tsukiko's blood ran cold, and then it boiled; she hadn't anticipated anything like this. This class had worked way too hard to suddenly be kicked out when they were so close to finishing their high school careers! Who exactly did this Aizawa-sensei think he was?! Furthermore, this kind of test put her at an unfair disadvantage. Her quirk couldn't be manipulated for an athletic context. It could help her use her limited physical capabilities most efficiently, but that was about it. Pitted against her impressive classmates, she just couldn't win.

"Should...should we tell the principal about this?" Rin whispered.

"It won't do any good." Tsukiko shook her head. "The teachers have a lot more free reign here. I don't like it either, but Principal Nedzu must trust his judgment."

The test began without much fanfare, the first two students lining up at the start for the 50-meter sprint. The cogs in Tsukiko's head began to turn. Perhaps she could use her quirk to sabotage her classmates in some of these situations... As she herself lined up alongside Suzuki-kun, she scanned his mind briefly, discovering his hope that another female classmate was watching his performance. "I didn't know Izumi liked Takahashi-kun..." she mused casually, biting back a grin as Suzuki turned his head to look right as the starting bell rang, adding a few seconds to his time.  

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Halfway through the exam, Aizawa-sensei decided that his students deserved a short break. Tsukiko wandered away from the group, slumping against a wall. Despite doing seemingly everything she could to compensate for her less-than-impressive athleticism, she knew she was still coming up short. It just wasn't fair! She'd put in the effort to succeed here at UA, and now some stupid, clueless, nobody teacher might ruin everything. She pulled her knees up to her chest, hiding her face in between them and willing this whole thing to just be a bad dream from which she'd eventually awake, starting the day over brand new.

"You should step it up in the next five tests if you expect to compete with your classmates."

The hair on the back of Tsukiko's neck stood up at the sound of his voice, and she looked up, disdain apparent in her eyes. "Maybe I could compete if this test wasn't all physical." She knew that she probably shouldn't be back-talking a teacher, but she didn't care right now. She really didn't like Aizawa-sensei, and it didn't matter if he knew it.
Shouta's lip curled at the nerve of this girl (Moriyama, was it?). She was just a little too proud for her own good, and blamed others for her own shortcomings. "That doesn't make any difference. You should be able to adapt, if you ever expect to succeed as a professional hero. No one likes a one-trick pony."

"You've never seen me in combat."

"If you're as uncreative in battle as you are in a simple quirk assessment, then I'd say it's not worth seeing."

Tsukiko scrambled to her feet, seething. "Listen, I don't know what your problem is, but you're not giving me the right opportunity to show what I can do!"

"If you're planning on spending your life blaming other people for the fact that things aren't easy for you, then you might as well just give up now."

Fuck you! The words danced on the tip of Tsukiko's tongue. How dare this random man imply that she didn't care about this, that she wasn't willing to do anything to achieve her dream, that her attitude toward helping others was little more than flippant. Tsukiko swallowed hard. "I'll never give up. I don't care if you fail me, if you expel me... I know what I'm capable of!"

Aizawa-sensei raised an eyebrow.

"You'll see! Watch closely; I'll be the best student you ever had!"

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"That's it." Shouta tapped a button on his measuring device, recording the distance the final student managed to launch a baseball (500 meters...not bad!). The tests had gone smoothly, for the most part, without the students putting up a fuss. Well, except for that one girl, the girl from the train that morning, who'd essentially had a nervous breakdown that ended in her spitting venom at her new teacher. True, it wasn't easy for her to use her telepathy, her very minor clairvoyance on a physical exam, but UA wasn't supposed to be easy! At least she did seem determined... Would that be enough? Shouta had tallied her scores, and the jury was still out for now.

"Everyone please join me over here." He projected the rankings onto a nearby scoreboard, from highest to lowest. He watched Moriyama's face fall before her name even came up, knowing even before she knew. She'd landed at the bottom of the list, what little she could do not quite enough to keep her head above water. Did he feel bad for her? Maybe just a tiny bit, but he knew she could have done better. The mere fact that she'd been admitted to the hero course was evidence of that. Shouta knew that she didn't deserve to be expelled...even if she could be a little bit mouthy when her abilities were called into question.
Tsukiko sniffed loudly and swallowed hard, trying to force back the lump forming in her throat. She refused to appear weak; she wouldn't be so easily defeated by stupid *Aizawa-sensei*!

"Tsukiko?" Rin whispered, horrified.

"It'll be okay...I should have tried harder..." Tsukiko's voice wavered. "Maybe I can...b-be moved back into the class if I p-perform well at the s-sports festival..."

She wasn't the type to give up hope; Shouta had to concede that.

He sighed, voice going softer that it had been all day. "Miss Moriyama, I'm not going to expel you from the hero course."

She turned to look at him, eyes wide. "Y-You're not?"

Of course Shouta had originally intended to expel the lowest-ranked student, but he couldn't exactly tell them that. He'd decided on the fly to let Moriyama stay, not because he felt *bad* for her, but because he felt confident in her potential as a hero! At the same time, he knew this truth would make him look weak all the same. Worst case scenario, it might make him look like the kind of degenerate who went a little *too* easy on his female students. "When I told you that I planned to kick one of you out...it was a logical ruse!" He grinned widely, and the class looked a little more than disconcerted. "I knew that if your membership in this class was on the line, you'd give it your absolute best."

Fuming, Tsukiko clenched her teeth. She'd been *humiliated* in front of her classmates, for no other purpose than to ensure that she'd "*do her best.*" She spun around, squaring her shoulders and curling her fists. "You're a fucking asshole!"

Shouta clenched his jaw, taken aback. The rest of the class had a similar reaction, seemingly shocked at this kind of outburst. "*Excuse me?*"

"You heard me." Moriyama attempted to hold her strong stance, intense gaze scanning him, with the expression of a person who hadn't *quite* thought her actions through.

"You're *way* over the line, Miss Moriyama."

"*No, you are!*" At some point during this back-and-forth, the violet coloration of Moriyama's eyes began to fade, hair floating around her head in a silvery halo as her stare glowed bright white. As she spat her most recent comeback, Shouta didn't focus so much on her spiteful words as on the fallen leaves swirling up around her, baseballs and students' water bottles lifting a few meters off the ground. Moriyama's information sheet hadn't said anything about telekinesis... Perhaps...he'd underestimated her.
She tilted her head, surprised that her teacher didn't have any kind of crushing reply, completely oblivious to this surprising new manifestation of her power. Met by silence, she looked around, confused, face morphing from anger to utter shock as she looked down at her own now-trembling hands. "W-Wha-?"

"Too bad you didn't know about this sooner. You might have scored higher on the exam."

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After a rather eventful morning, Shouta's first day of teaching had finally come to a close. Students had begun to slowly trickle out of the school, happy to return home as they had not quite readjusted to their school year routine. As the new teacher gathered his things and made for the school gates, a flash of steel-blue demanded his attention. He'd let Moriyama's attitude slide before, considering her surprising discovery, but he couldn't let it go completely. She'd acted entirely inappropriately, and Shouta couldn't let her think that it was okay to talk to him that way. He cupped his hands around his mouth. "Miss Moriyama!"

Moriyama stopped short, turning her head in the direction of her name, cringing as she realized who was calling her, and therefore what kind of fate awaited her. She went over, her gait tentative. "Yes?"

"Listen...I know you don't like my methods, and maybe you don't like me either, but the way you've spoken to me today... You can't do that."

"You humiliated me in front of my classmates."

"That wasn't my intention." Shouta looked at her firmly. "Besides, you still need to be respectful toward your teachers."

Moriyama crossed her arms. "Well, all due respect, sensei, but..." She paused, biting her lip and shaking her head, questioning whether she really wanted to open Pandora's box.

"You don't get to use your dead wife as an excuse to be an asshole."
Tsukiko's second day as a staff member at UA passed quickly, where the first had crawled by, as she'd still been finding her footing then, not entirely sure what to do with herself. She'd adjusted quickly, coming in for day two with the comfortable mindset of someone who'd been there for years. As before, her day had been spent largely in solitude, without students requesting time to talk with her. Tsukiko understood, of course. She couldn't realistically expect someone to suddenly have a problem as soon as she arrived. It might be a couple more days. At the rate she'd been analyzing film, it seemed more likely that she'd be the one initiating first contact, calling a student to her office to discuss something that she'd noticed. She had some thoughts, of course, but they were good thoughts, performances that she thought deserved recognition, skills that seemed to have been overlooked before by UA’s faculty.

She'd finished with the footage from the practical exams, and had now moved on to video from that year's sports festival. Like every year, the event had been broadcast on national television, but Tsukiko hadn't paid that close attention then, hadn't put all of her focus into studying it diligently. Furthermore, UA kept more detailed tape of each event, filmed from more angles, and now, Tsukiko could pause, rewind, and slo-mo the film to her heart's content. Nothing would get past her. The students of 1A continued to stick out to her, clever, innovative, and even more able to think outside the box with their quirks than she'd been in her third year. It wasn't even necessarily that they possessed powerful quirks, either. Of course, the did, but that wasn't the point. It was that they knew how to use them well, and that they could find solutions even when not using their innate abilities. One student, Midoriya, exemplified this more strongly than the others. He didn't even use a quirk during the first two events, from what Tsukiko could tell, relying on his ability to use his environment, and the abilities of others, to his advantage. He would make an incredible strategy analyst. If you ever decide you don't want to go into hero work, I know of some agencies that would love to have you!

Tsukiko double-clicked on the next video. She'd finished up with the first two events now, moving into the final stage of the festival, the one-on-one tournament. This was the one event that stayed the same each year, even back during her own stint in the famed hero course. That was a real shit-fest... Tsukiko could recall during her third year, her final festival, when she'd made it past the first round of one-on-ones only to be severely injured in the second, impaled by another student with a porcupine-type quirk, who had apologized so profusely that she thought he might spontaneously combust. Aizawa-sensei had wanted to have him disqualified, since he'd put another student in such grave danger, but Tsukiko had insisted that the other student be allowed to move on. After all, in the real world, you couldn't disqualify an opponent just because you thought their tactics were unfair.

It seemed that Aizawa-sensei had changed his tune since then, defending Bakugou's behavior during a fight against Uraraka, another 1A student, while even professional heroes complained from the stands that Bakugou was "playing with his food." He was right to do so, Tsukiko thought. UA's purpose was to prepare young heroes for what it would actually be like out in the field, and unfortunately, this sort of thing did happen sometimes. That's just how it is on this bitch of an earth.

The impressive student from before, Midoriya, showed up again a few videos later. Maybe now
he’d be forced to use his quirk; Tsukiko was interested to find out what it actually was. The
information sheet she had on the student avoided listing anything too specific, making only vague
reference to things he’d done with his quirk, rather than what it actually was. However, before
Midoriya could actually do anything, he froze, a funny look in his eyes. Tsukiko's interest shifted
to the other student on the field, the one student from the general studies course to make it this far
in the competition. She ruffled through her papers to find more information about this kid, Shinsou.

**Quirk: Mind Control.** "Holy shit," Tsukiko whispered, eyes glued to the video in front of her.
Shinsou very nearly got his rival to walk out of the ring of his own free will, maintaining complete
control over his every move. He didn't use his power maliciously, like one might think, but rather
carefully, only pushing the subject as far as necessary to obtain a specific goal.

After the competition ended, with a last-second comeback from Midoriya, Shinsou had seemed
surprised, even touched, by the audience's encouraging reaction, almost as if he'd expected them to
be put-off by his ability. Cogs starting to turn, Tsukiko went back to the film of the previous
events, watching Shinsou a little more closely this time. He used his skills similarly in the first two
events, controlling other students in order to win, but without harming them. Some might have
found Shinsou's quirk frightening, but to Tsukiko, it was fascinating, similar enough to her own
"scary" quirk that she felt she might understand a little better than most.

The metal filing cabinet squeaked irritatingly as Tsukiko yanked the drawer open, thumbing though
the manila folders until she finally found Shinsou's file. *Just like I thought.* He'd originally tried for
admission to the hero course, only to be denied due to a low score. *He was kind of set up to fail,
though.* The practical portion of the entrance exam was much more suited to those could
manipulate their quirks in some sort of physical manner. Shinsou couldn't use his mind control on
the robotic enemies, and if he'd used it to get another test-taker to destroy the bots for him, the
associated points would be given to that student instead. It was a bit like testing a fish on its ability
to ride a bicycle. *He should be moved to the hero course.* He'd earned it, given his impressive
performance in the sports festival, making it further than even some of the 1A students, and
practically all on his own.

Shinsou should be moved into the hero course as quickly as possible, Tsukiko believed, to
maximize the amount of time he'd have to learn and train. At the same time, she had to wonder how
well this suggestion would go over. Of course everyone probably respected her opinion as a
professional, but they might not be too keen on her coming in and making a lot of changes right
away. Tsukiko worried that she'd be expected to wait for a while, implement changes gradually,
not rock the boat too much. Then again, she could always ask. Worst case scenario, they'd say no.
It was more likely that everyone would want time to think about it before making a yes or no
decision. Better to start that process sooner rather than later.

*I should talk to Aizawa-sensei about this first.* After all, Aizawa-sensei's thoughts on the matter
were only second to Principal Nedzu's, since he'd be the one teaching Shinsou if he was
transferred. Furthermore, he had the teaching experience necessary to know whether a student
could be successful under his tutelage. Tsukiko organized the documents she'd been sorting
through, preparing the correct footage should Aizawa-sensei take some convincing. He had a free
period right now, if the schedule she'd been given was correct. As she set off toward the faculty
lounge, she desperately hoped that she wouldn't have to wake him up. Aizawa-sensei could be a
little bit cranky when his power naps were interrupted, and a cranky sensei would be a lot more
difficult to convince.
"Aizawa-sensei?" Tsukiko tapped him gently on the shoulder, cringing internally at having to wake the literal sleepiest person in the world.

"Hmm?" The teacher didn't open his eyes.

"Sensei?"

"I'm awake, Moriyama. What is it?" Aizawa-sensei mumbled, reaching up to pinch the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, massaging lightly.

"I'd like to talk to you about one of the students."

"One of my students?" He opened one eye.

"Well...no... Not right now, at least..." Tsukiko pinched a piece of hair between her fingers, playing with it tensely, a nervous habit.

Aizawa-sensei sighed. "If it's that important, we can talk about it. You don't have to get all worked up and play with your hair."

Tsukiko's arm snapped back down to her side and she went a bit pink in the face, turning stiffly to lead the teacher back to her office.

Inside, Aizawa-sensei dropped onto the couch, crawling back inside his dumb yellow sleeping bag. "Okay. What did you want to talk about?"

"I want to consider moving a student into the hero course." Tsukiko's posture remained taut. "I know it's sudden, but-"

"Which student?"

"Shinsou Hitoshi. I saw his film from the sports festival, and I think he'd do well."

Aizawa-sensei rubbed his hand along his jawline thoughtfully. "He originally applied for the hero course, right?"

"That's right."
"If I remember correctly, the only thing that kept him out was his performance on the practical exam."

Tsukiko started to relax. "It seemed so to me."

"You might be on to something." Aizawa-sensei stood up, sleeping bag dropped to the floor, and he stepped out of it. "Bear with me a moment. I'll be right back."

He returned a few minutes later with Midoriya in tow, who looked as though he feared he might be in trouble. "Midoriya, this is Miss Moriyama. We wanted to ask you a few questions about Shinsou, since you learned a lot about him at the sports festival."

Midoriya perked up pretty quickly. "Oh, yeah! Shinsou's pretty amazing!"

"I thought so too!" Tsukiko smiled. "I was also thinking that it might be good to enroll him in the hero course."

"Really? I think he'd do great! He really wants to be a hero." Midoriya got a far-off look in his eyes. "I think a lot of people assume things about him because of what his quirk is like, but he's a good guy, really!"

"That's what I thought, too."

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"There's only one problem with this idea, though," Aizawa-sensei sighed, looking frustrated.

"What?"

"There's a cap on how many students can be in a hero course class at a time. I'm assuming that you came to talk to me because you want to put Shinsou in my class." He looked at Tsukiko, his eyes serious. "To move him into my class, someone would have to be transferred out."

Tsukiko's heart sank. She hadn't known about this enrollment limit. She didn't feel good about kicking a student out just to put another in. She couldn't even think of a student off the top of her head who was obviously too unskilled to remain in their current class.

"Moriyama, you've been watching film for two days now. Are there any students that you think won't be successful heroes, who don't have what it takes?"
Finally it dawned on her; it should have been much more obvious. Aizawa-sensei had a student who wasn't really all *that* skilled, who couldn't really get by on his own, whose motivations for becoming a hero bordered on vulgar. "Mineta."

"Mineta?" Aizawa-sensei wasn't necessarily arguing with her, but he clearly needed to be convinced, just to keep everything on the up-and-up regarding this potential change.

"He just isn't performing on the same level as his classmates, and he doesn't have the same courage. He's not the kind of person to rush in and help if it puts him at risk." Tsukiko raised an eyebrow. "Besides, his motivation isn't exactly...heroic."

"I can't say I don't agree with you..."

Tsukiko screwed up her face, thinking. "My only concern is, how is he going to take this? Young men who behave in that way often do so out of self-reassurance. Would having this pulled out from underneath him lead him to act out? Could he potentially become a power-reassurance villain?"

"We can't make decisions like that, worrying about whether we should make the right choice based on how someone else will react to it. You can only make a decision based on what benefits the most people. In this school, we have to make them based on performance, and potential." Aizawa-sensei gave a slight smile. "You're still young, still idealistic. You're not going to be able to make a choice that makes everyone happy, so you just have to make the best one you can."

"I think this is the right thing to do."

"If that's what you think, based on your professional knowledge, then I trust your judgement."

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The next morning, Tsukiko and Aizawa-sensei arrived outside Principal Nedzu's office before he did, prepared to make a case for switching Shinsou to class 1A, bumping Mineta down to class 1B. After discussing the issue at length the previous afternoon, they'd decided that it wouldn't be appropriate to drop him to General Studies right away, especially since Mineta *had* tested into the Hero Course. Still, he was on thin fucking ice. Additionally, Tsukiko still feared that making too big a change might trigger some sort of emotional breakdown, tempting the little pervert into acting out.

Nedzu had immediate suspicions upon turning the corner to his office and finding two members of his staff waiting for him. *They're in cahoots about something.* Despite not being a mind reader, he did have some vague idea of what they wanted to talk about. He knew that Miss Moriyama had been viewing film for two days straight, that she and Aizawa had still been having some sort of lively discussion when classes ended the day before. Nedzu already suspected that Miss Moriyama might be wanting to move students between classes, given her keen eye for this sort of thing. He
was open to the idea, of course; he trusted her professional judgment. If he didn't, he wouldn't have hired her in the first place.

Miss Moriyama clutched a stack of file folders tight to her chest, her brow furrowing in seriousness. "Principal, good morning! We have something we'd like to discuss with you, if it's not inconvenient."

"It's not inconvenient at all. You want to propose moving a student into a different class, right?"

Nedzu unlocked the door, indicating for his two staff members to come inside.

Miss Moriyama looked dumbfounded; Aizawa, not so much. Then again, he wasn't really the sort of person to be dumbfounded, either. He reached for one of the folders in his colleague's possession. "Yesterday, Miss Moriyama and I explored the possibility of enrolling Shinsou Hitoshi in the Hero Course, moving him to my homeroom."

"I have no quarrel with that. Shinsou is a fine student." Nedzu took a sip from a cup of tea that had seemingly come out of nowhere. "However, I'm sure you are aware that class 1A is already at its limit for enrollment."

"Yes, sir. We've considered that." Miss Moriyama paused, looking nervous about her proposal. "We floated the idea of moving Mineta Minoru into class 1B."

Nedzu leaned back in his chair. "As you know, I prefer to allow my staff to make a lot of decisions on their own. I trust their judgment as professional heroes, after all. Of course, you'll need to ask the homeroom teacher for 1B for permission, to place Mineta in his class, but I personally have no conflict with this."

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"Shinsou? You can come on in."

The indigo-haired student stepped tentatively into Tsukiko's office, digging his hands into his pockets, looking around. "What's this about?" Shinsou didn't look nervous, or confused, but honestly rather bored, though neither Tsukiko nor Aizawa-sensei thought anything of it. He simply had that kind of face.

"Go ahead and have a seat." Aizawa-sensei gestured toward the sofa. Shinsou shrugged, obliging him. "This is Miss Moriyama."

"The new guidance counselor, right?"

"Yes, that's right." Tsukiko cleared her throat, placing an envelope of paperwork on the table in front of the couch and sliding it toward Shinsou. "I've been reviewing film from the sports festival this spring." She leaned forward, looking the student in the eyes. "How would you like to enroll in
the hero course."
A Hard Day's Night

The light coming from the streetlamps outside cast long shadows along the floor of Shouta's apartment as he arrived home. It was very late now— one? two in the morning? *Fuck.* He didn't wear a watch generally. He'd ended his patrol a little bit earlier than usual, having just released a criminal into police custody. Said villain had been able to use his own blood as a weapon, and the whole thing had gotten very messy, very fast. On top of that, he hadn't slept well the night before, and that, on top of a lengthy fight, had left him too fatigued to carry on. Shouta's back hurt. His neck hurt. Even his hands hurt. *I'm getting too old for this shit.* Truthfully, thirty wasn't *really* all that old, but the slew of injuries over the years, his own tendency to push himself past his limits... It did take its toll. Shouta was only human, after all.

He flipped on the lamp in the living room, closing the front door behind him before kicking off his boots so as to not track grime throughout his home, the small, one-bedroom apartment he'd been living in since Mariko's death. After all, how could he have stayed *there*, in the home they'd shared before? Much as Shouta had loved her, he couldn't stand to be haunted by her memory. So, now he lived here, in this tiny apartment, surrounded only by the most essential items. He wasn't the kind of man to bury himself in luxury, and a teacher's salary couldn't support that kind of lifestyle anyway. This place was just right— clean, well-built, and utilitarian. Hanging his keys on the hook by the front door, Shouta padded into the bedroom, mindful not to drip blood onto the carpet.

Shouta turned the knobs in the bath, producing a spray of not-yet-hot water. He paused a moment, then turned the "hot" just a little bit higher, hoping to sanitize himself of that bozo's biohazard. If only he could autoclave his entire body... As he waited for the water to warm, he stripped out of his dirty jumpsuit, placing it carefully in a plastic bag so that he could rinse the blood out before throwing it in with his other laundry. Shouta stepped under the powerful spray, sighing in contentment as the hot water met his scalp, drenching his tangled black hair before running down his neck and chest. The warmth soothed his aching muscles as it trailed down his body, little rivulets tracing their way through the hills and valleys of his lean, sinewy body.

Finally clean, he tugged on a pair of fresh, comfortable lounge pants which hung loosely on his hips, the prominent bones peeking out above the waistband. Shouta switched on the light and fell
into bed, taking a few minutes to arrange the blankets and his pillow to make himself comfortable. He grabbed his phone off the nearby table to set a couple of alarms, ensuring that he’d be on time to work the next morning, groaning at the realization that he’d only get maybe four hours of sleep. Shouta put the phone back down and tried to relax, hoping that maybe at least tonight, he’d be treated to a speedy descent into unconsciousness.

That hadn’t been the case recently—well, for the past few months, really, if Shouta was being honest. For reasons he himself couldn’t entirely explain, he struggled to fall asleep, his body remaining too tense, and his mind too alert. When he did finally manage to fall asleep, it was a restless one, either completely dreamless or wrought with the strangest visions. Shouta hesitated to call them nightmares; it seemed too childish to put so much stock in one’s dreams. Still, they were, at the very least, inconvenient. They pulled him from his rest violently, interrupting what should have been a few blessed hours of rest; what few he got each night.

Shouta wished he could take sleeping pills, or melatonin tablets, or something, but those were for people who had the luxury of knocking themselves out for eight hours at a time. Still, he managed to fall asleep tonight without too much of a struggle, having exhausted all the energy that he had, both physical and mental. He’d spent a few minutes dealing with the anxiety of “people die of exhaustion it's a real thing that happens oh god I need to sleep,” but it proved to be short-lived in the end, thank fucking god.

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A horrid, familiar screech echoed behind Shouta, and his blood ran cold. His instinct was to remain turned away, as though not acknowledging the thing would make it go away. At the same time, he knew that it was his duty, as a hero, to protect others from that thing, that unnatural abomination with the bulging eyes and exposed brain matter. Something so gruesome shouldn't exist in this world.

"Sensei, help us!" Their voices called out to him, terrorized, Uraraka's, and Midoriya's, and Asui's, and even Bakugou's.

Shouta turned on the ball of his foot and launched himself forward at the terrible Nomu, determined to liberate his students from its crushing grasp.

And then it was he that was clutched tight by the terrible monster.

It was just as it had been before at USJ, with Nomu throwing him around like a ragdoll. Shouta worried that his body would not be able to endure this a second time. If only he could hold on a little while longer, All Might would arrive just in time, right? Much as they disagreed, Shouta could admit that the Symbol of Peace was the only one physically capable of tackling this beast.

He felt a searing ache in his right arm, the burn of bare muscle exposed to the elements. Shouta was able to lift his head just long enough to see Shigaraki's wicked grin, almost hidden behind the scores of extra hands obscuring his visage. The young villain reached for his Shouta's face.

"I'll pluck out your eyes, you miserable bastard." It wasn't Shigaraki's voice that came out. It was a different one, just faintly familiar. Where had he heard it before?

And then he was gone.

Shigaraki was about fifty meters away now, all those hands reaching out, beckoning. A young girl in a UA uniform walked slowly toward him, as if under his spell. Steel blue hair, caught up in a breeze, mingling with cherry blossoms. Where could those have come from?
Suddenly the girl was a woman, dressed in a blouse and straight skirt, her hair cropped short. She called out to Shouta, her eyes wide, stance frozen in fear. "Help me." It was Mariko's voice that passed Moriyama's lips.

Nomu slammed his face into the dust once more, and when he lifted it, everything in his vision blurred before fading to black.

"Shouta! No!" Moriyama's own voice had returned to her. "Don't touch me!"

Shigaraki cackled, a terrible, high-pitched laugh, voice still not his own. Shouta knew the words that would follow. They'd haunted him for so long that he'd memorized them by now. "Beautiful girl you've got, Eraserhead."

Shouta jerked forward in bed, gasping for breath, feeling around him for tactile confirmation that the whole thing had, in fact, been a dream. He drew in another deep inhale. It worried him that he'd been holding his breath while he slept. Of course, that was probably what had forced him to wake up in the first place. His heart raced; this dream had felt *so real*. As his heart rate began to steady, he flopped back down, covering his face with his hands. Logically, none of it made sense. What he had envisioned couldn't *possibly* happen. That Nomu was in police custody still, and *that man* was long gone.

So why were Shouta's hands still trembling?

Though, this wasn't the first time this had happened. For months now, and especially the first few weeks following the attack on USJ, memories of the event would manifest themselves in his dreams. At first it was terrifying, of course, but after some time, it didn't bother Shouta so much. *You really can get used to anything.* It took less and less time for him to fall asleep again, and those memories would start to intermingle with other kinds of dreams. Sometimes he'd dream that he was in class, teaching, and Nomu would be sitting in the back, taking notes. Sometimes he'd be at USJ, but instead of the other teachers being there, it would be a troupe of clowns, making balloon animals and throwing pies at the villains. This was the first instance in some time where Shouta had actually been afraid.

*Why?*

*Whatever.* This whole thing was silly, anyway. He should be able to cope better than this! He was a professional hero, after all! It came with the territory. *A grown man, afraid to sleep, afraid of his own dreams. How stupid.* Obviously there was nothing to worry about. It shouldn't bother him so much. But it did. Recovery Girl had been concerned that something like this might happen. She'd recommended that Shouta talk to someone about it. "The trauma," she called it. No. *Trauma* was a civilian luxury. Seeing a shrink was a civilian luxury. Shouta didn't need that!

He closed his eyes and shifted, trying to get comfortable. Maybe he could fall asleep again. It always seemed easier to fall *back* asleep than to fall asleep at first. Shouta found himself dozing lightly, dreaming those little half-dreams that your brain knows aren't quite real. Unfortunately, his body didn't get the memo, and he'd jerk himself awake every time his dream self tripped on a flight of stairs, or (incorrectly) believed that he was about to fall out of bed. Shouta huffed in irritation, scooting over to the very center of the mattress and turning onto his back, staring up at the ceiling. Perhaps he could bore himself to sleep.

It worked, kind of. He sank into unconsciousness once more, his mind a void this time, and for a good couple of hours, he was granted rest. Shouta's brain woke up first, eyes just barely opening, seeing the still-darkened bedroom through a haze. He went to turn over onto his side, but found himself unable to move. Sleep paralysis. Again. * Fucking fantastic.* All he could do now was close
his eyes again and wait. He'd either wake up the rest of the way, or he'd fall asleep again. In the meantime, it was just lost sleep, minutes creeping by like sand through an hourglass. It would sort itself out, but it was just so goddamn uncomfortable!

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Morning arrived, and Shouta did not feel well-rested. He wasn't well rested. He never was. This morning he felt even more tired than he had when falling into bed the night before. Maybe Moriyama was right. Maybe he should develop a coffee habit after all. Then again, he'd gotten through this much of his life without chemical aids. But you're not getting any younger, old man. Shouta stared into the mirror; he looked terrible. Then again, he never had been a beauty queen, exactly. He looked worse today, though. Deep bags had settled under his eyes. He was in bad need of a shave. The tangles in his hair were physical evidence of his restless night.

Shouta splashed cold water onto his face, tying his hair back to hide its state of disrepair. He shuffled off to work, looking a little worse for wear and hoping his appearance wouldn't frighten the other train passengers.

Moriyama, your sensei is having a rough go of it today.
Help Wanted

Though Shouta was used to the late nights and the early mornings, his previous sleepless night seemed to weigh more heavily on him than the others. Furthermore, his homeroom class was unusually rambunctious today; he could scarcely get them to stay quiet for five minutes before something would inevitably distract them, derailing the entire lecture. Normally, Shouta was a patient man. After all, they were still kids, and he was inclined to let them stay kids for as long as possible, but due to his lack of rest, their behavior today grated on his nerves, and it took every ounce of willpower he possessed to not speak tersely with them. It wasn’t like they were purposefully trying to irritate him. If Shouta was bothered by this, it was because he allowed himself to be. If only he had gotten the rest he so desperately needed, he might have an easier time keeping a hold on things.

When would he next be able to get a good night’s sleep, though? It was always a craps shoot whether or not Shouta would be able to rest easy. He gambled on it every night, and it seemed as though the house usually won. Between the fact that he had so little time to sleep, his difficulty falling asleep, and the bizarre dreams that interrupted his slumber so rudely, it seemed as if he were shit out of luck. He worried that if this continued, he’d eventually have to cut back his hours on hero work. Of course, he still had his full-time day job, so it wouldn’t be too much of a strain financially, but Shouta still had some sense of duty, damn it! There weren’t too many heroes who were willing to take the night shift, and crime rates were always higher in the late hours when villains could conceal themselves in the darkness. This was something that he had to do.

Fifteen minutes… If only he could make it that much longer, he’d be able to rest for a little while. Shouta had a free period next, and he could crawl into his sleeping bag and pass out for an hour or so. It wouldn’t be difficult. He could fall asleep seemingly anywhere, and in any position...unless it was nighttime, and he was alone in his own bed. He’d been plagued by insomnia for years, since Mariko had left, but the nightmares were a fun new feature, and they only made things that much worse. Luckily, neither of those seemed to be an issue during Shouta’s daytime naps. Ten minutes...

As the next teacher arrived to begin his lesson, Shouta ducked out quickly, ready to make his way to the teachers’ office to pass out for a while. He set an alarm on his phone, so as to not sleep for too long, hoping that no one would need anything from him, and he’d be able to get a good power nap. In the office, he dug out the yellow sleeping bag folded neatly under his desk, and climbed inside of it. Shouta sank into his desk chair, leaning forward to rest his head on his desk. He closed his eyes, and, almost immediately, his thoughts went fuzzy. He let himself fall, and he easily sank into the quiet void of his unconscious mind, thrilled to have this even for just a little while.

Shouta rested well, so much so that he had no concept of time’s passage until Present Mic nudged his shoulder gently. He spoke as quietly as he possibly could, which really wasn’t all that quiet, but hey, it was the thought that counted. Shouta jumped in surprise, suddenly worried that he’d slept through his alarm. “Shit,” he mumbled. “How long was I out?” He reached for his phone, checking the time and groaning. “Hizashi! I could have slept for five more minutes!”
Mic lifted his hands defensively. “Sorry, I didn’t realize that you had an alarm set. I just didn’t want you to sleep through your next class!”

Shouta felt bad for snapping; his friend was only trying to be helpful. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have been so pissy.”

“Is everything all right, Eraser? You seem a little...off lately.” Mic lifted an eyebrow.

“Yeah...yeah...” Shouta reassured him, in a way that wasn’t quite so reassuring. “I haven’t been sleeping too well recently.”

“Do you think you should see a doctor?”

Shouta waved him off. “Nah...it’s just some psychosomatic thing. I’ll be fine.”

“Well...okay then...” Mic still wasn’t entirely convinced that Shouta was “fine.” Besides the lack of sleep, he seemed distant, and more quiet than usual. He could play it off as “focusing on his work” all he wanted, but he’d been like this since the attack on USJ. Mic had been paying attention; after an event like that, he’d been attentive to changes in his friends’ behavior, knowing what kind of traumatic effect it might have. It had the potential to be especially bad for Shouta, since he’d been right there in the middle of it, and had been so critically injured. Mic didn’t know all of the specifics when it came to the human mind- he’d studied languages, not psychology- but he had to wonder if maybe the incident might have brought up some painful memories regarding Mariko’s death. Maybe I should ask Nedzu what to do next.

---

“Has everything been going okay for you lately, Aizawa?” Nedzu placed his teacup on his desk and looked back at him.

“Did Mic tell you?” He never could keep a secret to save his life.

“He told me that you’ve been having trouble sleeping lately.”
Shouta ran his hands through his hair. “It isn’t really a big deal.”

“Yamada told me that he thinks it’s been going on since USJ was attacked. Is that true?”

“How did he-?” Shouta was dumbfounded. He hadn’t shared that detail with his friend before.

Nedzu folded his paws/hands in his lap, looking at Shouta seriously. “I think this might be stemming from what you experienced during that attack.”

Shouta knew that the principal was probably right, and that he couldn’t convincingly deny it. “Do you think so?”

“I do. I don’t want to pry too much, but I think your situation has the potential to be an example of post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“No, I can’t have that,” Shouta insisted. “I’m a professional hero. I’m used to this sort of thing.”

“That doesn’t mean you’re immune,” the principal reminded him. “You can be hurt like any other person, physically or psychologically. Are you a professional hero? Yes. Was that situation like anything you’ve ever experienced before? No. Not at all. You likely had a near-death experience. That’s very traumatizing.”

“It’ll sort itself out eventually, right?” He’d gotten over Mariko’s death well enough. He could get over this too, right?

“It doesn’t work that way, Aizawa. It’s not something that you need to ‘get over.’ What you need is to learn how to cope with what happened, learn how to process it and move forward.”

“Is there a book I can read or something?”

“Books can be a helpful aid, but what I recommend is finding a professional to talk through this,” Nedzu suggested.
“You’re saying I need to see a shrink. No, I don’t need that.” Shouta crossed his arms, frustrated that the principal would even suggest it.

“There’s no shame in asking for help. Think of it as seeing a doctor for your brain. If you were sick, you wouldn’t refuse to see a doctor. You’d be seeing a professional to help heal your mind.”

Shouta decided to humor him for the time being. “Where would I even go to find a shrink?”

“We have a counselor here, at UA, remember?”

He nearly choked. “Moriyama?! You think I should talk to Moriyama about this?”

The principal took another sip of his tea. “Of course. Why not? I hired her to serve both the students and the teachers as needed.”

“You do remember that she was once my student, right?”

“Of course.”

“Well, it’s hard to not still see her that way. I think I’d feel weird talking about this kind of thing with my former student.”

“Aizawa, she’s not your student anymore. She’s a professional, and a grown woman,” Nedzu reminded him.

Trust me, I’m aware. “I’ll...I’ll think about it.”

---

Shouta did think about it, late that night while struggling once more to fall asleep. He did need to get help. Even if it were possible to get over this eventually, he couldn’t wait any longer. It was
just too miserable to keep living like this—sleepless nights and wasted days. Still, he felt weird about the idea of Moriyama being his therapist. It would be a surreal sort of role reversal, with her as an authority figure. Besides, there was history there. Would it be healthy to go to her for something so personal? To put himself in a vulnerable position with her? Of course Moriyama was a professional. Of course she was competent and took her job seriously. Shouta was simply aware of what he was likely to do. Would he stand to benefit from reforming that emotional attachment?

Furthermore, he didn’t want Moriyama in his head. There was no doubt that her quirk made her especially suited to her chosen profession, but Shouta had spent that whole year as her teacher making sure he kept her out, for lots of reasons. It would be even more difficult to do so now. Since his injuries at USJ, the amount of time he could use his erasure had lessened, and the time between activations had increased. He knew that if he asked, Moriyama would most likely agree not to use her telepathy on him, but she didn’t always have to be actively using it to discern someone’s thoughts. If a thought or emotion was particularly strong, she’d pick up on it right away. Shouta couldn’t risk that.

Then again, would he really rather talk about this kind of thing with a complete stranger? He was a rather private person, after all. He’d really prefer not to share this with anyone, but it was the best way to get better, faster. Shouta knew that he could trust Moriyama, at least, and he’d rather open up to someone like that than to someone he didn’t know, whose motivations were uncertain. Besides, Moriyama had been a therapist for professional heroes before, right? This wasn’t going to be anything she hadn’t seen before. Trauma stemming from near-death experiences probably bored her at this point. Furthermore, he’d seen her at her rawest, her most vulnerable, while she was still a high school student. It was only fair that Shouta open up in the same way. *Show me yours and I’ll show you mine.*

---

Shouta didn’t feel quite the same way when he poked his head inside Moriyama’s office the next morning. His initial discomfort had returned, even though he was here anyway, taking part in this foolhardy endeavor. She looked up from the work on her desk as she sensed his presence, gesturing for him to come inside. “Hey.” She tilted her head as Shouta closed the door behind him, clearing his throat. “What is it?”

“The principal told me that you’re willing to work with faculty.” It wasn’t really a question, but Shouta wasn’t quite sure he wanted to ask yet.

“That’s right.” Moriyama shifted in her seat. “Actually, he came down and talked to me late yesterday afternoon. He said that you might be coming by.”

“Ugh… He told you?”
Moriyama took off her reading glasses, folding them neatly on her desk. “He didn’t give any
details; he just told me that you were having a difficult time, and might benefit from talking with a
counselor.”

“Would you be open to doing that? Working with me?”

She gave him a funny look, almost offended at the implication that she wouldn’t. “Of course. Why
wouldn’t I be?”

Tsukiko knew *exactly* why she wouldn’t be, though her actual reason was probably vastly different
from Aizawa-sensei’s imagined one. Of course the prospect made her nervous. He’d been her
*teacher*, after all, and had seen her during some of her most unflattering moments. Now the
situation would be reversed. She’d be seeing all of her former sensei’s faults, his pain, his anger,
his desires. What if she didn’t like what she saw? This wouldn’t be quite as objective as counseling
should be ideally, but she wasn’t going to turn him away. She was a grown woman now; she had
the ability and good sense to keep herself from getting too close this time around. “How soon
would you like to begin?”

“When are you available?” Shouta did not want to be the one to make this call.

“Let’s shoot for meeting twice a week; say, Mondays and Fridays? Right after school lets out for
the day?”

“That works for me. Should we start tomorrow? Since it’s Friday?” *What have I gotten myself
into?*

“I can start tomorrow if you like.”

Shouta shifted uncomfortably. “Listen...I think we should have some ground rules for this.”

“Of course,” Moriyama nodded. “Establishing boundaries is healthy.”

“I don’t want you using your telepathy on me, even for therapeutic purposes. If I can’t keep my
erasure activated, we have to end the session.”
She gave a sly grin. “You’re gonna make me work for it, huh?”

“I always do.” Shouta’s jaw clenched right as the words came out of his mouth. His response had sounded just a little too suggestive for his own comfort.

Moriyama either didn’t notice, or didn’t mind the remark. “Tomorrow it is.”
The following morning arrived even as Shouta dreaded it somewhat, blinding sunlight peeking over the horizon, interrupting yet another sleepless night. He groaned, joints creaking as he rolled out of bed, feet hitting the floor with a dull thud. He rubbed at his eyes, trying in vain to keep them from drooping so very much. Perhaps I should stop for a cup of coffee on the way. At least today was Friday, and he could spend the weekend napping as much as he pleased, but he had to get through today first. Today would be a strange one, to say the least, and longer than he wanted, considering that he would have to stay late this afternoon, spilling his guts to his former student, and now shrink. Who knew how long the session would go? It really depended on how long he could keep his erasure quirk activated.

The whole deal still made him feel uneasy. Moriyama had seemed more than willing to take on the challenge, but it was still Moriyama. She’d been Shouta’s student—perhaps one of his finest—once upon a time, and he didn’t want her working her way too deep into his head. She already knew more about him than he liked, and there was much, much more to it. There were things that, if she knew, she’d be revolted, she’d hate him. Of course, Shouta could keep them off the table as much as possible; they weren’t relevant to the issues at hand, after all. Still, he had to be careful not to let them come up accidentally. The prospect of that happening made him nervous; this whole arrangement seemed so risky.

At the same time, he didn’t really have a choice now. He needed to see someone, to get himself right. Of course it didn’t have to be Moriyama. He could always seek out another professional. However, Shouta had already committed to doing it this way, and backing out now would only seem rude, and potentially make things awkward between them. It would make it seem as though he didn’t trust her as a professional, and even if that were the truth (which it wasn’t), he would never let on that he felt that way. Shouta would simply have to get over this silliness for his own good, and let Moriyama do her damn job, even if seeing her several times each week, getting
attached to her all over again, was a really, really bad idea.

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Tsukiko pressed the power button on the electric kettle in her office, scooping fresh coffee grounds into her french press. This was already her third cup of the day; it had seemed as if the first two had no effect whatsoever. She dug through her bag for her vitamins, doling out a couple onto the counter as she waited for the water to heat, mind drifting back to the long day ahead of her. Friday had finally arrived after one hell of a long week; though she enjoyed her job, Tsukiko looked forward to being able to relax over the weekend. However, she still had to get through today first. She had two students signed up to come see her this morning, and then three more in the afternoon. Furthermore, she had her first session with Aizawa-sensei this afternoon, and that was guaranteed to be even more mentally taxing.

She didn’t quite feel ready for this; even though she’d done this kind of session a thousand times, it had never been with Aizawa-sensei. For most of the time she’d known him, he’d been able to keep her out of his head in a way that no one else could. He knew her very well, but she still knew so little about him. That would start to change now, and Aizawa-sensei would no longer be the aloof, enigmatic man she had always known before. She couldn’t reasonably expect to learn every single thing about him, and she knew that he would never let her in fully, but things would inevitably start to change- if he wanted to get better, anyway.

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As much as Shouta and Tsukiko both dreaded it, the end of the day did eventually come around, with UA’s student body chattering noisily about their plans for the weekend as they hurried out of their classrooms. Shouta halfway hoped that maybe one of his students would end up staying after class with questions about what they’d learned that day, but such luck evaded him. With no excuse keeping him behind, he made his way down to Moriyama’s office, hesitantly poking his head in the door. She noticed him immediately, turning around and giving a slight smile before waving him into the office and gesturing for him to have a seat on the couch as she organized some papers on her desk.

“Long day?” she asked as he yawned audibly.

“You could say that, I guess.” Shouta awkwardly arranged himself on the couch, shoving the decorative pillows to the side.

“I’m going to make myself a cup of coffee. Would you like some?”
“Never been much of a coffee person.”

“You’ve never my coffee.” Moriyama flashed a smile, going to make a second cup anyway. Shouta raised an eyebrow in suspicion as she sprinkled a pinch of salt into the black brew, followed by a little bit of cream, and a few squirts of sweetened condensed milk. Moriyama passed Shouta the cup. “Just trust me.”

He furrowed his brow as he tasted the mixture, surprised at the unexpectedly mellow sweetness of the normally-bitter beverage. “That’s...not bad.”

Tsukiko smirked at Aizawa-sensei’s response as she grabbed a legal pad and a pen, plopping down in her usual chair and placing her coffee mug on the nearby table. “Told ya.”

“So…” Shouta started, hair floating around his head as he kept his quirk trained on Moriyama. “...how is this supposed to work.”

Tsukiko cleared her throat. “Essentially, we’re just going to talk about what you’re experiencing. I’ll ask a lot of questions to try and figure out what problems you’re having. For example, what is it that made you decide to seek out therapy?”

Shouta took a deep breath, not entirely able to believe that he was actually doing this. “I’ve been having trouble sleeping.”

“In what way?” Tsukiko needed more specificity. While sleeplessness was often a symptom of psychological disorders, it could have biological factors as well. “Are you having trouble falling asleep, or staying asleep?”

“It’s a little bit of both, actually.” He shifted uncomfortably. “It takes me a long time to fall asleep at night, and then I wake up a lot during the night.”

“You said you have trouble ‘at night.’ Is your insomnia exclusive to the nighttime?” If this was the case, Aizawa-sensei’s issues were likely physiological in nature.

“That’s right.”
Tsukiko took another sip of her coffee. “Can you tell me what it is that’s waking you up during the night? Is there a specific cause, or are you just waking up without really knowing the reason?”

Shouta froze. He didn’t really feel ready to talk about his dreams yet, but he knew that he wouldn’t get anywhere by withholding information from Moriyama. “I’ve been having strange dreams. I always wake up at the most intense moment.”

“What kinds of strange dreams?” Tsukiko’s pulse quickened. It seemed as though she was moving into the more intimate details of Aizawa-sensei’s life sooner than she expected.

Shouta hesitated, remembering the dream he’d had a few nights before- at USJ, with Mariko and Moriyama, one blending into the other. Could he really tell her about that? “Oh, you know…” He gestured vaguely. “They’re just...weird. They don’t make a lot of sense.”

Aizawa-sensei was clearly uncomfortable with the idea of disclosing the details of these dreams. Tsukiko knew that he hadn’t merely forgotten what he’d seen. If that were the case, he wouldn’t have brought them up, and clearly, they were upsetting enough to wake him. He simply didn’t want to share what was, to him, a private affair.

After a few seconds of awkward silence, Tsukiko cleared her throat. “You know...we can talk about something else if you’re not ready to discuss this…”

“No...no. I’m not going to get any better until I actually talk through this, right?” Aizawa-sensei ran his hands through his hair, looking frustrated.

“Well…” As much as Tsukiko didn’t want to force him into uncomfortable territory too quickly, he’d hit the nail on the head. Besides, Aizawa-sensei had always been frank with her; she could afford him the same courtesy. “Yes.”

He took a deep breath, leaning back on the couch. “I had this dream a few nights ago... I was fighting with a villain, and I could hear my wi-...Mariko’s voice. She was...terrified.”

Tsukiko’s jaw clenched almost automatically. *Old habits die hard, I guess.* “Go on…”
“There was another voice too… I couldn’t see, but… what he said… he sounded like the man who-” Aizawa-sensei went silent, catching himself before he shared more than he liked.

Though she kept a neutral face, Tsukiko’s stomach dropped. She hadn’t realized that Aizawa-sensei’s late wife was still such a point of contention for him. He likely didn’t realize it himself; if she was manifesting in his dreams, it was probably a more subconscious issue. He’d stopped himself from finishing his last sentence, but she could guess how it would end. The man who murdered her. Tsukiko knew that Mariko had been murdered; she’d always known that. Certainly, the circumstances of her death had the potential to make the events that much more traumatic for her husband. Tsukiko supposed she shouldn’t be so surprised that Aizawa-sensei was still mourning her passing all these years later.

Still, she needed more information. Was he reliving the moment of her death in his dream? Was it being incorporated into other scenarios? “Can you tell me more about the setting of this dream? Was anyone else there?”

“My homeroom class was there. It was… It was the USJ incident all over again.” Aizawa-sensei gripped the coffee mug in his hands tightly. “I was fighting that same monster. It slammed my face into the dirt like before, and when I could lift my head up, I couldn’t see anything.”

Tsukiko tilted her head, some of the pieces starting to come together.

“I could still hear the voices, though- my students…Mariko… him …y-” Aizawa-sensei stopped himself again.

“I couldn’t see anymore… My homeroom class… USJ…” So the incident at USJ was the root cause of all of this. It wasn’t surprising, really. That experience was likely the most traumatic battle of Aizawa-sensei’s life, at least to Tsukiko’s knowledge. And he always did have a soft spot for his students. He’d probably been so terrified that he wouldn’t be able to protect them. But what about protecting yourself, sensei? Tsukiko didn’t think it would be wise to push him to talk about what had happened there just yet; he’d buried it so deep that tearing it to the surface risked retraumatizing him all over again. It might be better to address the lingering sadness over his wife first, then start moving forward in time.

Another hour passed, with the discussion turning toward the things that comprised a typical day for Aizawa-sensei, giving Tsukiko a baseline for what he considered “normal.” He had a simple existence- wake up, work, patrol, sleep- hardly making time to take care of himself; he was so busy taking care of everyone else. Perhaps he didn’t want to leave too much time alone with his thoughts. His eyes were getting rather bloodshot now. Tsukiko doubted that he could keep them open much longer. “I think this is a good place to end for today.”
Aizawa-sensei sighed, letting out a breath he seemed to have been holding this whole time. “I think you’re right.”

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Even after the session had ended, Tsukiko still worried about Aizawa-sensei. His trauma ran much deeper than she’d initially believed, and treating it could potentially take quite some time. Would he be able to tolerate that? Aizawa-sensei was already rather impatient with their arrangement. Against her better judgement, Tsukiko was tempted to shorten the timeline. Her sensei could handle it, she believed; he wasn’t emotionally fragile. If anything, he was perhaps too stoic. She couldn’t be expected to believe that he’d always been like that. He needed a shock to his system, drawing out some kind of genuine emotion. Tsukiko had seen it before, just hints of feeling lingering under that tough surface.

What would happen when she did draw it out, though? Aizawa-sensei’s kindness, the tenderness she knew he was hiding, that unconventional, easy connection they’d always had… She was weak to it- at least, she had been before. Tsukiko was older now, wiser. Surely she wasn’t the same silly child that she’d been back then. She could get close now without falling into the same pattern. Still, the danger presented itself- if she got too close, would she find herself charmed by Aizawa-sensei all over again?

After all, old habits die hard.
Six Years Ago

Tsukiko rested her head on one hand while using the other to scrawl notes on the paper in front of her, rather uninterested in what the instructor at the front of the room had to say. *Who even cares about macroeconomics, anyway?* She’d never use this in her career as a pro hero! She desperately wanted the class period to end so that she could finally get to training. That was the only class she needed, really. Tsukiko already had a part-time job as a sidekick at a hero agency; she was basically guaranteed a permanent position upon her graduation from UA! Her parents insisted that she should probably still go to college and get a degree in something practical, just in case, and that she needed to continue to make good grades if that were going to happen. Good thing this dumb shit came easily to her…

Of course, going to training would mean that she had to see Aizawa-sensei again, and his dumb fucking face. In the month that had passed since the beginning of classes, she still hadn’t warmed up to him very much. He was blunt, and aloof, at it annoyed Tsukiko. It seemed like he didn’t really care about any of this, like he was just here to collect a paycheck. Didn’t he realize how important this was? That he was responsible for preparing the next generation of *star heroes* for their careers? Tsukiko’s relationship with him was contentious at best; she didn’t like him, and he wasn’t too fond of her either. He’d had the gall to tell her once that she should be careful of being too *arrogant*. *Tsch.* What did he know, anyway?

Regardless, Tsukiko was determined to focus hard on her training for the next few weeks. The Sports Festival would be coming up and she couldn’t afford to skip out on one second of preparation. Of course, the Festival wasn’t as important for upperclassmen, as they almost always had secured employment by an agency already, but it was still an opportunity to show off how
much you’d improved since the previous year. Besides, sidekicks didn’t always get much time to really flex and display their abilities. If a student performed well, it could potentially put them on the fast-track to advancement opportunities within the agency. Tsukiko hoped to debut within the next year, and this year’s Sports Festival might give her the chance to prove herself. *Now I just need to think of a better hero name...*

Though she would admit it to no one, she hadn’t stopped thinking about what Aizawa-sensei had said to her that first day, when he told her that she needed to compensate for the non-physicality of her quirk. Furthermore, she now had a whole new ability to develop. She’d never been able to use telepathy before; perhaps her neural capacity hadn’t been developed enough until now. She did still face problems with it, however. For now, it seemed to require some kind of an emotional trigger. She’d been angry enough, that first day, but now she could spend hours trying and failing to use it, until she built up enough frustration to get a small response. It took a toll on her physically, too. Using the telepathy drained Tsukiko of her energy- physical, mental, emotional- and caused her nose to bleed, as capillaries in her head burst under the duress. She severely doubted that she’d be able to use this ability at the Sports Festival.

Thus, Tsukiko had instead decided to focus on building up her physical abilities as much as she could before the event. Most of the other UA students had quirks that amplified their bodily capabilities, which put her at a disadvantage. No matter how much she exercised and built up her muscle mass, it wouldn’t be enough to give her an edge on her opponents just on strength, speed, and dexterity alone. If she used what physical abilities she did have in tandem with her psychic ones, she might be able to come out on top. Since the beginning of the semester, Tsukiko had been staying late after classes to use UA’s workout facilities.

She was there again this afternoon; with classes having ended two hours before, her now-daily ritual neared its end. She’d focused on close-combat and weight training today. Her arms felt like wet noodles after so many repetitions, but she continued to push the barbell up and down over and over, determined to make the most of the time she had.

“You should really have someone spotting you during a bench press.”

Tsukiko’s initial reaction was to bristle at the familiar voice. “You’re still here, sensei?”

“I had some papers that I needed to finish grading.” Aizawa-sensei came over to the bench, holding his hands underneath the bar as Tsukiko pushed it up once more. “Have you been here since classes let out?”

Tsukiko lowered the bar onto the resting rack, sitting up and dabbing her sweaty face with a nearby towel. “Yeah. I’ve been working out like this almost every day. I need to get stronger if I’m going to be able to compete with my peers.”
Her teacher raised an eyebrow. “You actually followed my advice?”

She made an irritated noise. “Well...it wasn’t bad advice…”

“Just be careful not to over-exert yourself. It’ll all be for nothing if you get injured.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“What kind of training have you been doing?” Aizawa-sensei asked.

“Weights mostly; I’ve been trying to work on close-quarters combat, but it’s kind of difficult to do by yourself.” Tsukiko shrugged.

Aizawa-sensei widened his stance. “Do you want to show me what you’ve learned?”

Tsukiko looked at him, befuddled. Could she really fight her teacher? “Can I really do that?”

“I’m a professional,” Aizawa sensei smirked. “I’ll be fine. Give me everything you’ve got. Besides, you know you want to.”

He had a point. “Alright…” Tsukiko paused, waiting for the right moment to strike first.

She flinched forward, just enough to make Aizawa-sensei react, throwing out his arm to block the anticipated attack. Tsukiko grabbed it and twisted. In one quick maneuver she wrapped it around herself, so that she was backed up against her opponent, reaching back with her other arm to grab the front of Aizawa-sensei’s jumpsuit. With a quick burst of strength through her legs, she ducked forward, suplexing him forward onto the ground.

He lay there for a few moments, almost making Tsukiko worry that she’d actually hurt him, but instead, to her surprise, he started to laugh quietly, sitting up and pushing his hair away from his face. “I knew it.”
Tsukiko furrowed her brow, unaware of how humorous her seriousness might seem. “W-What are you talking about?”

Aizawa-sensei stood up, actually smiling as he met her gaze. She’d never seen him smile before; it was weird. “I knew you had potential.”

The student shifted uncomfortably, unused to the praise. “Well, yeah… I am at UA…”

“I know you and I got off to a bad start, and maybe it wasn’t nice to call you out in front of your peers, but I never had any doubt in your abilities.” The teacher rubbed at his neck; maybe he actually had pulled something. Oops.

“Do you think we could start over?” Tsukiko blurted out, a little shocked at her own words.

Aizawa-sensei laughed again, reaching out almost reflexively and ruffling the hair that had fallen down out of Tsukiko’s ponytail. “Of course.” He looked over at the clock hanging on the wall. “It’s getting late. Make sure to get home safe.” He turned to leave, leaving Tsukiko unsure of what to think.

“See you tomorrow, sensei,” she called out to him.

Without turning back, Aizawa-sensei raised one hand to wave back at her. “See you, Third Eye.”

Tsukiko’s lips curled into a grin, and involuntary response. Of course her teacher had let her win. He was a professional hero, after all; he could have taken her down in seconds. Instead, he’d allowed her to best him, either to gauge her skill level or to boost her confidence. Tsukiko couldn’t quite identify what she felt in that moment, but for reasons other than her long workout, she felt very warm.

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Time passed in the blink of an eye and the sports festival had finally arrived in all of its glory. The first years’ events still drew the most attention as they did every year, but everyone else still felt determined to give it their all, fighting tooth and nail (sometimes literally) to come out on top. Like the two years before, Tsukiko had managed to make it through the first two rounds of events, chomping at the bit for the round three one-on-one battles. She owed her success this year to her
diligent training, and was anxious to show everyone here what she could do. Even though the other challenges were inevitably physically taxing, she still felt full of energy. She couldn’t sit still, pacing around incessantly. Someone said something about how it would keep her “momentum” going, but she waved it off. Such a theory was utter bullshit. She was simply ready for a good fight.

The second round of one-on-one fights was beginning now. Tsukiko would be up next after this current face-off, taking on one of her classmates, Mako-kun. The challenge was potentially dangerous- Mako’s quirk gave him tough, porcupine-like spines which he could raise or use as projectiles at will. She would have to be careful, and move nimbly to avoid getting stabbed. She’d been able to avoid using up too much energy during her first fight, instead getting into her opponent’s head, and taunting him as a distraction until she could find an opening to strike, forcing him out of bounds.

The match in front of her ended, and Tsukiko marched out to the field that had been constructed for this purpose. “Next up, Moriyama versus Mako!”

“You think you can take it?” Mako grinned. He was competitive, but good-natured.

“Bring it on.” Tsukiko activated her telepathy, finding out exactly when her rival planned to attack, and how. He ran toward her, torso ducked low, quills up. She dodged, delivering a swift punch to the ribs as he passed her. Mako gasped for air, stumbling to the side a little, but quickly recovered, launching a few quills in Tsukiko’s direction. She could see them coming, and dodged, tucking into a somersault and rolling free of harm.

The fight wore on, with a series of attacks, and dodges that became more a contest of endurance than one of strength. One such defensive evasion forced Tsukiko to turn her back on her opponent briefly, breaking her mental connection, allowing Mako a single opportunity to attack without warning. He launched one single spine at her, aiming for her leg, hoping to immobilize her.

Unfortunately for Tsukiko, he missed.

The quill pierced the left side of her abdomen, not quite sharp enough to pass all the way through her body. A few seconds of silence passed at the audience waited with bated breath to see what would happen next. Tsukiko herself didn’t process what had occurred for a few moments, wondering why she could taste blood in her mouth and then finally looking down to see the long keratin spike sticking out of her body. She slumped to her knees, pressing her hands against the wound. Mako looked horrified, rushing over and moving to pull the foreign object out of his classmate. Tsukiko put out her hand in a “stop” motion. “You can’t just...pull it out like that…” she gasped.
A first aid response team hurried over, careful not to jostle the spike as they loaded her onto a stretcher to take her to Recovery Girl. The nurse hero looked surprised as she triaged her patient; the sports festival hadn’t seen an injury this severe for the past several years. Still, she remained nonchalant. “I’ve seen worse.” Within five minutes she had the spine removed, and the bleeding under control. Tsukiko was lucky, she said, getting away with damage only to her abdominal muscles. Normally, she would be out of practice for a few months, but with Recovery Girl’s help, she could heal within a week.

As Recovery Girl stitched the wound closed, someone knocked at the door. “Five more minutes, please,” she requested.

The guest chose to deliberately ignore this, and burst into the room anyway. “Moriyama!” Aizawa-sensei looked terrified for his student. “Is she going to be okay?” he demanded.

Tsukiko turned her head away, feeling weird about having so much attention focused on her. “I’ll be fine, sensei. It’s not as bad as it looks.”

Aizawa-sensei looked back at the half-closed puncture wound, at the bruised flesh around it. “It looks pretty bad. Are you sure you’re alright? Are you in pain?”

“No shit it hurts!” Tsukiko looked at him like he had two heads.

Her teacher relented, seeing that she wasn’t injured badly enough to lose her attitude. “I’m not sure what the other faculty think, but I’m going to ask for Mako to be disqualified.”

“Why?” she asked as Recovery Girl finished her work, leaving the room to let them talk.

“Because he was too reckless. You could have been killed!”

“He only did what he had to in order to win,” Tsukiko insisted. “This school is supposed to prepare us for the realities of hero work, right? What happened out there… Something like that could easily happen out in the field. And out there, you can’t just disqualify your enemies.”

Aizawa-sensei sighed. “You’re right. I guess I was just biased because you seemed to have been
injured so badly."

“You were worried? About me?” Tsukiko hoped he couldn’t see the heat spreading through her cheeks.

“Yes. You’re my student. Of course I was worried.”

She looked away, face hot, a lump rising in her throat. Her emotions still ran high from the fight, the injury, this sudden concern from her seemingly-cold teacher. Tsukiko swallowed the lump down, determined not to make a fool of herself, but she still couldn’t fool her teacher, who could tell that her head was still spinning.

In a sudden act that surprised both of them, Aizawa-sensei wrapped his arms around Tsukiko, careful not to disturb her injury as she held her close. She relaxed into the embrace almost automatically, feeling safe and warm, her better judgment keeping her from closing her eyes and laying her head against him. She inhaled deeply, the smell of pine and soap tickling her nose. For someone who could act so cold, Aizawa-sensei was surprisingly warm. Tsukiko could feel the hot blush in her face spreading to the back of her neck and the tips of her ears. *This is bad... It’s good, but that’s why it’s so bad...*

Tsukiko didn’t realize until it was too late that she was in this way over her head.
As relatively restful as the weekend had been, a new week still came around, rearing its ugly head. Though most people hated mondays, it was the one day of the week that Shouta actually felt well-rested. He gave himself sundays off, which meant he could nap as much as he liked, and then turn in early for a better night’s rest than he normally received. All the same, monday now meant another session with Moriyama, picking through all of the shit that clogged up his mind. He halfway dreaded it, since it meant watching his every word to keep himself from sharing too much, and keeping his erasure activated for such a long period of time. Back when Moriyama was his student, it was much easier to keep it going, but with age and injury, it scarcely lasted an hour, and his eyes needed more time to rest afterward. Shouta could tell that he would need time to rest after every session anyhow; despite how little he was willing to open up, it still left him emotionally exhausted.

The first session on friday had proceeded without a hitch, Moriyama gathering background information to try and figure out what problems Shouta was facing. He didn’t feel quite as anxious about today’s meeting; rather, he felt a little more confident in his ability to keep private things private and only share was was necessary for his recovery. He believed that Moriyama might want to talk more about Mariko today, about her death and what kind of effect the event had had on Shouta. If this was the case, he didn’t really have cause to worry. It wasn’t difficult for him to talk about Mariko anymore. After seven years, most of the wounds had healed. The only question was: why was all of this coming up again after so many years of believing that he was over the incident?
What did Mariko’s death have to do with everything that Shouta was experiencing now- the attack on USJ, Moriyama’s sudden return?

At the same time, he worried that talking about Mariko might bleed into topics that Shouta didn’t want to discuss with Moriyama. She’d come into his life only a year after his wife’s death, and he’d been able to heal quite a bit during his first year as a teacher. Some of the things that had happened during that year- things that had helped him...he couldn’t tell Moriyama about that. She couldn’t ever know that… Well, maybe Shouta could keep it from coming up. Maybe he could be vague enough that his answers would satisfy his new therapist without betraying too much private information. No good would come from her knowing. It would only make things worse for her, and for Shouta, and would completely destroy any pleasantries in their relationship. Moriyama would never be able to trust him again, never want to speak to him again.

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“How was your weekend?” Moriyama asked as Shouta entered her office, closing the door behind him. She poured a second cup of coffee without even asking, fixing it up with more sweetened milk than she did in her own.

“Restful, I guess.” Shouta sat down on the couch again, waiting to activate his quirk until she turned toward him; using it right now would only be a waste of time.

“That’s good. How have you been sleeping?”

“Well, things haven’t changed much in terms of insomnia or dreams. I just had more time to sleep over the weekend,” he explained.

Moriyama grabbed her notepad and a pen from her desk, handing one of the hot mugs to Shouta. “Now, last time…” she made herself comfortable in her chair, kicking off her shoes and tucking her legs underneath herself. “...we started talking about these dreams you’ve been having. You talked a little bit about what happened at USJ, being worried about your students, and we talked some about Mariko. She passed away about…” Moriyama stopped to do the quick calculation. “…seven years ago? When you were twenty-three years old?”

“That’s about right.”

“How long were you married?”
Shouta took a deep breath, staring off into space. “We’d been married for around two-and-a-half
years when she died.”

“I think...this would be a good place to start. To my knowledge, it really was the first serious
trauma you experienced,” Moriyama sounded a little on-edge, as if she still felt hesitant to delve
into her former teacher’s private past.

Shouta nodded, encouraging her. She was a professional now, and he’d asked for her help. “It
was.”

“I think some of the things you’re dealing with now stem from that incident, and I think it would
be good to try and work through things chronologically. If you don’t mind, I would like to focus on
Mariko for now- your relationship with her, the circumstances surrounding her death, and what you
experienced after that. Does that sound amenable?” Moriyama took a sip from her coffee cup,
waiting for his answer.

“I knew her for quite a long time before we were ever involved.” Shouta took a deep breath.
“Yamada Mariko...was three years younger than I. I met her through her brother, who was- is a
good friend of mine. I don’t know why, but she was always fond of me, even when I was an
awkward teenager.”

You really can’t fathom someone being fond of you? Tsukiko bit her lip.

“Anyway, as we got older, I realized that I felt the same way. When she was eighteen, and I was
twenty-one, we decided to get married.” Shouta smiled softly, recalling the happy memories. “We
were happy, in the time that we were together. Mariko was a gentle soul, much quieter than her
brother, but special in her own way. I loved her so much.”

“I know you did.” The words slipped out unexpectedly, and Tsukiko clamped her jaw shut after,
uncomfortable as she realized that she’d reminded Aizawa-sensei how she’d once been privy to his
private inner thoughts.

He cleared his throat, the slightest amount of color rising in his face, before continuing. “About
three months before her death, I started tracking this villain; he got off on killing women. I made
the capture a couple of times, but he always managed to escape custody. Anyway, at some point he
became obsessed with me, always taunting that he wanted to cut out my eyes.”
Tsukiko’s breath hitched in her throat, her eye contact with Aizawa-sensei never breaking as she scribbled away at her notepad.

“He eventually found out that I was married, and he started harassing Mariko, calling our home phone when she was there alone, talking about how he wanted to kill her as he made me watch, and then cut out my eyes. He said that he wanted her death to be the last thing I ever saw.”

“That’s sick…”

Shouta nodded. “One night I tracked him down, and before I could do anything, he dragged Mariko out of a nearby alleyway. I could see how terrified she was. She couldn’t stop crying…” His voice cracked momentarily, and he leaned over to rest his face in his hands. Moriyama looked away and waited quietly as he took a moment to compose himself before sitting up straight again. “He cut her throat right there in front of me, no hesitation or anything. She tried to cry out, but she couldn’t make sounds anymore- her vocal cords had been cut. I still don’t know if she died from suffocation or blood loss.”

“Aizawa-sensei…” Tsukiko knew that Mariko had died violently, but she hadn’t known the horrible details until now.

Shouta’s voice was gruff as he continued. “I know he intended to maim me after that, thinking that I’d freeze after watching my wife be murdered, that I wouldn’t move or fight back, but he miscalculated.”

“You arrested him?”

“I stomped his skull in.” Shouta cringed internally as he watched the last remaining color in Moriyama’s face drain away. “Sorry, was that too much deta-”

“Good.”

“Sorry?”

“It’s what he deserved.”
They sat and stared at one another for a few moments. Shouta hadn’t exactly expected his therapist to advocate murder, but then again, this was Moriyama Tsukiko; she’d never been exactly what he expected. Sometimes that was a good thing, sometimes it wasn’t. “How do you think you reacted to her death after that?” She snapped right back into the conversation as if her sensei hadn’t just confessed to killing another person.

“I...I think I reacted much like any husband would. I was devastated, of course.” Shouta shook his head, trying to recall a period of time that had honestly been a blur for him. “Her family helped me plan the funeral; I don’t think I could have done it by myself. I felt sick every time I thought about it.”

“That’s understandable.”

“The first few weeks...it didn’t even feel real. I felt like I was going through life in a haze, like it was all a terrible dream and I’d wake up eventually.”

“You were in the ‘denial’ stage of grief,” Tsukiko explained. “It’s exceedingly common for the death of a spouse to feel unreal at first.” She had known that once they started talking about Mariko, she’d get all of the particulars of her murder, but it still made her sick to her stomach. Though she’d loved Aizawa-sensei once upon a time, she’d never been happy that his wife had died. She would never wish that kind of agony on a person that she cared about, and she felt for Mariko, too. She didn’t deserve to die, especially not in such a grotesque manner. Tsukiko’s heart hurt for both of them- two people who had loved each other deeply, torn apart by the world’s cruel ugliness. All she could do now was help Aizawa-sensei move forward, try to find happiness again, in whatever form that happiness took.

“I just don’t really understand why it’s all coming up again. Why am I having dreams about her all of a sudden?”

“Well, if I had to guess…” Tsukiko thought for a minute. “Maybe you didn’t fully grieve for her the first time.”

“No.” Aizawa-sensei seemed adamant. “I was so depressed, I didn’t work for a month. You call that not grieving?”

“Okay, but consider this- how did you come out of the depression? Did things get easier over time?”
“Not really,” he admitted. “One day, I just realized that being sad wasn’t going to help me any, so I decided to stop being sad.”

“You repressed your emotions.”

“I did not.”

“Yes you did!” Tsukiko insisted. “You went ‘I’ll keep all of my feelings right here, and then one day, I’ll die.’”

Aizawa-sensei got quiet after that, so Tsukiko could only assume that she was right.

“This stuff could very well be coming up again because you’re experiencing something that reminds you of what happened with Mariko—feelings of fear, or helplessness.”

“I just...I just thought I would be over it by now.”

“Aizawa-sensei…” Moriyama looked sympathetic. “The death of a partner...you don’t ever really ‘get over it.’ All you can do is learn to live with it, to accept what happened, and move forward. A part of you will always miss her, but in time, you’ll have more happy memories of her than sad ones.”

“I guess I thought I already was moving on,” Aizawa-sensei looked confused.

“It’s possible that you are, to some extent, especially since so much time has passed, but part of you is still struggling to cope with this. I think the best thing to do would be to identify exactly what part of that trauma is coming up now, because that’s the part that still hurts. Moriyama cocked her head. “You said that you felt like you were starting to move on. Can you tell me more about that?”

Shouta clenched his jaw. He’d been dreading that question ever since he let it slip that he believed he was “getting over” what happened to Mariko. He couldn’t very well lie to Moriyama, since that would get him exactly nowhere, but the truth was...uncomfortable. Perhaps he could be vague about it, leave out the more crucial details, the things that he knew would make her hate him, the
sordid, disgusting things. Moriyama raised an eyebrow at him now, suspicious at his hesitation. “It’s a little bit uncomfortable to talk about…”

“It can’t be that bad. I’ve heard some pretty fucked-up shit before,” she chuckled. “I think I can handle anything you dish out.”

Oh, Moriyama…Tsukiko… If only you knew… “I…” Shouta groaned internally at himself. “I started having feelings for someone else.”

Tsukiko had to make a physical effort to keep herself from snorting. “That’s it? That’s what you were afraid to tell me?”

Aizawa-sensei shrugged, looking embarrassed. “I guess it just seemed like a big deal to me.”

“Of course.” Tsukiko quickly composed herself. If Aizawa-sensei felt that his romantic feelings were a significant step, then they probably were, for him. Still, part of her felt a bit skeptical. “You know, sometimes after the death of a spouse, the remaining partner can quickly become attached to someone else in pursuit of attention, or affection. Your feelings are valid; I just want to verify that this wasn’t what happened to you.”

“I don’t think so. What you described, it would happen pretty quickly after her death, right?”

“Yes. If you started having those feelings a year or more after Mariko died, I would consider it to be authentic romantic attraction.”

“Yes, it was more than a year.” Shouta nodded in confirmation, careful not to specify exactly when he started having feelings.

Though Tsukiko considered herself to be “over” her silly teenage crush, a pit still formed in her stomach for some reason. She didn’t want to hear about this, to know about some other woman, but she knew that her feelings were selfish. Why should she care if someone she used to like was attracted to someone else. It wasn’t as though she still felt that way! Besides, if it meant that Aizawa-sensei was starting to get better, she should be thrilled! As a therapist, she needed to know more about this- the nature of the attraction, what sort of person the feelings were for… “Can you tell me more about this person? What are they like? How did it feel to be attracted to them?”
Shouta immediately got quiet again, searching for ways to be as nonspecific as possible. “Well...personality wise, she was very different from Mariko- loud, sort of...bombastic, and high-strung. I got along with Mariko so easily, but this girl...er...woman - was always a little bit of a pain in the ass.”

“Did you ever tell her how you felt?” Moriyama raised her eyebrows. Shit, was she on to him?

“No...it wasn’t...the kind of situation where it would have been appropriate to tell her.”

A coworker?

Studying Moriyama’s face carefully for signs of too much understanding, Shouta continued. “Eventually, she faded out of my life, and it was probably for the best, but I still missed her for a long time. I tried dating other women, but I eventually just gave up.”

“Who was she?” Fortunately, Moriyama still seemed clueless.

“You wouldn’t know her,” Shouta lied. He hadn’t realized that the details of this would prove to be so crucial. Moriyama wasn’t just being nosy, right? No, of course not. That would be silly. Why should she care one way or the other who Shouta found attractive?

“That’s okay, you don’t have to tell me her name, but it would be helpful if you told me more about your attraction to her. It’ll help me understand your cognitive functions, how you processed the feelings.”

“I don’t think I’m ready to talk about that yet.” Shit. Evasive maneuvers were in order to end this conversation as quickly as possible.

“We can revisit this topic later, but you might have to talk about it eventually.” Moriyama sighed, seeming slightly frustrated. “This would be so much easier if you would just let me in…”

“I’m sorry.” Shouta sighed, frustrated. “I don’t think I could ever do that.”
Deepest Darkest Secret

Six Years Ago

“It’s still difficult to sleep without you there next to me.” Shouta laid the small bouquet of flowers next to Mariko’s headstone and seated himself in the soft grass, still moist from the early morning dew. Though solemn, this place was particularly peaceful this time of day—a quiet grove tucked away from the busy roads. Pale sunlight filtered in through the trees, specks of dust dancing in the warmth of its rays. It was a dreamy sort of place where time seemed to slow down for a little while. “I do miss you, Mariko.” He knew that she wouldn’t be able to respond, or even hear his words, but visiting her, talking to her like this did make Shouta feel better somehow, as if some part of her remained here with him. He hoped that Mariko was resting easy despite her gruesome death, that she’d found peace in another world beyond his own, that she didn’t miss this world, didn’t miss him as he did her.

After an agonizing year and a half of mourning, and subsequent numbness, it had started to become easier for Shouta to cope. For the first six months or so after her passing, he couldn’t even visit her grave. It hurt too much to see the still-fresh earth, the name carved into the cold, lifeless stone that marked her resting place. Of course he still missed her, and he knew that he probably would for a long time, but Shouta had ceased to feel like a dead man walking; he felt as though he could breathe again, like his life held some purpose. His new role as a teacher gave him something more to do with his time than simply sleeping, and then waking up to chase bad guys until it was time to sleep again. It required a lot of time and effort, and he hadn’t anticipated how much it would help him to feel needed, to have all these crazy kids looking to him for guidance.

“You should see them, Mariko…” Shouta loved to tell her about his students, how they’d grown,
what they had accomplished. They almost filled some sort of paternal instinct; he and Mariko hadn’t gotten the chance to have children of their own. She’d wanted to, but… He told her about their training, the sports festival, their abilities- some of them new-found since the beginning of the year. For the first time in a long time, Shouta actually felt proud of something, excited about something. When Principal Nedzu had initially reached out to him, offering him the chance to do something different (and take his mind off of the pain he’d been put through), he’d been skeptical. “What makes you think that I would make a good teacher?” In the end, Nedzu was right, but, then again, he usually was. “You should see Moriyama now; she’s made so much progress since the beginning of the term…”

“…she was right, I realized…” The sun climbed high enough now to hit Shouta in the eyes, reminding him that it was time to go, that the school day would be beginning soon. He clenched his jaw, realizing that he’d spent a good ten minutes now just talking about Moriyama. Had anyone been listening, it might appear as though he had a preference for her. That wasn’t the case, of course; Shouta valued all of his students equally. Moriyama just…had a lot more going on. She’d grown by leaps and bounds in only a few short months, and he couldn’t help feeling proud of her. From cussing him up and down on the first day of the term, to staying late every afternoon just to push herself the extra mile. She’d sworn before that she would be the best student he ever had, and it looked like she intended to keep that promise. *Of course* Shouta would be proud of such a dedicated student.

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After *barely* making it to class on time, morning homeroom had gone off without a hitch, even if the class *had* started to get a little squirrely, anticipating the rapidly-approaching summer break. For them, the break wouldn’t mean lazing around all day like it did for most high school students; they would instead be hard at work in their part-time hero positions. Still, they’d be doing that instead of going to school, and they were happy to have a little bit of a break. Shouta hoped that he could hold their attention long enough to help them prepare for the end-of-term exam, and that they wouldn’t forget *too* much of what they had learned so far while the school was closed. The period ended, and they clustered around each other to chat while they waited for the next teacher to arrive while Shouta rushed to hand back some graded tests before leaving.

“*Aizawa-sensei, your hands are shaking.*”

“*Are they?*” Shouta held them up to his face after handing Moriyama her paper back. He *did* feel a little bit shaky, maybe somewhat lightheaded too.

“*Have you eaten anything today?*” Moriyama raised her eyebrows.

He hadn’t, he realized. The original plan had been to pick something up after visiting Mariko, but
by the time Shouta had left for school, he’d run out of time. “I guess I haven’t.”

“Here.” Moriyama reached down to dig her hand into the pocket of her school bag, retrieving a granola bar. “Your blood sugar is probably low.” She looked vaguely concerned. “Please make sure to take care of yourself.”

Shouta was struck by the unexpected gesture. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had expressed concern over his well-being. It became more evident every day how grossly he’d misjudged Moriyama on that first day, thinking that she would be a problem student. Instead, she was clever, and tenacious, and caring. Long after he’d left the room, and her offering had been eaten, he continued to think on it. Maybe he was overblowing all of this, so starved for attention, but something about this made Shouta’s chest feel tight.

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The day had been long, but it was over now. Shouta needed to figure out something to eat before heading out on his nighttime patrol. Normally, he would only eat when he felt hungry, but he knew that Moriyama was right- he needed to take better care of himself. Before, he’d had Mariko there to make sure his needs were taken care of, but now he was completely responsible for himself, and he still wasn’t used to it. Shouta organized the papers he had been marking, and put them aside to hand back the next day. His back popped in several places as he stood and stretched. Fuck, I must be getting old. The school was eerily empty as he headed down the hall- seemingly everyone else had already headed home for the evening. One lone figure remained in the school yard, dressed in workout clothes and seated in the grass, a variety of differently-sized objects placed in front of them.

An errant breeze caught Moriyama’s long, silver-blue hair, playing with it before dropping it back in place. Her eyes glowed lavender as she focused all of her mental ability on the items in front of her, brow furrowed in intense concentration. Normally, she stayed late to make use of the school’s gym equipment, but she seemed to be working on something else today. Shouta could only surmise that she was trying to use her telekinesis. Months had passed since Moriyama discovered the ability, but she’d only used it infrequently since then, and only as a last resort. He had to believe that she hadn’t yet mastered it yet, which was understandable. Moriyama appeared to be a little less understanding. The expression on her face suggested frustration, and she made an aggravated sound when she failed to move the items. “Oh! Come on!” she exclaimed, throwing her hands up in irritation. “You’ve gotta be freakin’ kidding me!”

She turned to face Shouta, having sensed his presence, observing the look of surprise on his face. “Hey, I didn’t say ‘fuck,’ okay?”

“You just did.”
Moriyama shrugged, unbothered. “I’m working on my telepathy, but you probably figured that out already.”

Shouta sat down in the grass next to her. “How is it going?”

“I’m getting exactly nowhere.” Moriyama ran her hands through her hair, sighing in frustration.

“What problems are you having?”

She screwed up her face, trying to find the best way to explain her dilemma. “Right now, it seems like I can only use it when I’m feeling some kind of strong emotion. Like in that one exercise we did in training, when that wall almost fell on me, and I was able to stop it? I think it was because I was afraid. And the first time I used it, I was so-”

“Frustrated.”

“I was gonna say ‘pissed off,’ but yeah.”

“Hmm…” There was something to her theory, Shouta thought. “If it’s that connected to emotion, at least right now, then you need a way to trigger your emotions on command.”

“You have something in mind?”

“Is there any type of music that makes you feel things?” If certain songs could elicit powerful enough feelings in Moriyama, then she could use wireless headphones while in the field.

“Yeah, hold on…” She reached into her bag, retrieving her phone. “I have some music on this.”

“I’ll be right back.” Shouta ran back inside to borrow a pair of headphones from one of the computer labs, returning to find Moriyama searching through her phone for a song that might work for her. “Got one?”
“I think so.”

“Here.” He reached out to gently place the headphones over her ears, surprised as she maintained eye contact even as he got closer to her. Shouta had never noticed before how pretty Moriyama’s lilac eyes were, big and clear. He pulled back quickly, grimacing inwardly and hoping that she hadn’t seen that thought. “Now try again.”

Moriyama started the music, staring at the objects again. A few pens lifted slightly, while the notebook vibrated, but her efforts didn’t yield quite the response she was expecting. “It’s not working!” she lamented, looking to Shouta for guidance.

He went to stand in front of her, placing his hands on her shoulders as he stared into her eyes. “Relax, and keep trying. Focus. You can do this.”

She sighed, releasing the tension in her shoulders, and returned her gaze to her possessions laying in the grass. A more serene expression crossed her visage, and the color in her eyes began to fade. Her hair began to float first, encircling her head like a steely halo, and Shouta’s did the same, hovering gently instead of standing on end as it did when he used his own quirk. The scattered school supplies lifted from their resting places, dancing in the air effortlessly. Easily, as if she’d been doing it all her life, Moriyama returned the objects to her bag, each item falling into its own designated place. *She has more control over this than she realizes.* “Try something a little heavier.” She would never improve if she only ever practiced with small, light things. Moriyama turned the stare forward, gritting her teeth as she extended her ability to its limit. Shouta felt his feet leave the ground, and he placed his hands back on her shoulders to steady himself, not expecting to be used for mental deadlifting. Though she only moved him a few inches, he still stumbled when she dropped him back down, panting and clutching at the sides of her head.

“When I said something heavier, I meant a rock, or a textbook.”

Moriyama shrugged. “I wanted to see if I could lift a person.”

“That was...kind of amazing.” Shouta normally hesitated to dole out praise too generously, but for Moriyama to be able to use her new ability so effectively, to be able to lift a grown man off the ground using only her mind; he could only imagine the full extent of her power once she developed it further. He reached out to ruffle her hair, as he’d become accustomed to doing somewhere along the way. “I’m so- Moriyama, your nose!” The student pressed her fingertips to her face, eyes widening at the blood that stained them bright red.

“Shit...” She reached into her pocket for a packet of tissues, but otherwise didn’t seem shocked by

“Moriyama… Your ability is impressive, but you need to be careful with it, if this is what it does to you. Shouta stared at her wide-eyed, hoping that she understood the severity of the situation. “Please be careful.”

She cast her gaze to the side, color dusting her cheeks, probably embarrassed by the attention. “Don’t worry about me too much, sensei. I’ll be careful.

“Good girl.”

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The first term ended, and UA’s student body hurried off to whatever adventures awaited them over the break- training, extra studies, or part-time work. Only a few students from the general studies course would spend their break lazing about. Shouta, on the other hand, would receive a well-deserved break from pulling double-duty. He would have to put together some lesson plans once the beginning of the next term approached, but mostly, he could rest. Increasingly, he found himself thinking about Moriyama, wondering how her summer work was going, or just thinking about the sort of person that she was. He would be grocery shopping, and find himself wondering what sort of foods she liked. He could be passing through a department store, see an item, and think to himself “Moriyama would love that.” As the fall term drew nearer, Shouta found himself anticipating the return to school, wanting to see her again. His chest felt tight whenever he thought about her. In some ways it was a nice feeling, but the implications fouled the sensation.

Day after day Shouta struggled to convince himself that his interest in Moriyama was purely as her teacher, or the result of some kind of kinship between two people with non-physical quirks. He knew, deep down, that that wasn’t the truth, but he didn’t want to even think that he might have special feelings for his student. “But she’s already eighteen,” an ugly voice in the back of his head would say, “Her birthday was in April.” Shouta always forced the idea away. Even if Moriyama was an adult, she was still immature, and still his student. Any feelings he ABSOLUTELY DID NOT HAVE would still be entirely inappropriate. Less than a week before school started again, Shouta dreamed of her in his kitchen, putting on a pot of water for tea, laughing softly at something he had said, fidgeting with a piece of her hair as she so often did. Moriyama took his hand in her own, and stood up on her toes to kiss him gently. Shouta woke up with his arm wrapped protectively around his pillow, his first emotion of the day being disappointment that she wasn’t lying there beside him.

He was immediately violently sick, his own body actively rejecting the disgusting feelings deep inside. It was wrong, just... wrong. Shouta wanted to believe that maybe this was just another part of his grieving process, that he was just so starved for attention that he had latched on to the first
girl to offer it to him. That theory gave him some small comfort, but he still didn’t like where this was going. Thinking about Moriyama felt nice, but the fact that it felt nice felt awful. It made Shouta feel like he was some sort of predator, even though he had absolutely zero intention of ever acting on his attraction. If only he could get through this next term, Moriyama would graduate, and then he could move on. He wouldn’t have to worry about this anymore. Still, he worried about how he would feel when he went back to school, when he saw her again.

He would have to be even more diligent with his erasure. She didn’t need to know about this, she shouldn’t know about this. She needed to be able to trust her teacher, and this situation would only make her uncomfortable. Moriyama would be disgusted if she knew. Shouta worried about the possibility of his emotions becoming stronger, and deeper. He would never think of her in that context, and he hoped that he would never be tempted to. He didn’t know if he could live with himself with he did. Right now, his feelings were as innocent as they possibly could be. God save him if he ever actually fantasized about sleeping with her. Shouta prayed to whoever was listening that things would never get that out of hand, that he could just get her through to graduation with her trust in him intact, with their relationship unharmed.

God...I’m going to hell, aren’t I?
“It doesn’t work like that!” Moriyama argued, half-laughing. “Recovery isn’t a strictly linear thing!”

“But I know that it gets easier over time!” Shouta fired back.

“Yes, it does get easier, overall, but it’s very common to find yourself backtracking sometimes, dealing with things that didn’t get resolved the first time around,” she explained. “Sometimes you find yourself relapsing into old behaviors, especially when you’ve had another traumatic experience.”

Shouta gave her a quizzical look. “What do you mean by ‘old behaviors?’”

“I mean…things that you did before in order to cope, that weren’t necessarily healthy, but that got you through another day.”

Like the feelings I had for you back then. Shouta had managed to get over all of that long ago, but Moriyama’s suggestion that he might fall back into old patterns worried him. He tried changing the subject. “What about things that were healthy?”

“Like what?”

“Well…” Shouta shifted uncomfortably, still not quite used to sharing his feelings. “I think that this teaching job helped me. It gave me something constructive to do, other people to care about. I was able to use my time purposefully rather than just sitting around and feeling bad.”

“Finding other activities can be helpful, as long as they don’t become a complete distraction from the trauma; it shouldn’t be a way for you to ignore the problem. You still have to give yourself time to process it.”

“Trust me,” he grimaced. “I still had time.”

“It’s funny,” Moriyama said suddenly. “If I hadn’t known, you know, I don’t think I would have
ever suspected that you were dealing with all of that.”

“Really?” Shouta asked, surprised. “How so?”

“You just…” she stopped for a minute, biting her lip and thinking. “You were always relatively easy-going, so even-tempered.”

“You were always a little shit.”

“I was a little shit.”

“An ambitious little shit. Loud, driven…” Shouta stopped himself before he said too much.

Moriyama smiled softly. “There was nothing in the world I wanted more than to be a hero.”

Shouta remembered. He remembered Moriyama’s constant battle to place first in her class. He remembered the long hours she spent after school putting in extra work. He remembered how she fought tooth and nail to master her telekinesis. He’d never seen a student so driven to succeed. Of course, she was one of his very first, but at the same time, he didn’t find anyone matching her vigor for a long time after. She was stubborn, the kind of person who didn’t let anything get in the way of her goals, and yet here she was, only doing hero work part-time, earning a living in a support role. It just didn’t match up to her past ambitions. What are you not telling me, Moriyama?

Moriyama had originally told him that she left full-time hero work because she found clinical psychology more fulfilling, but Shouta couldn’t quite believe that that was the whole truth. For someone to be so determined, and so excited about something, and then just suddenly drop it just as she was on the way to becoming one of the most popular heroes… It just didn’t add up. Shouta could think of several explanations, but he couldn’t be quite sure why Moriyama had made the decisions that she did. He could remember her struggle to adjust to her sudden popularity, how surprisingly uncomfortable she felt in the spotlight. It had seemed like she was able to adjust, eventually, but maybe it had become too much to handle in the end. Maybe she was like him after all, more at home lurking in the shadows.

“What really happened, Moriyama?”

She looked up from her notepad suddenly. “Huh? What are you talking about?”
“Why did you leave mainstream hero work, really?” Shouta gave her that look, the one that told her that she shouldn’t even bother with half-truths and excuses.

“I told you, I found therapy to be a better position for me.” She looked away, knowing that he knew that this wasn’t the full story.

Shouta sighed. “That’s not the whole truth, now is it?”

Moriyama was quiet for a moment before letting out a sigh of her own. “No. It isn’t.”

“What did happen?” Shouta asked her, swallowing hard and bracing himself for what might turn out to be an unpleasant reality. He probably shouldn’t be asking about this kind of thing right now, seeing as this was his therapy session, and not Moriyama’s, but at least this was an opportunity to ask in the privacy of her office.

She took a deep breath before starting. “My whole life...I’ve always known what everyone around me was thinking. I always knew too much. Even when I was very young...I got one of my classmates’ parents arrested because he was beating on my classmate when he drank, and I told my teacher. I found out way too young that there is so much evil in this world. For me, a child, to be seeing the ugliness in some people’s hearts…” Moriyama paused, shaking her head and letting out a heavy sigh. “It was why I decided to become a hero in the first place. I couldn’t just go on knowing all of these things and not do anything about it!

“I thought that I had a pretty firm grasp on the reality of the world, but it only got worse as I got older. I was probably eleven or twelve the first time I saw some of that depravity directed at me.”

Shouta felt nauseous suddenly, knowing exactly what Moriyama meant. Around that age, she would have started to show signs of maturity. He could only imagine what sort of vile things floated around in the heads of perverts.

“For the first time, I was terribly aware that I was being looked at. The first time it happened, I was sick for the rest of the day. I just couldn’t get those thoughts out of my head. And it just kept happening. In fact, it became more and more frequent as time went by.” Moriyama laughed bitterly. “The sick thing is, I got used to it, to a point where it was just background noise after a while. Isn’t that fucked up?”
“What’s fucked up is that you ever had to deal with that in the first place.” Shouta already knew that Moriyama had dealt with this sort of unintentional harassment in the past. He’d watched her struggle with it in the period following her debut, but he didn’t ever consider how long she’d been dealing with it, that it was simply a part of her everyday life, going along fully aware of the lewd thoughts of complete strangers. Shouta found it rather incredible that she was able to trust men at all, even though the ones she seemed to trust would never think of others in a demeaning fashion. She’d be appalled if she knew some of the things he himself had thought in the past. Of course, he’d been very careful to never think of her sexually when she was younger, but the mere fact of his romantic attraction was enough to disturb her, he thought. Now, his feelings had long gone, but Shouta did have at least a passing awareness of her full maturity now. Though he had no desire to be with her, he would have to be blind not to notice the smooth skin of her legs, the way her skirt rode up when she crossed her legs, the gentle sway of her hips as she walked… Fuck, he wasn’t supposed to be noticing those things! *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

He tried to quiet his thoughts as she continued. “Everything was always just so loud. You know this. You know what kinds of things I tried just to get a little bit of peace and quiet. The only time things ever went fully silent was when I was in your class. I didn’t fully appreciate it at the time— I was so pissed off about not being able to use my quirk, but once I didn’t have that escape anymore, I missed it.”

*Did you miss me too, Moriyama? “What about now? Are things quiet now?”*

Moriyama gave him the faintest hint of a smile. “Yes.” There was a quiet desperation in her eyes, the suggestion that he was a comfort to her. Maybe he always had been. They stared at one another wordlessly for a few uninterrupted moments. Shouta couldn’t help noticing the slightest bit sad. There was pain lurking underneath the clean, shiny surface, but she normally hid it well. Now, he could see the crack in her tough, polished exterior, a vulnerability that maybe only he understood.

She covered it quickly, snapping back into her monologue as if they hadn’t just shared that intimate moment of honesty. “Then I finally debuted. I was so excited, remember? It was the best day of my life, I thought. But it was only the beginning of a very difficult, uncomfortable period of my life. I wasn’t at all prepared for the publicity. That fight was televised, and I had no idea that it would go so viral!” Moriyama grimaced at herself. “I was so naive. Of course it would go viral, considering what happened. People are disgusting, and that should have been my first clue. I actually thought that they were impressed with my combat skills.” She shook her head sadly, embarrassed by her own naivety. Shouta remembered the event well. He’d been so angry with the level of exposure suddenly placed on this young woman, the shamelessness with which they invaded her privacy.

“I was so stupid to not realize that being a female hero also means being a…” She didn’t need to finish the sentence; both she and Shouta knew what she meant. *A sex symbol.* “Suddenly all these commentators were talking about me, and they wouldn’t talk about my fights at all— they only focused on how I looked. There were entire internet forums devoted to my…” Moriyama turned
red, too mortified to say it aloud. To speculation regarding her anatomy, what she would look like
naked, whether or not she was a virgin. Shouta had made the mistake of searching “third eye hero”
online in pursuit of serious articles, but had found that sort of vulgarity instead. “Before, most of
those disgusting thoughts stayed inside men’s heads, but now, they felt bold enough to voice them.
They knew that I could read their minds anyway, so they figured they might as well say it, I guess.
And then there was the weird merchandise- I didn’t sign off on any of that, by the way!”

“Of course not.” What hero would sign off on anatomically-correct figurines and waifu body
pillows? Well, Midnight had, but she was a little more confident about that kind of thing, the
desires of men rolling off her back like water off a duck. Moriyama was much more shy in
comparison, preferring to keep that kind of thing private.

Many female heroes wound up playing into that kind of thing in order to gain popularity, whether
they liked it or not. They often just accepted it as being “part of the job,” as unfair as it was.
Because of her unfortunate ability to know the nitty-gritty of every random fan’s dirty fantasy,
Moriyama had had a hard time accepting it. Because she was young, and cute, and behaved in a
way that could be construed as “innocent,” she attracted a very certain kind of deviant. Some of the
fantasies described online were downright disgusting. Shouta hoped that she hadn’t read any of the
forums discussing her. It was already too much that she had to be privy to the indecent thoughts of
the public. Even on the rare occasion that she appeared on a talk show, they would ask her personal
questions like what her measurements were, whether she had a boyfriend, even her favorite sexual
position. When asked, Moriyama had blushed and declined to answer, leading the interviewer to
speculate that “Whoa! She is as innocent as she appears!”

Moriyama ran a hand through her hair, staring off into space, eyes holding a tiredness that Shouta
could empathize with all too well. “I thought it might help if I changed my appearance some. My
original suit was so cutesy, with the shorts, and the long stockings...it fed the fantasy too much.
And it was so badly damaged during my debut battle anyway that it had to be replaced…”

“That’s when you switched to the black one, right?” The second iteration of Third Eye’s hero suit
had been a looser-fitting black jumpsuit, with long pants instead of shorts, and more of a unisex
kind of fit that concealed her feminine figure. At the same time, Moriyama had cropped her hair
into a chin-length bob, opting for something a little more androgynous.

“Yeah. I thought that if I downplayed my femininity, my sexuality, then it would force people to
focus on my skills, instead of my looks.”

“It didn’t work, did it?”

Moriyama sighed heavily. “No. It didn’t. It was the same as always, just with more discussion of
‘oh my god, she has such a nice body, why would she cover it up?’ Everyone completely missed
the point. I even tried to adopt a more serious persona, kind of a ‘take no shit’ attitude, but everyone just said that I was being bitchy. Maybe I was. I don’t know; I was so angry all the time.”

“Being serious and standing up for yourself doesn’t make you bitchy,” Shouta reassured her. He bristled, angry at the thought that the public could have the nerve to criticize her for not taking its shit. “You shouldn’t have to just put up with that kind of thing so that people will like you, or think that you’re nice. Popularity shouldn’t mean sacrificing your dignity.”

“I know, I know… I just got tired, I guess. Tired of being looked at, tired of being talked about… At the same time, I didn’t want to give up hero work, because I knew that I was helping people. I had a real martyr complex for a while, always thinking about what I was ‘sacrificing’ in order to do the right thing. I thought it would be selfish to stop my work just because of how I, one single person, was being treated.”

“It’s not selfish.”

“No, it’s not selfish to prioritize your mental health. Not at all, but I didn’t realize that at the time. I was in a really bad place, and I didn’t know how to help myself.” Moriyama took off her reading glasses to rub her eyes, and for the first time, Shouta could see the fine lines starting to form beneath them. She had gotten older. She was still young, and still looked her age, but the stress from her former job had taken its toll on her.

“When did you figure out that you could do this?” he asked, referring to her therapy work.

“The whole time I was working as a hero, I was taking college courses in psychology. It was absolutely fascinating to me, and I realized that I could make a career out of it, helping heroes help others.” For the first time since she’d begun spinning her tale, Moriyama actually looked happy to remember. “And I remembered how you made it work, still doing hero stuff, just out of the spotlight.”

_You still thought of me then?_

“It’s been a suitable compromise. I know that it’s not what you ever intended for me,” Moriyama laughed, “but I’m much happier now.”

“If you’re happy, then that’s all that matters. It doesn’t matter what you were trained to do. You’ve found a way to make a difference that works for you. I’m proud of you.”
Moriyama grumbled, waving him off and telling him that he was just being a sentimental old man, but he could tell that she was touched by his words. “Anyway, we should probably get back to talking about you.”

Later, when they’d finished their meeting, Shouta made his way toward the door, noticing that Moriyama looked just a little bit more tired than normal. Of course, they’d brought up a lot of difficult subject matter from her history, and Shouta knew as well as anyone how exhausting that could be. Moriyama had told him that she was doing better, and he hoped that she’d been telling him the whole truth. He bit his tongue as a question formed in his mind, but tried to keep it to himself. Of course, she could tell by his brooding expression that something was still bothering him. “What’s on your mind, sensei?” she asked him as she followed him toward the door.

“Moriyama...when was the last time you had a drink?”
Introducing: Psychic Hero, Third Eye!

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Six Years Ago

Tsukiko swept her gaze from left to right, her consciousness focused on anything that might be happening in the nearby area. She trailed closely behind Freeze Frame, her mentor at the hero agency, ready to help out in any way she could, though she knew the professional hero to be more than capable in combat, her quirk allowing her to temporarily “freeze,” or stop the movements of an opponent long enough to take them into custody. However, like Tsukiko, and Aizawa-sensei, she had to have the other person in her line of sight in order to incapacitate them. Today had been relatively quiet in terms of crime activity- only a purse snatcher and a drunk-and-disorderly to worry about. Tsukiko had a strange feeling things were going to start to pick up soon, though she couldn’t yet discern what was to happen. She couldn’t pick up any specific details, only the heavy sense of foreboding that seemed to permeate the city air, utterly undetectable to everyone else around them.

She stopped suddenly, aware of a malicious presence. Freeze Frame turned back to look at her. “What is it? Are you getting something?”

“A little bit.” Narrowing her eyes and honing her focus, Tsukiko tracked the movement down a nearby alleyway, heading straight for the main road where they were patrolling. The presence exited the alley, but she couldn’t see them anywhere. Tsukiko swept her vision back and forth, desperately searching for the individual in question. “I can’t find.”
Suddenly the concrete sidewalk behind Freeze Frame cracked and burst open, a quirk user with gigantic hands launching through the rubble, long, sharp claws protruding from his nail beds “Behind you!”

Freeze Frame whirled around, hoping to catch the villain in her gaze long enough to stop him in his tracks, but he dug one hand into the rubble, flinging up a cloud of dust into her face. She coughed and rubbed at her stinging eyes, desperate to regain her vision.

As soon as she was able to see again, she tilted her head up, but it was too late. The villain knocked her aside easily with one swing of a hand, hurling her into the nearest wall. Freeze Frame struggled to pull herself back into a standing position, but she trembled at the knees, the impact having taken a toll on her physical form. She moved to run forward, but her opponent struck again, hitting her in the legs just above the ankles. There was a sickening crack, and Tsukiko looked over to see her mentor slumped on the ground, a shattered piece of bone protruding from her mangled leg. Freeze Frame howled in pain, a chilling sort of scream from deep within, until the shock finally hit her, and she passed out from the agony. Several civilians ran over to check on her as the villain turned his attention toward Tsukiko, the short fight having taken seemingly no energy out of him. A young sidekick would be an easy defeat for him, having taken the heavy-hitter out of the picture.

In a situation like this, Freeze Frame probably would have told Tsukiko to run away, and let a more experienced hero handle things instead of putting herself in danger. Unfortunately, she didn’t exactly have that option. The mole-villain had set his sights on her, and whereever Tsukiko tried to run, he would most likely follow. That was fine. She didn’t want to flee anyway. She was a hero, after all! She had a responsibility to protect all of the other people here at the scene. Her mentor might not want her to take on this fight, but she couldn’t exactly tell Tsukiko “no” while she was passed out. It was always easier to ask for forgiveness than for permission, anyway. Before her enemy could kick up another cloud of dust, she pulled her goggles down over her eyes to protect them, locking on to her target to find his weaknesses. He couldn’t see very well, but his nose was sensitive, which was both a strength and a point of vulnerability. He could track her by scent alone, but taking an attack straight to the snout would leave him in severe pain that returned every time he tried to use his sense of smell.

Tsukiko launched herself forward, changing direction erratically as she ran. The villain might be able to tell how close she got by her scent, but he would have a difficult time figuring out which direction she was coming from. Furthermore, she could anticipate his every move, giving her the opportunity to dodge any attack. She ducked easily under a swinging arm, whirling around behind to deliver a swift kick to the spine, causing her opponent to stumble. He righted himself, then dove back underground, where he could move much more quickly. Though the enemy was correct in assessing that removing himself from her field of vision would put her at a disadvantage, she could still track his position when she was this locked-in on her target. Watching where the ground would begin to crack, she could correctly assess where he would spring forth, giving her the opportunity to strike first. Fault lines began to form just behind her, and Tsukiko tucked and rolled just in time to avoid the criminal’s razor-sharp claws.
He still managed to catch the fabric of her suit, however, tearing through it like tissue paper, leaving a gaping hole across the back from her right shoulder to her left hip. *Shit.* Tsukiko would have to be careful of that area now, lest her flesh be the next thing he cut. She turned back around, focusing her telepathy once again. He planned to simply rush her, hoping that his sturdy form would be sufficient to knock her down. Tsukiko weaved to the side effortlessly, snatching a discarded scrap of rebar and whipping it hard against the back of his knees, and then his head. He fell to his knees, but steadied himself with his hands, not having the opportunity to defend himself against the sharp punch to his large and sensitive nose. *Crunch.* The villain howled, wiping away the blood that poured from it, dulling his ability to smell. With one swift movement he grabbed Tsukiko by the belt of her suit, hurling her away from him. She gasped for air as the impact of being thrown onto the concrete knocked the breath from her lungs, wincing in pain at the spot on her hip where his claws had dug through her clothing and into the top layer of her skin. It was only a minor injury, but it still hurt like a son of a bitch.

Tsukiko held the scrap of rebar firmly in her hands, using it like a makeshift sword to block each attack from her opponent’s massive claws. She could do this all day, and try to tire him out, but she quickly realized that doing so would result in her own exhaustion as well. Tsukiko needed to find a way to strike from above- the head was almost always a weak point, and this fellow was no exception. There was a fire escape close by, and she’d been training herself in parkour...if she moved quickly enough, she could get the drop on him, maybe hit him in the nose again, or even knock him unconscious. The mole-man swung at her again, but this time, she ducked instead, and hit him with the rebar on one knee. While he was distracted by the pain, Tsukiko made her move, scrambling for the fire escape. She moved quickly, but he was just as fast, grabbing her by the back of her suit and hurling her across the plaza once again, almost bowling over Miss Namikawa. His razor nails had ripped the top part of her jumpsuit completely in half, one scrap clutched in his paw of a hand and the rest hanging limply from her shoulder, the lavender fabric gradually stained red from the long claw marks across her back. Undeterred, Tsukiko firmly grasped what was left, and tore it away from the bottom half of her suit, held up by its matching belt, knowing that the loose scraps would only serve as a distraction.

“*Our young hero has been injured, but she doesn’t seem to be slowing down- what’s that? I’m now hearing from our news crew that this sidekick is a current hero course student at UA High School. We don’t have a hero name for her yet, but her name is Moriyama Tsukiko.*”
Shouta’s head snapped to the side to look at the television playing in the convenience store where he’d stopped to pick up energy drinks. Sure enough, Moriyama squared off against a large and intimidating villain, already injured, and her suit irreparably damaged, leaving her dressed only in the bottom half of her suit, and a black sport-style bra, exposing the long lacerations extending across her lower back. Shouta winced, knowing that it had to be rather excruciating to continue moving and fighting with that kind of wound. Somehow, Moriyama seemed unbothered, engaging her attacker once again. Shouta grit his teeth. He was in Hosu City today as well, and he wanted nothing more than to help her; this was too dangerous. Despite this inclination, he knew better than to interfere. This was Moriyama’s fight, not his.

He remained glued to the TV anyway, anxious to see how this played out. The main plaza was only a couple of streets over, and he could always run that way in the event that things got too out of hand. Shouta watched in awe as Moriyama dodged yet another strike, weaving under the enemy’s arm to deliver a swift uppercut. Even though she wore gloves, and taped her hands, the blood soaking through was visible on the television. Moriyama was a physical fighter by necessity- she couldn’t rely on super strength or special physical features to help her out. The fight was beginning to take its toll, Shouta could tell. She couldn’t focus as well now, and received a nasty scratch down the side of her hip which also tore through the fabric of her suit again, leaving one leg of it completely useless. Frustrated, she kicked the rest of it off; luckily, she still wore a pair of athletic shorts underneath. The cameraman zoomed in on her backside, and a second commentator joined the party, taking the opportunity to offer his two cents on Moriyama’s physical form. She’s only eighteen! She’s still a high school student! “Do they really have to be so vulgar about it?” Shouta asked the cashier.

“I dunno,” he shrugged. “She is pretty hot. I’d hit it.”

Shouta sneered, tossing a few crumpled bills at him to pay for his purchase, and left the store. He might as well catch the rest of this fight in person.

Tsukiko sighed, wiping sweat from her forehead. She’d begun to get tired now, though her opponent showed no sign of slowing down. A number of professional heroes had arrived at the scene, ready to jump in if needed, though they appeared inclined to let her finish this herself if possible. Tsukiko wondered if she should just let them handle things. She had sustained several nasty injuries, after all. No. This was her fight. This was her chance! She just needed to figure out how to end this as quickly as possible. If only she could use her telekinesis… It was still such an unpredictable thing, though! If she failed to use it properly, she’d only tire herself out, and give the villain the opportunity he needed to seriously injure or even kill her! Still, it might be her only option. She would have to try. She’d invested in a pair of wireless earbuds that she put in every time she went on patrol, and her phone was kept securely in the zippered pocket of the shorts she wore under her hero suit. This would be a hail mary, but it was the best option Tsukiko had.

Creating a little bit of distance between her and her attacker, she dove her hand into her pocket,
starting a playlist she’d created especially for a scenario like this. If anyone knew what she thought about when she listened to this music, the feelings that it inspired in her, she’d be mortified. The sheer realization made Tsukiko blush, but she tried to focus. She knew this song was cheesy, but it made her think of Aizawa-sensei, the kinds of things she wanted to do with him… *Let you put your hands on me in my skin-tight jeans…* She wondered if he was watching the broadcast— if he knew that one of his students was involved in a battle worthy of being televised, he was sure to be interested. *Are you watching me, sensei?* Tsukiko could feel her heart speeding up, and a shiver ran down her spine. Maybe this would work after all...

Tsukiko’s long hair began to lift first, floating eerily around her head as if she were submerged in water. She could feel some sort of powerful energy surging through her body as she powered up her attack, not even noticing how the crowd around her had gone silent in anticipation. With a great and terrible shriek of which she didn’t even know she was capable, Tsukiko threw her enemy backward into a brick wall, leaving a sizeable impact dent for which she sincerely hoped she wouldn’t be financially responsible. The villain shook as he pulled himself back up onto his feet, clearly dizzied from the collision. Tsukiko dragged him back out into the main plaza before hurling him into the middle of the road, sending him tumbling face-first into a lamp pole. He was still conscious, but just barely, and likely concussed; this was Tsukiko’s chance to finish this. One final blow to knock him out, and then he could be taken into custody. She ran toward him, shocked when he managed to continue swiping at her with those dangerous claws.

“Moriyama! Catch!” Tsukiko turned to see Aizawa-sensei breaking through the crowd, removing his capture weapon from around his shoulders and tossing it to her, as she didn’t have any means of her own to immobilize her opponent. She caught one end in her hands and the rest in her telekinetic gaze, throwing the straps around the villain’s wrists, marveling as how relatively-easy it was to maneuver the device, despite its flexibility. Tsukiko bound the free ends of the capture weapon around the light pole, tying them securely. She would have to make sure to give it back to Aizawa-sensei once the criminal was in handcuffs. Hopefully the police had a pair that was large enough. Her work done, Tsukiko released the energy focused on her telekinesis, knees going a little weak as she suddenly realized how much this fight had taken out of her. She leaned against the pole, wiping her nose on the back of her hand to clean up the inevitable bleeding.

A paramedic team met her first, offering her a gurney to sit on as they cleaned and bandaged her wounds, checking her vitals as they went. As soon as they confirmed that she was stable, and going to recover just fine, the news crews descended like a swarm of locusts, asking a million questions at once: what were the specifications of her quirk? how had her training at UA prepared her for this moment? what was her workout routine? All of it made Tsukiko’s head spin, simultaneously tired from her battle and overwhelmed by the sudden attention. She answered as many questions as she could, as best she could. “I’m sorry, this is all happening so suddenly! It’s a lot to process!” she laughed, doing her best to portray herself as a friendly, cute, high school girl, knowing that this would garner more fans than shooing the interviewers away, demanding to be left alone. If she could endure this for a while, she’d be able to rest eventually.

Shouta watched the scene from the place he’d retreated to in the shadows, smiling softly to himself. He never dreamed that he’d get to witness a student’s debut in person, much less Moriyama’s. He
almost couldn’t contain his pride in her; all of her hard work and sacrifice had paid off, and now she was on her way to a successful career as a pro hero. Shouta’s chest felt tight again, affection mingling with the pride. Moriyama’s tenacity was admirable; she hadn’t given up even in the face of serious danger, and now she complied with all of those stupid television crews, even though he could tell that she was tired, especially after using her telekinesis. Shouta wondered if anyone else had noticed the blood she wiped away from her face afterward. At least the paramedics were taking good care of her, though he wished that they would give her something to cover herself now that they’d finished bandaging her injuries. Moriyama was still young, and deserved the privacy. *Or maybe you just don’t want anyone else looking at her, you filthy old pervert.*

“This has been Namikawa Haruko, coming to you live from Hosu City! Young lady, will you please introduce yourself to all of our viewers at home?”

“I’m pleased to meet you! I’m the Psychic Hero- you can call me Third Eye!”
Changes and Crossroads

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Six Years Ago

Tsukiko stared absently out the classroom window, the bare trees in the courtyard reaching toward the sky, their skeletal branches in stark contrast to the backdrop of brilliant blue. She found it oddly-difficult to focus on Aizawa-sensei’s lesson today; normally she was very attentive, even if her motives for paying attention were rather questionable. Tsukiko couldn’t even bring herself to take notes, instead doodling absently in the margins of her notebook. She’d once caught herself scripting “Aizawa Tsukiko” over and over with tiny hearts, and, mortified, she’d abruptly flipped to the next page to hide her shame. She was much more careful now, instead sketching the silhouettes of the late-autumn trees, the changes she wanted to make to the new version of her hero suit, that kind of thing. It was almost December now, which meant another break from school, and then back again for that last stretch. Tsukiko would be graduating before she knew it, and though she’d been dreaming of that day for years, it made her feel a little sick every time she thought about it now. She’d start working full-time, while taking university courses, and she wouldn’t get to see Aizawa-sensei anymore.

She halfway considered confessing her feelings after graduation, but she knew that it was ridiculous to think that he could ever love her in return. After all, he was a grown man, still grieving his late wife, and she was just a silly teenage girl with a silly teenage crush.

Sighing to herself, Tsukiko changed her pattern of thought; the idea of being separated forever was
too depressing to think about anymore. At least she didn’t have to go to work after school today. Tsukiko still enjoyed her work, but she still hadn’t adjusted to all of the attention. She had thought that she was used to the way men looked at her by now, but now they felt as though they had a free pass to hassle her, take pictures of her, ask her personal and inappropriate questions just because she was a semi-public figure. She didn’t like to go out much anymore, preferring the peace and quiet of her own home. Well, relative peace and quiet, anyway, with the ambient noise of her sister’s music passing through the shared wall, or, before her older brother had moved away for work, the sound of him and her younger brother getting into it again because Kaito set up a rig to drop a heavy book on Kenji’s head. Her family was...well, it was something, but it was much more comforting to Tsukiko than the general public. Fortunately, this was the last period of the day, and she’d be able to head home soon.

On her way to school this morning Tsukiko had seen the newest issue of Hero Beat, for which she’d been interviewed. Curious, she’d grabbed a copy, only to be disappointed by how the final article turned out. First, the author spent an unsettling amount of time talking about the shape of her body, boldly asserting that she might should look into breast augmentation if she wanted to become more popular. Who would say that about a teenager?! Who would say that about anyone?! Even worse, the final edition included very few of the more serious questions about her hero work, choosing instead to devote more page space to the gossip-type content; Tsukiko had declined to answer some of the questions, as she felt they were too private, which led the writer to instead speculate about the answer. When asked if she had a boyfriend, she had said no, which led to him asking whether she had a crush on anyone, which she declined to say. The author proposed that, based on her telling blush, she did like someone, and that perhaps it was one of her classmates. You don’t know just how wrong you are...

Tsukiko wanted a drink- not soda, or tea, or water, but a real drink. She’d gotten a taste for chuhai during the last few months, since Rin had managed to get a hold of some to celebrate her friend’s debut. Now, she got Kaito to buy them for her when he was in town, since he was two years older than she and could buy alcohol. He didn’t necessarily like that his younger sister was developing a drinking habit, but he seemed to understand that she was going through a difficult transition period right now. Tsukiko liked the way alcohol made her feel- sort of light and floaty, and weirdly content. It also dulled her senses enough that her telepathy only worked if she used it actively. Drinking allowed her to unplug for a while, providing her with a silence that she’d otherwise only experienced with Aizawa-sensei. She wouldn’t have him there to quiet her mind for much longer, so Tsukiko needed to find a new way to cope with the more inconvenient aspects of her quirk.

Kaito wouldn’t be back in town for the rest of the week, as he’d gone to a conference on combat strategy, but Tsukiko thought that she probably still had a couple of cans left from the six-pack he’d bought her the previous weekend. Unfortunately, she went through them pretty fast. Tsukiko would have a can of chuhai in the morning before leaving for the train station, and she would fill the stainless steel flask she’d “borrowed” from her father’s office with her parents’ whiskey, so that she could have a little nip in the school bathroom before going out in public again. Once she was home, she’d have more of the fizzy canned mixed drink, especially if she was coming home from work, where she’d been in the public eye for hours on end. Deep down, Tsukiko knew that this wasn’t healthy, but right now, it was the only way she knew how to cope.
“Moriyama, are you with us?”

Tsukiko’s whole body went stiff as her mind snapped back to the present moment, and she turned bright red as she looked up at the teacher frowning down at her. “S-Sorry!”

“As I was saying…” Shouta continued his lecture, sneaking the occasional glance over at Moriyama to make sure she wasn’t zoning out again. She’d been distracted for the entire class period, staring out the window, her expression blank. Come to think of it, she hadn’t really been quite herself ever since her debut. It was probably just difficult for her to adjust to her newfound popularity, which was normal, but she didn’t seem quite as excited as Shouta would expect her to be. Something was going on, but Moriyama hid it fairly well. He wanted to ask her what was happening, if everything was okay, but he didn’t want to seem too interested. He would just have to keep an eye on her, make sure that things didn’t get worse. Shouta hoped that she would cheer up soon; it hurt to see her so listless.

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Shouta yanked a few paper towels from the dispenser in the bathroom at the police station, happy to “wash his hands” of this villain, so to speak. He was in custody now, giving Shouta a little bit of time to grab something to eat. He really did make an effort nowadays to take care of himself per Moriyama’s advice. It really wasn’t appropriate for him to take so much delight in doing things that he knew would make her happy, but at least those things were beneficial to his physical health. He’d lost so much weight after Mariko’s death, as he simply didn’t have the appetite, but he looked much healthier now, not quite so rail-thin. Shouta would never in his life characterize his body type as “beefy,” but he knew that his new habits had him looking “healthy” at least, the hills and valleys in his flesh formed by muscle, rather than bone. The time neared eight in the evening, and he actually felt hungry. Shouta didn’t really have the time to go to an actual restaurant for food, but a convenience store sandwich and a piece of fruit would be better than nothing.

The low hum of the fluorescent lights greeted him as he pushed open the door to the convenience shop along with the familiar beeebooo . Shouta got food here more than he liked to admit, but they made decent sandwiches (he wasn’t quite brave enough to try the pre-packaged sushi). The cashier nodded a curt greeting to his regular before looking back at the newspaper in his hands.

“Busy night, Eraserhead?”

“Not too bad. I’ve got time to eat at least,” Shouta answered, choosing a sandwich from the refrigerated unit along with a shiny, unblemished apple.
He turned to head for the refrigerators at the back of the store where the drinks were kept, but the store owner waved him over, lowering his voice. “Listen, a girl came in here a few minutes ago. She’s been actin’ kinda funny, and I think she might be trying to shoplift something—probably alcohol. You mind seeing what she’s up to?”

“I’ll take a look.”

Shouta made his way down one of the aisles, gaze sweeping this way and that in search of this mysterious girl. Finally a flash of silver-blue drew his eye, and he abruptly turned to see Moriyama wandering aimlessly through the back of the shop, as if she couldn’t find what she was looking for. It seemed that the cashier had nothing to worry about—Moriyama was a good kid, though it surprised Shouta to see her out so late in the evening. Perhaps she needed snacks or an energy drink so that she could stay up studying. She didn’t seem to notice her teacher there, glancing over her shoulder as she headed for the alcoholic beverages, staring at the selection and tapping her finger against her lip. No… Checking her surroundings again, she opened the glass door, quickly picking a six-pack of chuhai off the shelf and tucking it inside her winter coat. Moriyama...why? Shouta’s head was spinning. He’d known something was up with her lately, but he never could have anticipated this. What had gone so wrong that she not only had developed an underage drinking habit, but was willing to steal in order to get her fix.

Moriyama attempted to close the cooler door quietly, so as to not attract unwanted attention, but Shouta caught it in one hand, staring down at her in disappointment. She looked up, horrified.

“What are you…”

“Put it back,” Shouta whispered to her. “Put it back, and I won’t tell the store owner what you were doing back here.

With a defiant huff, Moriyama returned the cans to the cooler; he could smell alcohol already on her breath. Clearly frustrated, she turned quickly and hurried out of the store, earning a quizzical look from the cashier.

“What was that about?” he asked as Shouta reached the check-out counter.

“She couldn’t find what she was looking for,” he shrugged in response, cringing inwardly as he realized that Moriyama would probably be angry with him now. Still, he couldn’t just let her shoplift like that. Besides, it ultimately didn’t make any difference whether she liked him or not; it wasn’t like he would, or could ever pursue her romantically.

Back outside, a very annoyed Moriyama waited for him, arms crossed and pouting. It was very
clearly her intent to portray her irritation, but with her bottom lip stuck out like that, she just looked cute, though Shouta would never make the mistake of telling her that. “Why did you stop me?”

“Hmm… Good question. Why would I stop you from stealing, which is a crime?” Shouta raised an eyebrow at her.

Moriyama turned away, exhaling sharply through her nose. “It wasn’t any of your concern.”

“One of my students very nearly got herself into legal trouble, and apparently has a new habit of drinking underage. I think it absolutely is my concern!”

“Why...Why do you care so much?” her voice cracked as she spoke, shoulders starting to shake.

Shouta clenched his jaw, absolutely unable to answer her question. Because I like you, maybe even love you. “Have you been drinking?” The student didn’t answer him, her bottom lip trembling. “Why? Tell me the truth, Moriyama.”

“Because...because...” she clenched her fists at her sides, voice hoarse as she struggled to admit what was happening to her. She looked up at Shouta, her big eyes wide and shining. “It’s the only time things are quiet anymore.”

“How do you mean?” Shouta’s voice softened, not quite as upset with her now.

“I mean... You know how I can read people’s thoughts and feelings without actively using my quirk? If those thoughts are strong enough? Everyone is just so loud now...and the way they look at me...they just never shut up...” Tears streamed freely down her face now, cheeks pink with embarrassment for making such a scene.

The teacher moved closer to her, putting his hand on her shoulder and squeezing gently. “I think I see what you’re saying. Has it gotten worse since your debut?”

“Y-Yes...”

“And drinking helps quiet things because the alcohol dulls your senses, right?”
Moriyama nodded, sniffling.

“Is there anything else that helps?” Shouta already knew the answer, that his erasure definitely prevented her from detecting anything in another person’s head, but some weak part of him wanted to hear her say it.

“N-Not unless you wanna follow me around, erasing my quirk for the rest of my life.” Moriyama laughed a little at the absurd thought. “That’s kind of a stupid idea, isn’t it?”

“It’s not very practical.” Shouta knew that she was joking, but if she’d asked in seriousness, he probably would have agreed in a heartbeat.

Moriyama’s blush deepened. “I’m a mess, aren’t I?” She sniffled, teardrops still dancing on her eyelashes. “I just want things to feel normal again…”

Before he had a chance to act in the interest of his better judgment, Shouta was moving closer and wrapping his arms around her, pulling her against him. She made a sound of surprise, but not of protest, her tiny hands gripping the fabric of his jumpsuit. Moriyama’s shoulders began to shake again as her teacher’s concern overwhelmed her, making her start to cry all over again. Shouta knew that she would probably leave a wet spot on his clothing where she laid her head on his chest, but he didn’t particularly care. He was much more worried that she would hear his racing heartbeat. Underneath the sharp aroma of booze, she smelled like vanilla and lavender. He wanted to lay a gentle kiss on the top of her head, but thought better of it.

Moriyama pulled away finally, rubbing at her eyes as she tried to compose herself. “Ah...I’ve wasted too much of your time. I shouldn’t have made this your problem.”

“It’s not a problem, and you haven’t wasted my time.” Shouta sat down on a nearby bench, motioning for her to sit next to him as he pulled a bottle of water out of the plastic shopping bag, opening it and taking a long drink. “Sit down for a minute. I’m not done with you yet.”

Tsukiko seated herself next to him, folding her hands neatly in her lap. “What is it?” More than anything, she just wanted to go home now; she’d embarrassed herself enough for one evening. Aizawa-sensei probably thought she was a disaster.

He offered her a drink from the water bottle. “Your voice sounds hoarse. You should try to
rehydrate since you’ve been drinking.”

She took the bottle from him, her hand shaking a little. *Isn’t this what they call an “indirect kiss?”* Without another thought, she took a few sips, conscious not to take all of his water.

“Here’s the thing…” he started, not at all phased by the concept of drinking out of the same container. “You want things to be ‘normal’ again, right?” Tsukiko nodded. “Well, the way things were before- it’s never going to be just like that again. There’s been a major shift in the way your life works, and it’s going to forever alter things for you. You can live in a way that’s similar, but it’ll never be exactly the same. This is completely normal, and it happens to everyone. It’s just how the world works. No matter what, nothing can stay the same forever.”

“It’s too bad. I liked how things were going.”

“I know it takes time to adjust to this new sort of ‘normal,’ but it’s the only way any of us grow as people. We don’t always like the way things change, but we don’t exactly get to choose, either. You only get one choice.” Shouta looked at her seriously. “You either learn how to adapt, or you give up. You’re at a crossroads right now, Moriyama. Which are you going to choose?”

Moriyama shook her head. “I don’t want to give up; I just wish that things weren’t so hard.”

Shouta sighed, putting his arm around her to have her lean against him, surprised at how easily she relaxed in response to his touch. “You’re a smart kid. I know you’ll figure things out. You just need to find a healthier way to cope with the tough stuff.”

“I hope so.” She seemed oddly comfortable with the way Shouta held her, but he still wondered if maybe he was being inappropriate, being too physical in his attempt to calm her. The contact just felt so damn good. Not in a sexual way, but in a way that comforted him as much as he hoped it did her. Was he really that touch-starved? In all honesty, he wanted to take Moriyama home with him- not for anything dirty, but rather just to stay like this for as long as possible. Maybe he was just that desperate for human contact after all. *How pathetic.*

Tsukiko prayed that Aizawa-sensei couldn’t hear her heart pounding. All of this was a little too much for her poor slightly-drunk self to handle. She was slightly less inhibited than normal and she had to stop herself from doing something really, really stupid. What Tsukiko *wanted* to do was get a good hold on that capture weapon wrapped around Aizawa-sensei’s shoulders and pull him in a little bit closer for a deep kiss. She *wanted* him to take her home with him, and into his bed. However, she knew better than to try something so inappropriate, so cavalier. Besides, he’d never go for it anyway, so Tsukiko would only embarrass herself. She would have to be content with this,
sitting her and leaning against him for as long as he would let her. Given the opportunity, she’d be perfectly happy to stay like this forever.

White flakes began to slowly tumble down from the heavens, covering everything they kissed in a fine powder. Neither Shouta nor Tsukiko said a word, but a certain stillness enveloped them, both at peace as they stayed frozen in this one perfect moment for as long as decorum would allow.

Chapter End Notes

In case you were wondering, chuhai is a popular alcoholic beverage in Japan which combines shochu (a type of liquor) with carbonated water. The American equivalent would be something like Smirnoff ICE, or Mike's Hard Lemonade. It comes in a variety of fruit flavors.

If you enjoy this absolute dumpster fire of a fic, you can follow my daily shenanigans over on my tumblr (URL is dumpster-owl). I often talk about the more "behind-the-scenes" aspect of fic writing, and indicate anything that’s going on with me that might delay the release of a new chapter. I also post BNHA, Mystic Messenger, Pokemon (esp. SuMo), and neat birds and plants. Big ol' warning for Horny on Main.

Also! I made a playlist on youtube for all of the music embedded throughout this fic: https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLeqk-ZBuKTCBByUBwzkDN7rzWjOSfEJODP
Third Eye vs. Miss Joke!

Chapter Notes

Miss Joke probably ain't deserve the treatment she gets in this, but she's a very convenient catalyst for some upcoming stuff, and I wanted to write a scene where Tsukiko is very much NOT a victim, after like three chapters of "oh woe is me." Writing her as a huge asshole was so much fun.

ふくかど-さん, ごめんなさい!

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“Moriyama?” Aizawa-sensei rapped his knuckles lightly against the open door, a thick stack of papers clutched in his other hand.

Tsukiko turned to face him, moving her attention away from the reports on her computer and toward the teacher who had come to see her. “Hey. Are those the evaluations from your homeroom?” She had recently prepared a questionnaire to be completed by all students, which was meant to measure their emotional well-being as it pertained to the school, and to their education. “I hope it wasn’t too much trouble to have your students complete them.”

“It wasn’t, for the most part, and most of them took it seriously.” Aizawa-sensei placed the papers in an empty spot on Tsukiko’s desk, one of the sheets bearing unmistakable burn marks. “I did have one student who insisted that he didn’t need to worry about that kind of thing because it was silly.”
They looked at each other, both speaking the same name at once. “Bakugou.”

Aizawa-sensei grinned, amused by the understanding. “I’m going to lunch now. I’ll see you later.”

Tsukiko glanced at the clock on her desktop. *Is it that time already?* She grabbed her handbag and stood up abruptly. “Hold on, I’ll walk with you.” She joined him, locking her office door before starting down the hallway, walking briskly in hopes of beating the long cafeteria line. “Are you planning on attending the guest lecture this afternoon? Pro Hero Miss Joke is going to be giving a presentation for the students.”

“Oh… Is that today?” Aizawa-sensei suddenly looked annoyed, pinching the bridge of his nose between his fingers. It seemed as though this event would be inconvenient to him. Perhaps he had initially planned to attend the lecture, but had accidentally double-booked.

“Yeah…is everything alright?”

“I’m fine. I just-”

“Shouta-sama!~” A high-pitched voice rang out through the corridor.

*Shouta... -Sama?* Tsukiko turned first to look at Aizawa-sensei, who looked like he would literally rather be getting a root canal than be here right now, then to the woman bouncing up behind them, her long hair held back by an expertly-tied bandana. *Miss Joke!* The affectionate honorific, the recognition in Miss Joke’s eyes… *Sensei...do you have history with this woman?* She threw her arms out, intent on embracing the object of her attention, but was rejected as Aizawa-sensei simply stepped out of the way, causing her to stumble. So it was a one-sided sort of thing… Though, if they had actually been dating, it would have come up in one of his sessions, Tsukiko supposed. “Umm…” She started to speak, intending to introduce herself, but the other woman whipped her head around, eyes shooting daggers as she kept inching closer to the clearly disinterested Aizawa-sensei.

“Moriyama, this is Miss Fukukado Emi. ‘Miss Joke’ is her hero alias. We used to have offices next to each other, before I became a teacher at UA, so we worked together sometimes,” he explained as he refocused his erasure on his former colleague, lest she try some of her usual bullshit, ready to have this interaction over with as soon as possible.

Miss Joke wagged her finger playfully. “And we were lovers too, remember?”
“That’s a lie.” Tsukiko’s mouth curled upward into a mocking grin.

“And how would you know? Were you there? This doesn’t concern you, anyway.”

“Don’t ever try and fool a telepath.” She shrugged.

Shouta tried to hide his amusement. Fukukado was clearly baffled by Moriyama’s ability, and upset by how deep Moriyama had already managed to get in her head. “This is Miss Moriyama Tsukiko. She used to be a popular pro under the name ‘Third Eye.’ Now, she’s our guidance counselor.”

“Couldn’t hack it in the big leagues, huh?” Miss Joke looked smug.

“Fukukado…” Shouta’s voice carried a warning tone. He didn’t like her attitude toward Moriyama, though he figured he shouldn’t be surprised. Moriyama was young, and pretty, and they had a visibly-friendly relationship. “Anyway, we should be going. We were hoping to beat everyone else to the front of the lunch line. I would invite you to come along, but Lunch Rush only serves students and staff, sorry.” He turned to leave, planning to spend as much of today as he could hiding out in the teachers’ offices. Shouta did feel bad for Moriyama, however. She’d seemed interested in Miss Joke’s lecture, but first impressions were important, and this one had been bad. Then again, his and Moriyama’s first impressions had been antagonistic as well… Maybe those two would get past their differences and become friends in the end…but probably not.

Tsukiko went to follow Aizawa-sensei to the cafeteria, but Miss Joke grabbed her by the arm, surprised by the firm muscles she felt underneath Tsukiko’s blouse. “Are you fucking him?”

Tsukiko blinked, convinced that she had misheard. “Am I what?!”


“NO! Don’t be ridiculous!” She jerked her arm away, smoothing the fabric of her top. “I used to be his student, if that makes you feel any better.”

“Not really, considering you’re still all up on his dick.”
Tsukiko flushed red. “Please don’t talk about his dick.”

“So you want to fuck him, but-”

“Jesus Christ…”

“You wanna fucking go, bitch?” Miss Joke had clearly progressed past all logic and reason. “Or are you gonna fucking puss out on this, too?”

Tsukiko bristled, a devilish thought cropping up in her brain. “You know, I do still work part-time as a pro hero. I just don’t need attention and validation from others, so I tend to stay out of the spotlight. I guess that makes me more similar to Shouta than you. No wonder he likes me better!” She pulled the grossest, most shit-eating grin she could muster, watching Miss Joke astral project back and forth through the five stages of grief.

Finally she composed herself, clenching her fists. “Oh, it is on, bitch. You and me, right here in the courtyard. Five o’clock, Four Eyes.”

Tsukiko narrowed her eyes, baring her teeth in a fierce grin. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

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Despite the relatively-private setting of the previous conversation between Tsukiko and Miss Joke, UA’s entire student body had managed to find out about it, and they arrived en masse at 4:55 pm on the dot, excited as if they were about to watch the MMA brawl of the decade. Some of them had even chosen sides already. Class 1A placed itself firmly in Tsukiko’s corner, considering that several of its students already viewed her favorably. Most of 1B was undecided, with a few members more inclined toward Miss Joke either out of hatred for 1A, or for Tsukiko herself for the class roster changes she’d made since her arrival. Midoriya’s classmates swarmed around him, curious about the notes he’d made about each contender in his notebooks.

“Third Eye’s power comes from her highly-advanced neural network, and thus, her enhanced cognitive abilities. However, Miss Joke’s ability to force a person to laugh interrupts some brain function. Then again, Third Eye may have enough neural capacity to think and attack while somewhat distracted. It all depends on how much brain power the laughter uses up. If Third Eye…” Midoriya went on and on, speculating about statistics and strategy as his friends tried to
“Miss Joke is already waiting, but Miss Moriyama hasn’t shown up yet,” a familiar voice mused from closer to the ground.

The students looked down in shock. “Principal Nedzu?!”

“Have I missed anything?” Midnight?!

“I had some work to finish, but I came as quickly as I could.” Present Mic?!

“It’s getting late, Four Eyes! Are we doing this or not?!” Miss Joke demanded, looking around for any sign of her opponent.

“I’m here, don’t get your panties in a knot.” The other woman emerged from the shadows, having changed into a purplish-gray jumpsuit and goggles, her knuckles expertly taped and protected by black fingerless gloves- the third iteration of her hero suit. “Looks like the whole school came out to watch you get your ass beat.” The two women positioned themselves on opposite sides of the courtyard, squaring their shoulders and preparing to beat one another halfway to next week. Square up, thot.

Miss Joke attacked first, sending Tsukiko into peals of laughter. Shit, this isn’t good. The forced giggling acted as a distraction, giving the other woman an opening to strike. Damn it! Focus! Tsukiko managed to control her mental processes long enough to stand up straight from her present doubled-over position, moving aside and throwing out an arm to clothesline Miss Joke, knocking her to the ground and breaking her concentration long enough to end the laughter. This is my chance. Tsukiko trained her telepathy on the other woman, digging for weaknesses, embarrassing secrets that she could use to throw her off her game. Though, a 28-year-old woman with googley eyes for one specific man wasn’t exactly difficult prey. Tsukiko’s lips curled into a cruel grin. This would be fun. “I can’t say I don’t understand what you’re going through. Of course, I can’t empathize, since I’m so much younger than you, but you have my sympathy.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Miss Joke growled as she dragged herself back to her feet, brushing the dust off her clothes.

“What I’m saying, is- it’s difficult to find a husband after a certain age, isn’t it? And the one you want most doesn’t want anything to do with you? How will you ever find someone else who
measures up before your looks start to go? And once they start to go, they go fast, don’t they? What’s more, you’ve got, what? Maybe ten more years left on your biological clock? Tick-tock, bitch.”

“Wh-Who says Shouta doesn’t want anything to do with me?”

“Look, just because he-” Tsukiko froze, eyes going wide as she found out an unpleasant truth she very much didn’t like. Just because he slept with you once.

Miss Joke sneered at her sudden bewilderment, thrilled that Tsukiko’s telepathy had backfired on her. “Oh, that has to sting, doesn’t it? I guess he just prefers grown women to little girls. Don’t misunderstand your place here.”

Tsukiko quickly composed herself, not wanting to show too much weakness. “Well, a man will fuck a WcChicken sandwich, so you shouldn’t flatter yourself too much.” Though she managed to appear calm, the whole thing still threw her off. Why... Why her? She shook her head. Focus, you dumb asshole, you can use this!

“Tch. WcChicken my ass. This-” Miss Joke gestured rudely to her nether region. “This is Michelin star.”

“The why didn’t he ever come back for seconds, hmm? If it’s really that good…”

Several of the students watching in the crowd looked rather disturbed by all of these revelations. Yaoyorozu wrinkled her nose. “Are they talking about…”

“This probably isn’t something they should be discussing in front of students,” Iida commented, shaking his head and covering Midoriya’s ears.

Tsukiko, in a late-arriving moment of clarity, moved closer to Miss Joke, indicating that they should continue their verbal sparring in more hushed tones. “If it’s really that good, why did it take so long for him to get it up?” She cringed inwardly at the explicit mental image, but didn’t let her distaste show. “He couldn’t even look you in the face.”

“He’d been drinking…”
“He didn’t even stay the night,” Tsukiko sneered. “The ol’ pump and dump.”

“It wasn’t like that!” Miss Joke seemed near tears now.

“Face it, stupid! It was a one-night stand and he couldn’t care less about you! You’re nothing to him!” Tsukiko crossed her arms and backed away, her barrage of insults complete. Now, the real fun would begin.

“I’m getting really sick of you running your mouth!” Miss Joke sent her opponent into another fit of laughter. “You should stop talking for a while.” She attempted to rush the other woman again as she had before, but Tsukiko had already become accustomed to rerouting her cognitive functions while forced to laugh, allowing her to dodge easily, rotating around behind Miss Joke and elbowing her hard below the the shoulder blades. The other woman made a pained sound, but, being the veteran hero that she was, she didn’t go down that easily. She moved quickly to grab Tsukiko by the arm, easily flipping her onto the ground. Laughter coming out more as a harsh wheeze as the wind was knocked out of her, Tsukiko swept one leg around to destabilize her enemy as she scrambled to her feet, barreling forward and putting her shoulder into a powerful tackle more befitting an NFL linebacker. They both fell into the dust, punching and scratching at each other like a pair of feral cats.

Miss Joke hit Tsukiko with another Outburst, sending her into peals of maniacal laughter as she struck the older woman across the face over and over, busting her lip and bloodying her own knuckles. However, it did limit her abilities enough for Miss Joke to flip her over onto her back, reversing their positions so that she could attack. She backhanded Tsukiko hard across the face, lacerating the soft flesh just enough to make a mess. No one observing had expected things to get this vicious, but they didn’t dare stop the fight. These were two grown women, two professional heroes. Surely they’d stop if one of them was too badly injured. Tsukiko gave an agonized cry as the other woman whacked her again, but as Miss Joke moved to stand in hopes of giving her a good kick, she maneuvered her legs so that she could strike first, forcing a burst of power through her legs in order to send her opponent stumbling backward.

Tsukiko knew that her physical abilities wouldn’t last her much longer. She scrambled backward to put some space between herself and Miss Joke, giving her a few split-seconds to power up her ultimate power. Luckily, this whole deal had her pretty worked-up, so it wouldn’t take long.

“Look, Third Eye is going to use her telekinesis!”

Because the ability could be so taxing, Tsukiko needed to use the telekinesis as efficiently as possible. As much as she wanted to throw her enemy into the nearest wall, doing so would only
wear Tsukiko out, and might not finish things as she intended. No, she would have to use some of the strategies she and her older brother Kaito had devised over the years. She focused on the field in front of her, sweeping up a huge, thick cloud of dust, concealing her from Miss Joke so that she wouldn’t see Tsukiko’s attack coming. When she least expected it, Tsukiko burst through the powdery mass, leaping into the air and delivering a swift kick to the head. Such a move was potentially dangerous, risking giving her victim a concussion, but, unfortunately, Tsukiko wasn’t exactly using her common sense right now, furiously angry for reasons she herself couldn’t quite comprehend.

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The teachers’ office was suspiciously quiet as Shouta sat at his desk, entering grades from an exam given earlier in the week. Of course, it might just have been because Mic wasn’t there now; he’d rushed out right after finishing up some paperwork, seemingly anxious to make some kind of urgent appointment at five o’clock sharp. Only Thirteen remained here with Shouta, focused on their own work. “Do you know where everyone is?” he asked, confused. “The other teachers are usually here around this time.”

Thirteen looked over at the wall clock. “Ah, they must all be in the courtyard to see the fight.”

“Fight?”

“Apparently, Miss Joke challenged Miss Moriyama to a fight at five o’clock today. It must still be going on.” Thirteen shrugged. “I think it’s a bit silly for two grown women to fight one another like that, but I know some of the other teachers were interested in seeing how it went down.”

*Moriyama? Fighting Miss Joke? But why?* If Miss Joke had been the one issuing the challenge, the “why” was obvious. Earlier, she had clearly felt threatened by Moriyama in some way, but Shouta couldn’t believe that Moriyama would accept such a ridiculous proposition, or that she wouldn’t tell him that such a challenge had been made. Then again, she wasn’t obligated to tell him anything about her life, but still… Without another word, Shouta stood up abruptly, making a mad dash out of the office for the courtyard.

“Kick her ass, Third Eye!” Ashido yelled, throwing her little pink fist into the air.

“Murder her!”
Tsukiko gave a devilish grin, lifting Miss Joke into the air to send her flying across the courtyard. “Put me down, you bitch!” Before Tsukiko could make the throw, her telekinesis suddenly shorted out, dropping her opponent into the dust. Oh, fuck. Vaguely horrified, she turned back to look over her shoulder, giving Miss Joke the opportunity to tackle her, throwing a punch that hurt the attacker as much as it did the recipient.

“Oh, fuck.”

Vaguely horrified, she turned back to look over her shoulder, giving Miss Joke the opportunity to tackle her, throwing a punch that hurt the attacker as much as it did the recipient.

“Cut it out, both of you.” Shouta dragged the other woman off Moriyama, planting himself firmly between them. He turned, jabbing a finger at Miss Joke. “You should know better.” Moriyama childishly stuck out her tongue, making her look rather dumb when he pointed at her next. “You should know better.” Shouta searched the crowd, finding the small cluster of faculty members standing next to his homeroom class, which had begun to rapidly scatter in all directions. “You should definitely know better.”

The way Shouta saw it, the only responsible person here seemed to be All Might, who had been lurking nearby, ready to break up the fight if it went too far. Shouta nodded toward him. “I’m going to take Moriyama to see Recovery Girl. Please take Miss Joke to wait in the classroom next door so that she can be treated next.”

“What were you thinking?” Shouta asked her as he escorted her down the hallway to Recovery Girl’s office.

Moriyama hunched her shoulders sheepishly. “I wasn’t, really. She started it…”

“Are you five? That excuse doesn’t work anymore. I know you’ve never been a ‘turn the other cheek’ kind of person, but… You could have gotten seriously hurt.” He knit his eyebrows together, making his concern apparent.

Tsukiko felt a not-unfamiliar twinge in her chest. That’s what you were worried about? Not the fact that we made a huge scene? That we acted completely unprofessionally?

“I am sorry that Miss Joke acted the way she did. This is probably my fault, partially.”

Tsukiko snorted. “Why would it be your fault? She’s the one who can’t control her thirst.”

Aizawa-sensei stopped for a moment. “I…may have unintentionally led her on. Did you...did you use your telepathy on her?”
“What do you think?”

“So I guess you know about…”

“Yeah. I know.” Tsukiko clenched her jaw, the unpleasant mental images returning.

Shouta felt sick. Maybe it was his imagination, but Moriyama looked vaguely hurt by the revelation; maybe it was just TMI. All the same, it was an unflattering image of her to have of him. That one-night affair had taken place during a very desperate, weak period of his life, and he didn’t want Moriyama to think that *that* was the kind of woman that interested him. Why do I care so much what she thinks of me? “Listen-”

Moriyama held up a hand. “Don’t say anything.”

*Moriyama…*

She looked up, pulling a sadistic grin. “We can talk about it in your next session!”

*Oh joy…*

“Tsukiko! What did you do!” Recovery Girl’s sharp reprimand echoed off the walls, making the young woman freeze. Tsukiko hadn’t considered just how irritated her grandmother would be with her for getting into a silly fight as a 23-year-old woman.

“Tell *Oba-chan* what you did.” Genkiko leaned against the clinic wall, raising her eyebrows, relishing the opportunity to pick at her older sister for her poor decisions.

“Well, I’ll leave it to you two, then. Please take good care of her.” With that, Aizawa-sensei hightailed it down the hall.

“Sensei, no! Don’t leave me here with these two psychos!”

“You could have gotten hurt… This is my fault…” Tsukiko sat quietly as her sister and
grandmother bandaged her wounds, teasing her all the while. Those words kept ringing in her head over and over, mixing in with the horrible truth about Aizawa-sensei and Miss Joke. Her chest felt tight...

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Shouta watched the hot water pouring from the faucet, slowly filling the bathtub. He’d had a long day, and wanted nothing more than to sink into a hot bath, not thinking of anything in particular. However, he knew that he would only get one of those things, after today. His pain-in-the-ass one-night stand had shown up, only to hassle a woman that he’d once loved, and who now knew about the unflattering affair. Moriyama would never look at him the same way again… She’d been hurt because of all of this. The image of the laceration on her cheek stuck with him even now.

Shouta gathered up his long hair, tying it back as he stepped into the steaming water, sitting down and sighing as he tried to get comfortable, tried to relax. No such luck. Moriyama’s sheepish grin, and then her troubled frown, took turns at the forefront of his thoughts. Why can’t I get you off my mind?
“I think that’s a good stopping point for today.” Moriyama cleared her throat, taking off her glasses to rub her tired eyes.

“So, Monday then?” Shouta asked, placing his empty coffee cup on the table between them. Surprisingly, the things that Moriyama had discovered about him the day before, about his one-night affair with Pro Hero Miss Joke, hadn’t come up in their conversation today. There were plenty of moments where Moriyama could have brought it up; she had simply chosen not to. Shouta didn’t think it was likely that she would have forgotten something so significant overnight. Maybe she just...didn’t want to talk about it, and that worked well enough for him. He didn’t want to talk about it either, didn’t want to discuss the circumstances surrounding the event, didn’t want Moriyama to know exactly why he had been so depressed back then. She was his therapist, and she already knew much more about him than he liked, but some things were better left unsaid.

“Any plans for the evening?” she asked casually as she began to gather up her things, putting some papers away inside her desk.

Shouta stretched his arms out in front of him, cracking his knuckles. “Nothing out of the ordinary, just going out on patrol as usual.”

“How many nights are you working each week?” Moriyama asked, sounding vaguely concerned.

“Usually five or six. I take Sundays off, and sometimes Mondays.”
“You should probably take off more than that.” She stopped what she was doing and turned around to look at Shouta seriously, a line of worry forming between her eyes. “It’s harder on you than it used to be, isn’t it?”

Even without her telepathy, it wasn’t easy to hide things from Moriyama. He sighed. “A little bit, but don’t worry about it. I know what I’m doing.”

“I know, I know…”

“What about you? What have you got planned for tonight?”

Moriyama shot him a wry grin. “I’m going out on patrol too.”

“Hold on a second!” Shouta stood up abruptly, grabbing her attention.

“What?”

“You’re planning on working tonight? After the fight you had yesterday?” He eyed the bruises still apparent on Moriyama’s flesh, her bandaged knuckles, the scabbed-over laceration on her cheek, the compression brace she wore on her knee.

She snorted. “Come on, she didn’t hurt me that bad. You know I’ve been worse off.”

“Yes, being impaled is worse, but you should probably still be resting.”

“Look who’s talking about resting.” Moriyama raised her eyebrows, knowing that she’d made her point.

Shouta shook his head, chuckling softly to himself. “Fair enough. I guess there’s no changing your mind. You’ve always been stubborn.”
Moriyama’s smile widened in amusement. “Look who’s talking about *being stubborn*!”

“Alright, alright...you’ve made your point.”

Shouta still worried that she might be pushing herself too hard. From what little he had seen, her fight with Miss Joke had gotten pretty vicious, and, rather than intervene, the other teachers had let the whole thing devolve into a no-holds-barred knock-down-drag-out brawl. Both participants walked away from it with considerable injuries, though Moriyama didn’t seem quite as busted-up. He still partially blamed himself for the incident, since the initial challenge had come due to Miss Joke’s jealousy over him. Any woman in his general proximity could be a target when it came to her. What’s more, Moriyama’s stubborn attitude prevented her from just walking away; she refused to do anything that might paint her as “weak,” often to her own detriment. She seemed a little more even-keeled now, as an adult, but the recklessness of her youth still showed through sometimes. Moriyama’s hard-headedness always seemed to get her into trouble, but, then again, that attitude, that drive, that fire, had been one of the things that Shouta had liked about her back then.

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From his perch high on a rooftop, Shouta scanned the city scene, watching for anything out of the ordinary. He found that Friday nights could be a peak time for criminal activity, since more people were out and about enjoying their evening, allowing villains to more easily hide in plain sight. People’s increased alcohol consumption also made things a bit more hectic, as they were less inhibited, more willing to take risks, stir up a commotion. Shouta’s preferred lookout point on the highest building within a six-block radius gave him an excellent vantage point, letting him monitor the nearby goings-on without having to expend too much energy walking around. Like Moriyama had observed before, he’d lost some of his stamina over time, and needed to use it as efficiently as possible. “Old Man,” the wry voice in the back of his head repeated with an air of amusement. Shouta ignored it, sweeping his gaze over the perimeter again. This spot also gave him the upper-hand in surprising criminals in the act; you didn’t always expect a hero to swoop in from above.

Now, and for the past hour, this part of Hosu City remained quiet, with no sign of anything eventful to come. This Friday night had been surprisingly peaceful, though it was still rather early in the evening, barely nine o’clock. Shouta had managed to break up a couple of fights between college students who had miscalculated just how much liquor they could handle, but that was about it. The real action wouldn’t start for another two or three hours, once the real nightlife was underway. Things would get especially busy around 2 a.m., when the bars began to close down, and an army of drunken toddlers swarmed the streets, looking for fights, questionable hook-ups, or another place to keep the party going. Villains often used that time to operate under the radar while the police were busy with the drunks, writing tickets for driving while intoxicated, or being a public nuisance. Shouta figured he likely wouldn’t make it home until nearly 6 in the morning.
Maybe things would be a little busier further downtown, Shouta thought. After all, this was more of a business area, full of office buildings and family restaurants. If he wanted a taste of some action, he would have to head for the bar alleys, or the red-light district. Shouta tended to stay out of the latter. A group of dedicated female heroes generally held things down there, more sensitive to the sex workers’ needs than a man could be. He would keep to the area where most of the pubs were located, especially those known to have back-room gambling operations, though most of that kind of activity didn’t usually pick up until around midnight. In the meantime, perhaps Shouta could get something for dinner; though he never did have a very strong appetite, he knew that he needed to eat. Trying to do hero work on an empty stomach, especially for an overnight shift such as this, wouldn’t go so well.

A neon haze covered the downtown area, mingling with the Friday night aroma of cigarette smoke and too much cologne. Shouta made his way from one rooftop to another, search for an ideal spot to continue his watch. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see a glimmer of fluorescent turquoise dancing off of silver-blue; he wasn’t alone on this rooftop. “Better not slow me down with that erasure of yours.” Moriyama kept her back toward Shouta as a token of respect. If he kept out of her line of sight, she couldn’t use her telekinesis on him.

“Heh. I know better than to get in your way-”

“Shh!” Moriyama held up a hand, her eyes darting, searching. A faint cry could be heard from a block or so away. She lowered the goggles resting on top of her head to cover her eyes and backed up a few meters before darting forward, to leap onto the next roof, easily clearing the space between.

Shouta followed her as quickly as he could, ready to back her up if needed. Moriyama skidded to a stop, peering over the ledge at a fierce-looking villain cornering a woman who had stepped outside to smoke. He got closer and closer, and without another word Moriyama simply heaved herself over the side of the building, much to Shouta’s horror. Thankfully, she knew what she was doing, finding a flagpole extending from the side of the building and latching onto it before she fell too far. Using her own bodyweight as leverage, Moriyama swung herself forward and onto a fire escape a little bit further down, gradually dropping herself down story by story until she neared the ground level. From there, she could force a burst of power through her legs, landing firmly and safely in the middle of the alleyway. For most people, what she did might have been dangerous, but, when used by an expert, parkour was much faster than taking the stairs. Then again, Shouta supposed he shouldn’t have worried so much, considering he himself took similar risks often enough.

Moriyama stood up straight, squaring her shoulders. “Hey, I don’t think she wants to go with you.”

“Huh?” The villain turned to look at her, his hulking frame preventing his victim from being able to escape just yet. “Who the fuck are you?”
“Doesn’t matter,” she shrugged. “But if you don’t let the lady go, you and I are going to have a problem. We can do this the easy way or the hard way- your choice.”

“Piss off! Mind your own business!”

Moriyama sighed. “That’s what I figured. You know, I almost feel bad for you, being quirkless and having a micropenis? That’s rough, buddy. Is that why you pick on helpless women? So you can feel good about yourself?”

The villain turned and barrelled right at her, giving his victim an opening to hurry away. “What the fuck did you just say to me?!?”

Even from his position on the roof, Shouta could see Moriyama’s faint grin. This was exactly what she had planned.

As her opponent ducked low to hurl himself toward her, she did the same, racing forward and then at the last second leaping into the air and tucking herself into a ball to front-flip over him. With nothing to stop his momentum, he crashed into a pile of garbage bags, briefly breaking his focus. As he attempted to regain his footing, Moriyama appeared behind him, smashing the heel of her shoe into the back of his knee, breaking his balance again as she jammed her elbow into the flesh right above his kidney. It was a favorite move of hers, a painful distraction that could be used on anyone, and exemplary of her fighting style. Due to her small stature, and the fact that she could only bolster her strength so much through exercise and training, Moriyama had to fight dirty, using her telepathy to pick out an opponent’s weakness, and then exploiting it. She wasn’t so much a martial artist as she was a barroom brawler. Her knuckles bore deep scars and calluses from repeated use and injury, though these days it likely took much more to break the skin open.

Not unused to a back-alley fight, her opponent quickly went on the offensive, throwing punches which Moriyama easily dodged, waiting for the right opportunity to strike. She ducked under one such swing, punching hard into the upper portion of her enemy’s gluteal muscle, making him howl in discomfort. A popular steroid injection site. As he spun around to try again to hit her, she widened her stance, using his high center of gravity against him as she grabbed his arm tight, flipping him onto his back. Moriyama managed to give him a few kicks to the ribs before he reached for her ankle, and she backed away, giving the villain a chance to scramble to his feet, his bulky torso precariously balanced atop a pair of scrawny chicken legs. Surely she would target them at some point- any untrained body part could be a dangerous point of weakness. Leaping atop a nearby dumpster, Moriyama gave herself the advantageous high ground, reaching into one of the pockets lining her belt and pulling out a collapsible police baton. She delivered a couple of sharp whacks to the villain’s shoulders and neck, distracting and confusing him so that he wouldn’t see her next move coming.
With a swift, subtle motion that wouldn’t tip off her opponent, Moriyama signalled for Shouta to come further down. She planned to use him in some way to end this more efficiently, though if need be, she was perfectly capable of taking care of things on her own. Shouta waited on the lowest level of the fire escape, lingering in the shadows to keep himself hidden. Moriyama jumped from the dumpster onto the metal platform, letting her uncovered fingertips barely graze the back of his hand, giving him all the information he needed. “When I give the signal, jump onto him and hold on tight!” Her telepathy worked both ways, though she could only convey information to others through skin-to-skin touch. Moriyama returned to the ground, killing time once more by ducking and weaving, slowly making her way toward the fire escape to get her enemy right where she wanted him. She dipped low to avoid a swinging arm, smacking her baton against his leg with as much power as she could muster, quite possibly creating a minor fracture in one of the two calf bones, if Moriyama’s self-satisfied smirk was any indication.

“Now!” she yelled, and Shouta jumped down, using the man’s shoulders for leverage and throwing his capture weapon around him so that he wouldn’t be thrown off. The villain thrashed about, not fond of the concept of having a passenger. This was much like riding one of those mechanical bulls, or at least, what Shouta imagined it to be, considering he himself had never done such a thing. With her opponent distracted, Moriyama was easily able to place herself at his side, using every bit of strength she could muster to smash her foot into the side of her enemy’s leg. His massive upper-body put regular strain on his untrained legs, but with Shouta’s extra weight, it was simply too much. There was a sickeningly wet crack, and the man crumpled to the ground, screeching in agony, his leg bent at an ugly angle. In this shape, he could do nothing except lay there, whimpering pitifully as Moriyama called for the police to come and pick him up. Never one to leave loose ends, she retrieved a zip tie from her pocket, securing his hands behind his back.

Though she did this only on a part-time basis now, Moriyama had clearly developed into an incredibly clever and adept hero. Her fiery passion seemed to burn as bright as ever now that she’d found a way to do it that worked for her. Where she’d once been depressed, questioning her decision to pursue this line of work, her vigor had now been renewed; she seemed genuinely happy in everything she did. Moriyama could barely stand still now as she waited for the villain to be taken away, the rush of adrenaline keeping her on her toes. Despite the bruises and cuts that had worried Shouta before, she looked perfectly healthy and capable now, ready to take on the world. You’ve gotten stronger again. He did it behind a bored expression and a heavy scarf, but he did feel genuine pride in the kind of hero that Moriyama had become. Somewhere along the way, her stubbornness, her relentless drive, had paid off.

Once the villain had been carted off, she turned to Shouta. “Have you eaten yet?”

“Not yet, I was actually planning on getting some food when I ran into you.” He held up his hands as if to ward off any sort of a scolding. “I’m going to eat, I promise.”

Moriyama laughed. “Come on, there’s a good gastropub near here that does discounted to-go
orders for on-duty heroes.”

Thirty minutes later Moriyama was climbing up to their new rooftop vantage point, plastic bag in hand for a bizarre sort of impromptu picnic, passing a wrapped sandwich to Shouta, along with a bottled tea. Hopefully things would stay quiet long enough for them to eat, and rest for a few minutes.

“It seems like this sort of schedule is working for you,” he commented, inspecting the breaded chicken cutlet nestled inside its perfectly-browned bun.

“You know, it really is. I mean, I’m sure you of all people know how tiring it can be sometimes to work two separate jobs, but it’s good.” Even now, Moriyama kept her eyes off of him, respecting his request that she not use her telepathy on him, even accidentally. Instead, she stared down her food, her appetite ravenous after her action-packed encounter.

“I imagine that even doing this part-time, along with a full-time gig, would still be a lot.”

Moriyama’s eyes widened. “You’re still doing hero work full-time?!”

Shouta shrugged. “I’m used to it.”

“You’re going to work yourself to death one of these days. You’ve got to rest at some point!”

“That’s what weekends are for.”

“You don’t really expect me to believe that you actually spend the whole weekend resting, do you?” Moriyama seemed unimpressed with Shouta’s weak-ass excuse. “You work Saturday nights, don’t you?”

Nothing gets past her. “Well, yes, but-”

“But you’ll sleep when you’re dead, right?” She smirked.
“And I bet you manage to get a full eight hours every single night, right?” Shouta raised an eyebrow, as Moriyama got suspiciously silent. “That’s what I thought.”

She grinned slightly, sighing. “Well, it’s the life we’ve chosen, right?”

“You think you’d ever want to do something else?”

The soft smile widened, her expression beaming. “Wouldn’t trade this for the world.” Ferocity shone from her eyes as she gazed off into the distance, watching and waiting for the next fight. For all of her past heartache, she seemed that much stronger now by comparison. She was like a phoenix risen from the ashes, glittering and unconquerable.

Moriyama...what an incredible person you’ve become.
Her final year of high school had come and gone faster than Tsukiko could have ever anticipated. Within mere weeks, she would complete her final exit exam, and graduate from UA a full-fledged hero. The prospect of finally being finished excited her, but she dreaded it all the same. She would be torn away from the teacher she’d grown to love over the past year, the only man with whom she’d ever been able to picture herself. Yet, it was all just a silly teenage pipe dream anyway. He was seven years older than she, widowed for only a couple of years. Tsukiko was hardly a suitable bride- a little too loud, a little too awkward, and far too young. She would simply have to put on her Big Girl panties and suck it up, get over him, and hope that she might find someone who met her unreasonably high standards, or at least find the kind of satisfaction in her work that could fill the void created by her desire for companionship. She almost felt tempted to pursue a teaching degree, so that she might become an instructor here too, forever at Aizawa-sensei’s side. *I can’t be your bride- not that you’d have me anyway- but maybe I can be your colleague, your friend.*

Her reverie was broken as Aizawa-sensei entered the classroom, a small stack of papers in hand. He distributed a few to the first person in each row, instructing them to take one and pass it back. “Listen up, this handout includes all the information regarding your final exit exam. The front lists the topics that will be covered on the written portion, and the back gives instructions and guidelines for the practical. The practical portion of the exam will be similar to exercises you’ve completed in the past, but this time, you’ll be on your own. You won’t be able to rely on your classmates for help this time.” Several students glanced at each other, laughing nervously, recognizing that they themselves had needed assistance before. “Each of you will be placed in a one-on-one battle scenario with a faculty member, matched up according to your strengths and weaknesses.” Aizawa-sensei held up a pair of handcuffs often used in UA’s training exercises. “In
order to pass the exam, you must ‘capture’ your opponent using these cuffs. If you are captured first, you will fail. The match-ups are listed on the back of the paper that was given to you.”

A loud rustling echoed throughout the classroom as everyone scrambled to flip over their paper at the same time, eager to find out who they would be battling. Tsukiko scanned the page, eyes wide as she searched for her name on the list, heart jumping as she found it. “Moriyama Tsukiko: Aizawa Shouta.” It was a predictable match-up, really. Their quirks worked in similar ways, both requiring vision in order to be used. Furthermore, Aizawa-sensei had challenged her at the beginning of the school year to become stronger, so that she could better improvise in a combat scenario. She would have a week to come up with an effective strategy to use against her teacher. Otherwise, she would find herself wrapped up tight in Aizawa-sensei’s capture weapon. Not that she’d mind that all too much, other than failing her practical exam.

“You’re thinking about getting all tied up in his scarf, aren’t you?” Rin whispered, wiggling her eyebrows suggestively. “Ya nasty.”

Tsukiko flushed red. “W-What are you talking about?!”

“What I mean is- How are you gonna cope with having to beat up your boyfriend?” Rin kept her voice low enough that no one else could hear, but it still made Tsukiko’s ears burn.

“Rin! Shut up!” she hissed through gritted teeth.

“What? He can’t hear me. See, he’s already passed out. He’s giving us the rest of the period to start working on strategy.” Rin nodded toward Aizawa-sensei, already sacked out in his sleeping bag.

Tsukiko made a disgruntled sound. “How did you even know about that?”

Rin shrugged. “I just did. Plus I saw where you wrote in your notebook that one time- ‘Aizawa Tsukiko.’” She batted her eyelashes dreamily, making her friend cringe outwardly. “But seriously, though. How are you going to utterly destroy him?”

“I don’t know yet. I have to think…” Obviously, Aizawa-sensei would take the first opportunity to erase Tsukiko’s quirk. She would have to use stealth in this fight, hiding as much as possible, while still staying close enough to her opponent to use her telepathy. Another option would be to obstruct his vision in some way, though she would have to take care not to permanently injure him. Tsukiko
would never forgive herself if she destroyed Aizawa-sensei’s career just to pass some stupid test. No, she would have to be smart, relying on stealth, her improved combat skills, and the element of surprise. She gave a scheming grin. “Rin...I have an idea, but I’ll need your help.”

“Are you thinking what I think you’re thinking?” she asked as Tsukiko eyed the length of scarf dangling out of Aizawa-sensei’s sleeping bag.

Tsukiko shot her a devilish glance, confirming her suspicions. “Absolutely. I know scissors won’t cut through it…”

“But 500 degrees celsius should do the trick, right?” Rin held up her hand, fingertips glowing hot and red.

Carefully, so as not to wake their teacher with the vibrations of their approaching footsteps, Tsukiko and Rin moved over to Aizawa-sensei. The other students stopped their conversations to watch, curious. Tsukiko held up one finger to her lips as she carefully took the end of the capture weapon in her other hand. Working quickly, Rin grasped the material between two fingers, singeing through it, wincing at the smoke it produced, praying that the odor wouldn’t wake their sleeping teacher. Aizawa-sensei began to stir in his sleep, but the length had fortunately been separated, and the two girls scrambled back to their desks as Tsukiko stuffed the fabric into her top to hide it.

Awake now, Aizawa-sensei looked about the room, first to the hushed students, then to the two girls at the front of the room who looked just a little bit suspicious. “What’s going on?”

“I thought I saw a spider crawling on your sleeping bag!” Tsukiko blurted out suddenly. “I was going to smash it, but it was only a piece of lint.”

“Oh… Thanks.”

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After a solid week of late afternoons spent training, and late nights spent strategizing, the date of the practical exam arrived, much to Tsukiko’s chagrin. She’d prepared herself about as much as she could, but she still dreaded this. She knew that she was strong, but Aizawa-sensei was stronger-old enough to be more experienced, more skilled, but young enough that Tsukiko couldn’t simply tire him out, or overpower him physically. Fortunately, she did still have that one secret trick up her
sleeve—the bit of capture weapon that Rin had cut for her. As long as Aizawa-sensei hadn’t noticed that it was missing, she might still have that one advantage. She didn’t have much longer now—only two other students were still scheduled ahead of her. Tsukiko had gotten plenty of sleep the night before, eaten a good breakfast and a good lunch today, and had avoided injuring herself in her preparatory training. If she was smart out there, played her card just right, she just might have a chance.

In the designated waiting area, Tsukiko seated herself in a corner, closing her eyes. She sank into a deep meditative state, centering her mind on all of the combat techniques she’d learned, all of the best hiding places in the model city where her fight would take place. She needed to keep her consciousness as open as possible, so that she might access this information as needed during her exam. After all, Aizawa-sensei could take away her telepathy, her clairvoyance, her telekinesis, but he couldn’t take her intelligence, or the knowledge she’d stored deep within her brain. Even without all of that, she was smart, and strong, and an extremely capable young hero. As long as she didn’t get caught up in his capture weapon, without her telekinesis to help her out, she would probably be fine. I’m coming for you, sensei.

“Moriyama, it’s almost time. You should get ready.” A classmate touched Tsukiko gently on the shoulder.

“Right… Thanks.” Tsukiko’s heart pounded in her ears as she made her way down toward the field. Aizawa-sensei had likely already hidden himself deep within the area, ready to strike as soon as she entered his field of vision. She pulled the length of malleable fabric from her pocket, using it to tie her hair back, disguising the item as a simple ribbon. When she needed it, it would be easily accessible. Over the past week, Tsukiko had worn a ribbon in her hair every day so that today’s accessory wouldn’t seem at all out of the ordinary. Okay, maybe she was overthinking things, but she couldn’t really be too prepared for this, could she? Taking her place just outside the gate, she popped on her wireless headphones, pressing “play” on the MP3 player tucked inside one of her suit’s zippered pockets. Any second, the light above her would turn green, and the alarm would sound, marking the beginning of this last test.

The alarm sounded, a single, long tone, and the gate opened, allowing Tsukiko to enter, walking briskly. She needed to find Aizawa-sensei quickly, before he found her first. Since he would inevitably be hidden, she planned to use her clairvoyance to search for him, then hide nearby, where she could use her telekinesis from a distance for as long as possible. Tsukiko pulled her goggles down over her eyes, focusing her psychic energy toward searching out her opponent. He eluded her for now, but she knew that he had not yet managed to erase her quirk, as she was still able to pick up a limited amount of information about their field of battle. Needing to keep herself hidden, Tsukiko moved away from the center of the road, edging along buildings in the shadows, keeping her consciousness open so that she might locate Aizawa-sensei as soon as he got close enough to be identified. The urgency weighed heavily on her, but she tried to remain calm. Getting too worked-up would only serve as a distraction.

As the minutes passed, Tsukiko began to grow nervous. While she searched for Aizawa-sensei, he
was most definitely seeking her out as well. Whoever found the other first would have the advantage in this fight, and Tsukiko needed it badly, considering how she generally couldn’t stack up against an experienced professional. She continued to creep through the shadows, ducking into various nooks and crannies, keeping her eyes trained on the rooftops, knowing that her teacher would likely strike from above. Pressing herself into a recessed doorway, Tsukiko closed her eyes for a moment, focusing her clairvoyance. She could pick up a familiar signature at last, and it was growing closer now. Aizawa-sensei was approaching her from behind, but he couldn’t see her just yet. He would have erased her abilities already if that was the case. Then again, that would immediately tip her off that he was nearby. It was a catch 22 for him. Either way, he couldn’t possibly take her by surprise.

Tsukiko moved out of the corner, not wanting to be too closed-in, putting herself at a disadvantage. Still, she stayed flush against a wall; Aizawa-sensei would have to face her head-on. She could feel him getting closer and closer, slowly coming down from the top of the building. I hope you don’t actually think you’re sneaking up on me. He knew exactly where she was, and yet he wasn’t using his erasure for now. Maybe he wanted to have a bit of a real fight first. Next thing Tsukiko knew, a sinewy hand was reaching down to try and snatch the goggles off her head. I think the fuck not. Tsukiko grabbed onto his sleeve, dropping her center of gravity to jerk him forward and off of the perch where he was precariously balanced, throwing him down into the dust. The impact had a disorienting effect on her opponent, giving Tsukiko a split-second to escape, hoping to find a hiding spot with a good sightline so that she could use her telekinesis to make a quick capture.

While she had the chance, she took off running, trying to find a place to conceal herself. Before she could get more than a few meters away, however, her abilities were suddenly gone, stolen away by her teacher. Tsukiko glanced back over her shoulder, expecting to see Aizawa-sensei still on the ground, staring her down, but he was nowhere to be seen. In mere seconds, he’d already pulled himself back up and into the game. There was no use trying to hide now. He was locked on and would follow Tsukiko wherever she tried to run. She had no chance now but to face him head-on, relying solely on her physical abilities. A dull thud echoed behind her, and she turned to see her opponent racing toward her, intent on making the capture first. Tsukiko quickly ducked to the side to avoid the collision. “Lucky break,” he mused, turning back toward her and grinning.

You’re lucky you’re so damn charming. “No such thing as luck,” she retorted. “Only skill.”

“Show me then.”

Tsukiko’s mouth curled into a malicious smirk. “I’d be happy to.” She launched herself forward to meet him in combat, careful to avoid that swirling scarf which was more than happy to wrap her up tight.

Without her telepathy, Tsukiko had more difficulty timing her strikes to avoid getting tangled up in Aizawa-sensei’s capture weapon. Armed only with her sharp wits, she tucked and rolled to the side
to avoid the length of material thrown out to try and catch around her leg. At the same time, she
kicked her teacher hard in the shin, making him hiss in pain. No stranger to combat, he used
Tsukiko’s perception of having the upper hand against her, managing to wrap his weapon around
both of her legs at the knees. Having her exactly where he wanted her, Aizawa-sensei began to drag
his student toward the exit as she struggled against her bonds, trying in vain to untangle them with
her hands. As he walked, he kept his eyes on her, lest he allow her powerful abilities to come back.
Tsukiko did have a plan, however. As she pretended to continue struggling, she slipped her MP3
player out of her pocket. With every bit of strength she could muster, she hurled it at Aizawa-
sensei’s head, smacking him in the cheekbone. It was enough to make him blink, giving Tsukiko a
split second to throw him backward with her telekinesis, giving her the chance to wriggle free of
his scarf, kicking it out of the way so that he couldn’t use it against her again. “You can’t take me
that easy!”

Tsukiko planted herself firmly in a wide stance, ready for her opponent to come back at her
swinging. It was clear that he didn’t want to actually hit a student, as his fighting style was much
more focused on capture than on injury. Tsukiko, on the other hand, was a brawler by necessity,
needing to weaken her rival before she could restrain them. She wouldn’t put it past Aizawa-sensei
to cause injury if it became necessary, but he preferred to not let things get to that point. He
grabbed her forearm and bent it behind her back, hoping to restrain her again. Tsukiko sneered.
“Just because I can’t figure out your specific weak points doesn’t mean I’ve forgotten the major
ones!” Solar plexus. She jutted her elbow backward, knocking the wind out of her teacher.

“Not bad,” he wheezed. “You’ve gotten stronger.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere, sensei.” Tsukiko dodged as he attempted to grab her again. He was
right, though. She had gotten stronger. All of those hours of training hadn’t been for nothing. Even
without the use of her quirk, she could hold her own against a pro. Tsukiko grabbed a hold of
Aizawa-sensei’s arm, turning so that he was behind her. With her free hand, she clutched the fabric
of his suit, planning to suplex him forward onto the ground, stunning him again. Unfortunately for
Tsukiko, he remembered this move, and before she could lurch forward, he wrapped his free arm
around her shoulders, flipping her around and pinning her down in the dust.

Outside of a combat scenario, Tsukiko wouldn’t have minded this position at all, flat on her back
with Aizawa-sensei hovering over her. She did her best to suppress the fierce blush that threatened
to spread across her face, hoping that he would only think her face was red from exertion. All of
that aside, she needed to get out of this position, and fast, before he could slap his own pair of cuffs
on her, ending the exam. Though Aizawa-sensei had pinned her wrists above her head, Tsukiko
still had use of her legs, managing to pull one upward, kicking him in the chest. Despite the blow,
he held his position, determined not to let her escape a second time. Gathering her strength,
Tsukiko rolled her body backward, pulling her other leg up and jutting both of them out to plant
both of her feet squarely in her opponent’s face, knocking his goggles off of his head and into the
dirt. This minor distraction gave her the opening she needed to yank one of her hands out of his
vice grip, and swipe a cloud of dust into his face. “Shit!” Aizawa-sensei rubbed at his eyes as she
scrambled away, desperate to regain his vision as quickly as possible.
Sight beginning to return, he put an arm out to reach for her. As he did, Tsukiko grabbed the end of her makeshift hair ribbon and pulled, undoing the knot, hair falling down around her shoulders. Wrapping the length of material around her own hand to keep her grip on it, she quickly threw it around Aizawa-sensei’s arm telekinetically, his eyes widening as he realized that this was no ordinary ribbon. “That’s my… You…!” Tsukiko smirked at him gleefully as she snatched the cuffs off of her belt, clamping them firmly on her opponent’s wrist.

“Moriyama Tsukiko: Pass,” a voice announced over the loudspeaker.

Aizawa-sensei scratched his head. “Well, it’s not like there was ever any doubt, I suppose.”

He smiled softly, reaching out to ruffle Tsukiko’s hair as he so often did. “You did well. I’m proud of you.”

Tsukiko’s heart felt like it might burst out of her chest at any moment. How could one single person make her feel so much love? Do you know what it does to me when you talk to me like that? When you look at me like that? It only made her dread graduation day more. In less than a year, she’d gone from sheer hatred for Aizawa-sensei, to unconditional, unfathomable love. Soon, she would have to force herself to get over him, a feat that seemed impossible. Tsukiko pushed the thought out of her mind. She should be happy right now, damn it! She should be celebrating! She plastered on a smile, looking her teacher dead in the eyes. “See? I told you I would be the best student you ever had!”
In spite of the second cup of coffee in front of her, with its two shots of espresso, Tsukiko still struggled to keep her eyes open. Sure, it was important that they manage to discuss all of the topics on the staff meeting agenda before the day’s classes began, but did they need to start so damn early? She and Aizawa-sensei exchanged a glance across the conference room table, both understanding the other’s fatigue. Is there room in that sleeping bag for one more? Tsukiko though, amused at the ridiculous idea of both her and him crammed inside the sack, stressing the seams. Principal Nedzu went on and on about curriculum changes, or something like that as she zoned out, trying to entertain her brain any way she could in order to stay conscious. She smirked, remembering how Aizawa-sensei had passed out in the meeting on her first day working here. She’d been so nervous to see him again, for no real reason other than her past infatuation. They had an easygoing kind of relationship now, understanding each other’s personalities and tendencies well, even eating lunch together in the cafeteria.

“Okay, let’s move on. Next on the agenda is the upcoming class trip for the first year hero course students.” Though UA’s hero course was a particularly structured preparatory program, it still made time for “normal” school activities. The students had been able to vote on where they wanted to go for their trip, and they had chosen a beach trip to Okinawa. Visiting the ocean sounded like fun, Tsukiko thought. She’d gotten to go to the same place during her second year at UA, but not since. Dagoba Municipal Beach Park just did not stack up, even since it had been cleaned. Maybe I should take some vacation time come next summer… In a couple of weeks, the first years would be swimming in the ocean, catching shellfish, feeling the sand under their feet, and likely getting into one kind of trouble or another. Ah, youth… The Principal briefly went over the transportation and lodging plans, as well as the faculty members who would be chaperoning the trip.

“So far, Eraserhead, Vlad King, Present Mic, and Midnight will be taking the students on the trip, but I really would prefer to have one more chaperone for the girls. In the past, Recovery Girl has
sometimes filled in, but due to some personal business, she will not be able to help us out this time.”

Tsukiko would have been more than happy to volunteer, but she didn’t quite know how to do it so that it wouldn’t seem like she was just trying to get a free vacation. Of course, she was also the only other female faculty member on staff at UA, and thereby the default option. Aizawa-sensei put up a hand to get Nedzu’s attention. “Maybe Miss Moriyama would be able to go with us?”

*Sensei! Thank you!!* “It wouldn’t be an issue if you could use my help,” she offered calmly.

“I was already planning to ask, but it seems like everyone else is way ahead of me,” the Principal laughed. “Are you sure it’s okay? I understand that it is pretty short notice.”

“Oh no. It’s completely fine. I’m happy to help!” Tsukiko beamed. She’d be getting a free vacation under the guise of working, even if she would be herding high schoolers for a weekend.

“Okay then. Make sure you’re ready to go next Thursday at 8:00 sharp!” Everyone going on the trip would be taking buses to the airport, and then flying to their destination, where they would spend four whole days just enjoying the ocean. Of course, they had to be able to justify the trip as “educational,” so a local expert would be giving a brief lecture on marine biology on Friday afternoon, but otherwise, it was just for fun.

Though “tired” was basically a personality trait at this point, Shouta did actually feel excited to go on this trip, even if his students would inevitably get into something they weren’t supposed to get into. He had *three* friends going on this trip now; he supposed he considered Moriyama a friend at this point. Now that she was his colleague, rather than his student, they had a different sort of relationship. There was more equality between them, even if she did insist on continuing to call him “sensei.” It would be interesting to see her outside of work, to become acquainted with who Moriyama was on her own time. She was chatting away with Nemuri now about a crab pasta recipe that she had developed, and now she *definitely* wanted to try and catch some at nighttime, because fresh seafood was just *so* much better. It was kind of cute, really, Moriyama being so antsy to see the ocean, to play in the water with the sun warming her skin… She was the kind of person that got actively excited over things; it was endearing.

Even if this had been an obscenely early morning for Tsukiko, it had turned out alright. She’d gotten the opportunity to take a little trip, even if it would involve making sure a bunch of particularly-rowdy teenagers didn’t get themselves injured or killed. She almost couldn’t wait for the next week to pass, couldn’t wait to feel the sand between her toes, the hot sun on her skin, the cool, clear water rushing around her. Tsukiko could almost hear the seagulls now, could almost taste the fresh seafood, could almost smell the light aroma of the salty sea air. *This really is the best job ever.*
When she was younger, Tsukiko would have killed for five days and four nights spent in the same location as Aizawa-sensei. Though her romantic feelings had faded over the years, she still looked forward to getting to spend time with him. They got along well, and he’d always had a calming effect on her, considering his quirk. Though, she had absolutely zero concept of what he was like on his own time. *Probably not much different, honestly. What you see is what you get with him.* Tsukiko’s face started to heat up as she remembered another thing that would have gotten her teenage self all riled up- they would be going to the beach, meaning that she would be seeing Aizawa-sensei in a bathing suit, and *vice versa*. Because of the nature of her telepathy, she’d always tended to avoid the itty-bitty bikinis. Even now, she wasn’t wild about them, and that wouldn’t really be appropriate for a school function anyway. Anyway, she didn’t really need to worry about that kind of thing. *Overthinking things, as always.* She didn’t have *those* kinds of feelings for Aizawa-sensei anymore, so what did it matter?

On the other hand, Tsukiko *did* have a black suit that made her ass look incredible…

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Her packed bags piled in the doorway, Tsukiko scrolled absently through her phone as she slumped on the couch, waiting for everyone else to arrive so that they could load up the buses. She’d arrived early, because of the kind of person that she was, but that left her with nothing to do in the meantime. In a pair of shorts and a loose-fitting tank top, she was already dressed for vacation, a pair of sunglasses perched on top of her head. She would consider it a personal failure if she wasn’t just a *little* bit sunburned a few days from now.

“I hope you packed a bathing suit!” Kayama poked her head in the door, already bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

Tsukiko smirked. “Naw, I left it in the drawer.”

“I almost feel like I’m more excited than the students!”

“That’s a relief. I was worried that I was the only one!” Even though this trip was *technically* for the students, the faculty chaperones would be lying if they said that they didn’t get anything out of it.

“Anyway, Nedzu said that the buses would be here in five minutes, so let’s take our stuff out to the courtyard.” Tsukiko nodded in response, grabbing her two bags and her pillow to take them to the
bus. The other chaperones, and a handful of students were already waiting outside, watching as their transportation arrived. Aizawa-sensei lay sprawled out on the concrete in his sleeping bag, a single suitcase resting beside him. Tsukiko bent down to nudge him awake, pointing to a bus when he opened one eye.

“Sensei, it’s time to load up.”

“So it is,” he mumbled, climbing out of the faded yellow bag. This was probably the first time in her life that Tsukiko had seen him wearing something other than his hero uniform, dressed now in a pair of loose black shorts and a long-sleeve t-shirt, half of his hair tied back. Rather than his regular boots, he instead wore a pair of bright yellow foam-rubber clogs; Tsukiko had to stifle a giggle. Aizawa-sensei threw the sleeping bag over his shoulder, grabbing his luggage and dragging it over to the bus with everyone else’s.

Just loading up the bus took a good twenty minutes, considering how all of the students scrambled to throw their things into the cargo hold all at once. They all wanted to hurry and get on the bus, grabbing up the best seats for themselves and their friends. Tsukiko suspected that the words “You better behave or so help me I will turn this bus around” would be uttered at least once this morning, most likely by Aizawa-sensei, assuming that he didn’t just sleep for the whole ride. Finally the chaperones managed to get everything packed away where it belonged, and all of the kids settled into seats, even if not everyone got to sit next to their Best Friend Forever. Once Tsukiko got one of the 1B kids to stop picking at the 1A students, Kayama waved her over, having saved her a seat at the front. “They’re like this every year,” she shrugged, glancing back over her shoulder to make sure no one was standing up in their seat or running up and down the aisles. “Don’t worry too much about it.”

Somehow, Shouta’s students seemed much more lively than they normally did at 8:30 a.m. on a Thursday. Of course, today they were going on vacation, rather than sitting through a boring math lesson. They all managed to stay in their seats, as had been asked of them, but they were loud, especially with the 1B students joining them. Well, almost all of the 1B students. Mineta had gotten food poisoning at the last minute, and wasn’t able to go, much to the female students’ relief. Moriyama herself had had a difficult time feigning sympathy, much to Shouta’s amusement. “Oh...food poisoning? That’s...too bad...” Hopefully the students would be able to quiet down a little once they got to the airport, so as not to disturb the other travelers. It was best that they got it all out of their systems now.

Then again, they deserved to just kick back and be regular kids for a few days, Shouta supposed. They had been through so much this year, and it wasn’t fair. Of course, life wasn’t fair, as he himself knew all too well, but most high school students hadn’t been through the things that his kids had been through. For the next few days, he hoped that they could just enjoy themselves, enjoy the beach, enjoy a normal high school experience without the kind of drama that had plagued them all year long. They seemed pretty carefree now, having quieted down a little but still chattering excitedly to one another. Hopefully it would stay like this for a while longer.
Moriyama seemed almost as excited as the students, smile beaming off her face as she and Nemuri went over the trip’s itinerary. Nemuri always looked forward to chaperoning these trips, but this was Moriyama’s first one. “You made sure to pack sunscreen, right?” she asked her traveling companion, producing a tube from her backpack. “This one’s supposed to be really good!”

“Of course! The first time I chaperoned, I completely forgot to bring any, and ended up stuck inside for most of the trip,” Nemuri laughed. Shouta remembered that trip. She had wound up lobster-red and Mic hadn’t let her live it down.

Moriyama wrinkled her nose. “That sounds terrible… Let’s be careful so that we can spend as much time on the beach as possible!”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t forgotten it since then! I do want to try and get a nice tan, though…” The two women continued on with their chatter, both anticipating the opportunity to have a sort of mini-vacation for themselves.

“Moriyama, you seem excited to go to the beach,” Shouta commented finally.

“Yeah!” She smiled wide, lighting up her whole face. “It’s been a long time since I’ve gotten to go!” Her zeal was almost childlike, and, well... cute. He’d forgotten how cute Moriyama could be. Shouta put the thought out of his head as quickly as he could. Those days, those feelings, were long behind him. “Do you like the ocean at all? You don’t really strike me as someone who would like the heat.”

That was true. “I like it better in the evening, once it starts to cool off some. It’s still warm, but not so blisteringly hot. It’s okay in the daytime if I can find some shade, but I prefer to be on the shore at night.”

Moriyama seemed amused by this revelation. “So what you’re saying is that you like long walks on the beach at sunset?” She and Nemuri cracked up, but she wasn’t entirely wrong. Though she poked fun at what he enjoyed, Shouta realized that he wouldn’t mind it so much if she joined him on one such twilight stroll, foamy water rushing up around her ankles, the salty sea air playing with her silvery hair...

Nemuri and Hizashi exchanged a glance, both having the same realization. He likely didn’t realize it himself, but Shouta had started to develop feelings for this woman. To their knowledge, he hadn’t felt like this since Mariko’s death, and it would probably be difficult, and maybe a little
confusing for him to experience this with someone else. Nemuri wondered if it was possible that Moriyama felt the same way. She seemed to get along well with Shouta, seemed glad to have him around, but she was seven years younger. Would that complicate things at all? While Shouta was busy talking to her, Hizashi sent a discreet text message to Nemuri, wanting to talk about this later. They both wanted to see their friend happy again, to see him be loved again, and if they could help things along a little, then it would be worth being pests for a while.

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After a long day of traveling (and a hard lesson on which students suffered from motion sickness), the group finally arrived at their destination, exhausted and hungry. Who knew that sitting on one’s butt all day could take so much out of a person. Of course, it was always stressful to travel with a group, especially when that group was comprised mostly of teenagers. Someone would inevitably get motion sickness, and somebody would have a minor meltdown in the middle of the airport because they believed that the airline had lost their luggage. Now, if they could just get all of the students to the hotel and into their rooms in one piece, it would be enough. Though the kids still maintained their youthful energy, wanting to try and get some beach time in before dinner, the chaperones would have liked nothing more than to take a nap. Luckily, most of the students wanted to unpack and rest for a while, too, so Aizawa-sensei (who had slept for most of the trip anyway) volunteered to take the more energetic teenagers down to the shore while everyone else had some quiet time.

With only a couple of minor complaints, the weary travelers dragged themselves up the stairs of the lodge. UA had reserved two large tatami rooms, one for the boys and one for the girls, with futons and pillows provided. A couple of the girls dug furiously through their bags for their bathing suits and made a mad dash for the changing room, but most of the girls’ room guests lazed about, unpacking or unrolling futons for a short nap, Tsukiko and Kayama included. Although, taking a nap down on the beach didn’t sound half-bad. Tsukiko pulled a towel and a pair of rubber flip-flops from her suitcase, along with a wide-brimmed hat that she could use to cover her face. “I think I’m going to go down to the shore to rest.” Kayama gave her a strange look, raising an eyebrow. “W-What’s that look for?”

Nemuri snorted, remembering how Shouta had volunteered before to go with the students. “Ah, it’s nothing,” she insisted, thinking it best to not let either Moriyama or Shouta know what she and Hizashi were up to.

Tsukiko shrugged, sighing. “Alright then. If you need anything, you know where to find me.”

As she stepped outside, Tsukiko paused, closing her eyes and smiling softly as an errant sea breeze tickled her skin, ruffling her hair. Ahead of her, a group of students already splashed about in the water, kicking up the surf at one another and hollering in delight. Aizawa-sensei had spread out a blanket for himself on the sand, where he sat supervising, still wearing those dopey yellow shoes from earlier. The sun still shone bright even as it had begun its slow descent, casting streaks of pink
across the clear sky. Tsukiko was struck with the sudden urge to go and stand at the water’s edge, feeling the water around her ankles as her feet slowly sand down into the wet sand. Though she did not actively try to use her telepathy on him, she could still tell that Aizawa-sensei felt at peace right now. It was a strong emotion, easily detected. It made her heart feel warm; he’d known so much pain in his life, but in this moment, he was content. He was happy. Tsukiko moved to the water’s edge before she could get too deep inside his head, conscious of his constant request. Besides, she was wasting time standing here, when she really should be enjoying the ocean.
Asui popped her head out of the water, her long tongue wrapped firmly around a wriggling blue crab. Around her, the rest of the students fought with the long-handled nets that Yaoyorozu had made for them, determined to catch their own meaty crustaceans. After their one brief school-type activity this afternoon, they seemed eager to get back on with their vacation, swimming and playing on the beach for what remained of their afternoon and then sitting down for a dinner of fresh fish that Vlad King had gotten from a local seafood market. Now that the sun had gone down, Tsukiko had enlisted a group of dedicated students to troll the shoreline, hunting for fresh crab for sauteed claws, crab cakes, and her highly-anticipated crab pasta. Some of the students simply didn’t have the patience for this kind of activity, and had been sent back so that their, ahem, explosive personalities didn’t scare away the prey. Others managed to use their inborn abilities to their advantage, scooping up several crabs at a time in a massive fist, or sending Dark Shadow into the surf to snap them up before they could scuttle away.

For the other students, the task proved to be a little more challenging. Each equipped with a net, and a flashlight, they crept through the tide, keeping an eye out for the little clawed creatures. Once a crab was spotted, you would have to move quickly in order to net it, or else it would easily escape; they weren’t too speedy on land, but moved through the water like tiny fighter jets. Furthermore, a hunter had to account for how the beam of light was refracted by the water, making capture difficult. For Tsukiko, with her clairvoyance, it wasn’t too hard, simply a matter of snapping the net down over her target and then ripping it free from the tide, legs tangled in the fibers. Most of the students seemed to be getting the hang of it, faces shining with pride as they raised up their catch gleefully, stomping out of the water to dump it into the bucket with the rest.

For a group of first-time crab hunters, they weren’t doing too shabby. In the two hours that they’d
been out here, almost forty crabs had been collected, enough for dinner the next night. Though she’d retired from her position as a hunter, Tsukiko still put in her time hauling buckets of crabs back to the lodge, where they would be boiled later. Aizawa-sensei had offered to help at first, as the containers were rather large, and quite heavy when filled with crabs and seawater. However, Tsukiko was surprisingly strong for her small stature, amused as how wide his eyes became when she hoisted a pail in each hand, no problem, and hobbled back up the beach, careful not to spill the bounty. In and of itself, this was hard work, but at least the students seemed to actually be enjoying it, other than the moments when a toe or a finger would get pinched. She’d worried before that they might grow bored of this fairly quickly, but she had underestimated the competitive nature of UA students, always keeping score to see who could do the best, and in this case, catch the most in the time that was left. Asui was winning so far, because of how her quirk allowed her to move in the water, but the others weren’t showing any sign of giving up.

It was starting to get rather late now, with crabs getting harder and harder to find. Several students had already given up for the night, heading back to play a game indoors with their friends. Only the truly determined remained now, and they probably wouldn’t stop until they were instructed to do so. With the fourth bucket almost full, it was time to turn in for the night. Tsukiko turned to Aizawa-sensei. “You wanna call it?”

“It’s time to start heading back,” he called out to the students still tramping around in the waves. “It’s getting late.”

Though most of the stragglers started making their way back inland, there were a few cries of protest. “Aww, just five more minutes?”

“I was just starting to catch up!”

Aizawa-sensei crossed his arms, looking at them firmly. “I’m sorry, but it’s time.”

Despite their groans of protest, the students hesitantly made their way back to the shore, looking sad as if this were their last chance to enjoy the water. The group started back toward their lodge, stomping through the sand that clung to wet flesh like the most irritating kind of clothing. A couple of the students insisted on carrying the buckets, wanting to prove their strength despite their inferior crab-catching skills. Tsukiko kept having to warn them to be careful; their youthful vigor and cavalier attitude toward the task at hand almost resulted in overturned pails more than once. “It’s not a race!” she warned the two. “Be more mindful of what you’re doing!” Aizawa-sensei seemed amused by her dilemma, by how his student had grown into another responsible adult, griping at a couple of rowdy teenagers who threatened to make a mess. Back at the lodge, it suddenly occurred to the students that they actually were feeling sort of tired. They’d been so caught up in the excitement before, but now that it was over, the looming wave of fatigue finally hit them, whining as they waited for their turn to rinse their feet off with the outdoor hose.
A fairly adept cook, Tsukiko took charge of boiling the crabs while everyone else went to wash up and get ready for bed. It took three massive stock pots to fit all of the crabs, along with water which had been seasoned with salt and a seafood spice mix. Once the water came to a boil, she grabbed the crabs one by one, dropping them into the bubbling pot. Some of the students might have protested this kind of slaughter, but it was the best way Tsukiko knew. Besides, they’d all gone off to take their baths anyway. *Out of sight, out of mind.* She leaned against the kitchen wall, watching the bubbling pots. Compared to the next day’s task of cleaning the crabs, this didn’t take very long, but Tsukiko had begun to feel tired. After a long day in the sun, and hauling a bucket of seawater up and down the shore, her futon called out to her. She knew that she would sleep well tonight.

“Do you need any help?”

Tsukiko looked up to find that Aizawa-sensei had snuck up on her. “Not really. I just have to wait for them to finish cooking now.” She offered a soft smile. “I thought you were going to wash up.”

“Not yet. I’m waiting for the students to get done first.” A bunch of teenage boys splashing around and causing a ruckus wouldn’t exactly be *relaxing*. Shouta peered into one of the pots. “When did you learn how to do all of this? How to catch the crabs, how to boil them?”

Moriyama smiled, nostalgia apparent in her expression. “My family used to travel to the beach every year during summer vacation. I would always go with my brothers to catch the crabs, and then help my mother boil them.”

*Brothers?* Shouta had known that Moriyama had a sister, but that was it. He couldn’t believe that in all this time, he’d never known that about her. Of course, there was likely a number of things he didn’t know about her. He cringed, realizing how presumptuous he’d been in the past about his closeness to her. Realizing how separate they truly were, Shouta actually felt a little bit...sad.

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Skin still pink and tingling from her hot bath, Tsukiko pulled on her cotton pajama set, the loose, airy fabric cool against her flesh. She padded back into the girls’ room, where several of the students had already fallen asleep, but most remained awake, though quiet, chatting among themselves in hushed voices. Tsukiko unfurled her futon, arranging the blankets and pillow and settling inside, trying to get comfortable. She made a face, remembering how she’d struggled to get settled the night before. The pillows provided by the lodge looked puffy and soft, but tended to rapidly deflate once a person laid their head on it. A second pillow should do the trick, but Tsukiko didn’t exactly *want* to get up now. She knew that it would mean a better night’s sleep, but she was
also pretty warm already. *Damn it.*

Tsukiko growled finally, throwing off the covers and reaching for her robe. “Something wrong?” Kayama asked, looking up from her book.

“I’ve got to go get another pillow.” Tsukiko wrapped herself in the robe to cover herself. Her pajamas were on the skimpy side and she didn’t feel comfortable running through the lodge with her chi-chis bouncing around for everyone to see. She closed the door to the tatami room behind her, heading back to the downstairs area to ask one of the employees for another pillow. The woman currently on-duty returned promptly with Tsukiko’s requested item, and Tsukiko thanked her, turning around and climbing back up to the second level. Surely she would sleep well now, her head well-cushioned and her blankets keeping her nice and warm… Tsukiko turned the corner.

Apparently, Aizawa-sensei wasn’t quite as self-conscious as Tsukiko when it came to covering up. Coming back from the bath, he was covered only by the towel wrapped around his lower body, water still trailing down his chest, drops catching in the ample patches of body hair. He was more built than Tsukiko would have guessed, strong from years of training, and professional work. She could feel her face heating up, mortified to see her former teacher in this state of undress! If only she could just turn around and walk the other way! The only thing Tsukiko could do was just pretend that it was no big deal, and nonchalantly go back into her own room despite her beet-colored face. As she approached, pretending to examine her fingernails, Aizawa-sensei noticed her presence, making a sound of surprise as if he hadn’t expected anyone else to still be awake. His eyes went wide and his face reddened, worried that it was improper for him to allow himself to be seen this way by his colleague. Sufficiently uncomfortable, both parties hurried back into their rooms, eager to escape the awkward situation.

Slamming the door behind her, Tsukiko leaned against a wall, shoving her face into the pillow to muffle her screams. *Someone just kill me now…* To see her old teacher, and now coworker almost-naked like that…it was just so embarrassing. Not to mention, Aizawa-sensei had absolutely no business looking like that, all strong and masculine and shit… Tsukiko didn’t need that in her life! She didn’t need that running through her head! It was just too much to deal with. Once she’d finished screaming her head off, she dropped the pillow on the floor, face still hot and red. As one would expect, every single girl in the room who remained awake had turned to stare at her, dying to know what she had just experienced that would make her react like that.

“Miss Moriyama…is everything okay?”

Tsukiko gave a small smile, holding up a weak peace sign. “Yeah…” she murmured breathlessly. “Everything’s…totally fine.”

“What happened?”
Her blush deepened, not feeling that it was appropriate to tell them how she’d just seen their teacher, dressed only in a towel, dripping wet and looking way too sexy. “I-I think I saw a ghost…” While that seemed to satisfy some of the curious students, others discussed amongst themselves the fact that if she truly had seen a ghost, her face would be pale white, not red. At the very least, they realized that Tsukiko wasn’t going to tell them what actually happened, and left it well enough alone.

Tsukiko sighed, trying for the second time to settle down on her futon. “So what really happened?” Kayama asked, not even looking up from her book. Needing to tell somebody about this, Tsukiko got up once more, going to sit next to her, keeping her voice low.

“Is that a habit of his? Walking around only wearing a towel like that?”

Kayama put her book down. “Who are you talking about?”

“Aizawa-sensei.”

“Did you see him like that just now?” She looked terribly amused by Tsukiko’s awkward encounter. “Did you like what you saw?” Tsukiko’s face turned bright red again, and she let out a sort of scream-laugh. “Miss Moriyama has a cruuuush~!” she teased.

“I do not! It was just…a bizarre situation to be in.”

“I know, I know. I’m just teasing.” Kayama smiled knowingly, but left things well enough alone for the time being.

Though she maintained that she absolutely did not have those kinds of feelings for Aizawa-sensei, she did lie awake for some time thinking about the encounter. She couldn’t deny that he did look good, but it was from a purely objective standpoint. Certainly her younger self would have been delighted by the image, but she was over that now…right? Maybe she was just tired from a long day of fun in the sun, and her brain was going all wonky. Tsukiko turned over, trying to go to sleep. Things would make a lot more sense in the morning, when she could think more clearly. The nighttime had a way of heightening one’s emotions, making things seem more significant than they really were. Still, all she could see in her mind’s eye were rolling arm muscles, sinewy, skilled hands, a suggestive trail of hair… Tsukiko groaned, rubbing at her face. Shit. Damn it!
After finally managing to fall asleep, Tsukiko had slept well, no longer feeling quite so weird about what had happened the previous night. Neither she nor Aizawa-sensei said anything about it, not wanting to bring it up again. Most of the students already splashed around, acting a fool, while others searched the beach for rare shells, or buried one another in the sand. Tsukiko thought of enlisting class 1A to help her bury Aizawa-sensei once he fell asleep in the shade; she figured that the kids would get a kick out of pranking their teacher.

He wasn’t sleeping now, but rather cooling off in the water. Because this was a class trip, he wore a t-shirt to swim for the sake of propriety. Even so, it clung to his body when he emerged from the ocean, the fabric almost transparent. Wearing a white t-shirt kind of defeats the purpose, doesn’t it? The shirt fit loosely enough that he wasn’t quite as exposed as he had been the night before, but the dark color of Aizawa-sensei’s body hair still showed through, along with the cut shape of his upper arms. Tsukiko did her best not to stare, but she’d been correct in her teenage assessment that he was indeed a very attractive man. She grit her teeth, turning away and trying to forget the things she’d seen. The last thing she needed was to go through this all over again, pining after someone she could not have. Even if she truly never found another person who she felt was a good match for her, this wouldn’t work out, so she shouldn’t waste time thinking about it too much.

Moriyama’s cheeks were looking a bit pink, Shouta realized as he stepped out of the water, heading back to his spot underneath the massive umbrella. He hoped that she wasn’t getting sunburned. “You should put on more sunscreen; you’re looking a little bit red.”

“A-Am I?” she sputtered, looking flustered. She probably still felt a little awkward about what had happened the night before, Shouta realized. She’d seen him almost-naked as he returned from the men’s bath, and had promptly flushed bright red and scurried back into her room. He felt bad for having unintentionally put her in that situation, seeing more of him than she would ever want to. Hopefully things would go back to normal soon; Shouta missed their usual conversations. Moriyama rested on her own towel under the umbrella now, lips pursed in focus as she read the book laid out in front of her. It probably wasn’t noticeable to anyone else, but the expression struck Shouta as being kind of cute. Of course, Moriyama was cute. She’d always been cute. Her hair had gone kind of wavy from the salty water, tucked behind her ear now to keep it out of her face. That was cute. Her round cheek was smushed-up by the way she rested it on one hand. That was cute. The faint freckles starting to appear on her nose and shoulders from the sun were cute. The intense gaze of her violet eyes? Cute. The way she laid on her stomach, leaning up on her elbows pushed her breasts up and together in a way that wasn’t so much cute as it was...something else. Shouta looked away before he could notice anything else, cute or otherwise.

“I’m starving!” the students whined. “Is it ready now?” They’d been at this for a good twenty
minutes now, pestering Moriyama while she finished up cooking that crab pasta that she’d been going on and on about. Good-natured as ever, she didn’t seem to mind too much as she let the sauce simmer in the pan. In another skillet, the lump meat that had been cleaned out of the shells earlier heated up in butter and lemon juice, and would be combined with the sauce at the end. Shouta had been tasked with cooking the actual pasta, which was honestly the easiest part of the whole deal. He dumped the boiling water through a colander, shaking it to drain the noodles. Moriyama dumped the contents of the crab pan in with the sauce, mixing it all up together.

“Okay, okay, it’s ready!”

The students descended on the food like a pack of ravenous wolves, and a momentary flash of fear crossed Moriyama’s face, concerned that perhaps she should have made more. Once they’d been sated, scurrying off to the tables to devour their meal, the teachers were finally able to snag plates of their own. Shouta hadn’t realized just how hungry he had been until the food was in front of him, the aromas wafting up to his face. The light, buttery chunks of crab meat had been enveloped in a spicy tomato cream sauce, a combination that made his mouth water. He hadn’t known Moriyama to be such an adept chef, but it seemed that there were still a number of things that he didn’t know about her. She continued to surprise him day after day. Moriyama is...pretty amazing...

Chapter End Notes

This fic will be taking a brief hiatus while I take a little vacation of my own. The next chapter will be posted the week of June 19.
If You Love Me, Let Me Go

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Five Years Ago

Despite all of Tsukiko’s dread, the day of her graduation did arrive, much to her (unsurprised) dismay. While all of her classmates celebrated around her, she felt sick for the entire ceremony, barely paying attention to what should have been the greatest achievement of her life thus far. Instead, all she could think about was the jumpsuit-clad man leaning up against the wall, looking as bored as he always did, but with a twinkle of pride in his eye. This would be the last time she would ever see him, and she still questioned whether she should tell him how she felt about him while she still had the chance. If only she could slow down time, letting herself cling desperately to what she had left. Tsukiko had begun the year itching to be finished, but now she wanted her final year to last forever. Rin had noticed her friend’s distress, but she knew that saying anything about it would only make Tsukiko feel worse, so she just let things be; Rin would be there when she was ready to talk about it. She didn’t understand Tsukiko’s attraction to their teacher, but the feelings were real, along with her heartbreak.

The ceremony ended, with a chorus of relieved cheers from the happy graduates, and Tsukiko’s head began to spin. This...really was it. It was time to go home, diploma in hand, and try to forget about her beloved Aizawa-sensei, to forget about that goofy smile that the other students found creepy, but Tsukiko found endearing, to forget the way he gently encouraged her, ruffling her hair playfully, to forget the more... mature thoughts that came creeping in late at night when she couldn’t sleep. Tsukiko could already feel a lump in her throat, but she was determined not to let the tears fall while anyone could see. This was her own private anguish to bear. The tiny, optimistic voice in her head told her that maybe, just maybe, if she confessed her feelings, she’d be happily surprised, and Aizawa-sensei would feel the same way, but the pessimist in her drowned all of that out as she hesitantly dragged herself toward the courtyard, still not ready to say goodbye.
She could see him standing out there now, watching as the students ran away, ripping off their ties and waving *sayonara* to their old school. Tsukiko’s heart leapt into her throat.

“A-Aizawa-sensei?” she approached slowly, not at all ready for this.

Her teacher smiled at her. “Moriyama, congratulations.”

Tsukiko tucked a piece of hair behind her ear nervously. “Um...I didn’t want to leave without saying goodbye.” She couldn’t make eye contact with him, and she knew that her face had turned bright pink. *How embarrassing*... “Oh!” she remembered suddenly, pulling the length of her teacher’s capture weapon from her bag. “This belongs to you.”

Aizawa-sensei shook his head as he took it from her. Instead of pocketing the item, he tied it around Tsukiko’s ponytail in a rough-looking bow. “You should keep it. To remember m- your senior year.”

Heart racing, Tsukiko could feel her cheeks growing even hotter, words catching in her throat before they could make their way out. Instead of telling Aizawa-sensei everything, she bowed deeply. “Thank you, sensei, for everything.” As she straightened back up, he reached out as if to ruffle her hair one more time, but stopped himself. After all, she wasn’t his student any longer. Tsukiko gave him one last nod before turning away.

Though she seemed to do it with relative ease, turning and walking away was one of the hardest things Tsukiko had ever had to do. Her heart ached, the lump in her throat growing larger. She clenched her fists tight, fingernails digging into her palms, doing her best not to cry. Everyone else had already left the courtyard, but she couldn’t risk Aizawa-sensei realizing that something was wrong and asking her about it. That would just be too much to handle. Tsukiko grit her teeth at the thought of it, of him gathering her in his arms and asking what was hurting her. Her vision blurred, tears beginning to spill over her eyelashes. Still she kept her jaw clenched, determined to cry silently. This secret would die with her, she swore. No one else needed to know just how much this parting tore her up inside, just how much she wanted to scream and curse and smash glass bottles against the wall. Small objects in her path hovered low, affected by the deep emotions Tsukiko kept buried deep within.

*She must be feeling so excited to be done*, Shouta thought, observing the rocks and discarded refuse lifted unconsciously by Moriyama’s telekinesis. He gave a bittersweet smile, saddened to see her go. He had known that this day would come, and she would leave him forever, but it was more difficult than he had expected. The smile sagged into a heavy frown; he no longer needed to keep up a happy face. Shouta could wallow in his misery as much as he wanted now. He continued to watch as his now-former student disappeared into the distance, her silvery-blue hair mingling with the cherry blossom petals swept up by the wind. He could only imagine that she had a huge
smile plastered on her face, elated by her massive achievement. Though he knew deep down that it was time, Shouta hated to see her go, left only with the memories made over the past year. They seemed like a lousy consolation prize.

As she neared the gate, Tsukiko could practically feel her spirit calling out to Aizawa-sensei, begging him to stop her from leaving, to let her stay by his side forever. She had known that her dream of becoming his bride had been unrealistic, yet she still yearned for it, heart threatening to tear itself in two should she be separated from him. Please don’t let me go so easily… Please… Once outside the gate, Tsukiko slumped against the stone wall, trying to get some of her crying done so that she could get home without making a show of herself all the way back. She pressed her hand against her mouth to muffle her gasping sobs until they began to subside, and she could dry her eyes and make her way toward the train station.

With Moriyama disappearing from view, Shouta could feel his entire body sagging. For the first time since Mariko’s death, he’d been able to feel something for someone, and now that someone was gone, and he was right back where he had started. Of course, a relationship with Moriyama would never have been a realistic goal, but it was nice to be around her, at least. It made Shouta feel hopeful for the first time in a long time. He would find himself smiling more, feeling happy, or at least content, more. What would he do now? The loneliness was already settling in. If he were to find out that Moriyama had even a hint of feeling for him, he wouldn’t hesitate to go all-in; he was just weak in that way. The way she had looked at him before… No, that was just wishful thinking. Though, she had seemed hesitant to leave...

Shouta remained rooted to the spot, waiting, praying that Moriyama would come back. If there was any chance that she would come back to him, he would be willing to wait forever. Hell, even if she only returned to retrieve something that she had forgotten, it would at least give him the opportunity to be honest about what he had been feeling all these months. If she felt the same way, great. If not, it would at least be closure. Even as afternoon made its way toward evening, Shouta stayed right there in hopes that Moriyama would come back to him. Every once in a while, he would hear approaching footsteps and grow optimistic, only to be disappointed by the face of a passing stranger. Still he remained, unmoving, unswayed.

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Just when Tsukiko would think that she couldn’t possibly cry anymore, another wave of grief would hit her, and she would find herself weeping into her pillow once more. The truth was undeniable; Aizawa-sensei really was gone for good, and she had thrown away her last chance to tell him what she felt for him. Not that it would have mattered anyway. He was a man, and, though she was eighteen years old, she was still just a girl. No matter how much she ached for him, it wouldn’t do her any good. She would simply have to find a way to cope with this new reality, pretending to be okay until she truly was. Fake it ‘til you make it. Tsukiko hated this. Why would the universe present her with someone who fit her so perfectly, only to tear him away from her. Then again, it had done the same thing to Aizawa-sensei, hadn’t it? Now they were the same.
It was obvious to Tsukiko’s family that something was going on, but they knew better than to meddle. Kenji wasn’t exactly the emotional type, so he left his sister to her own devices, instructing Genkiko to do the same. Their parents had long ago given up on trying to get Tsukiko to talk about her problems when she was like this; she always had been stubborn, determined to bear her burdens on her own. It wasn’t healthy, but they were at a loss for ways to help her. They had believed that things were getting better for her, since this school year had seen her so light, so happy. She’d had a difficult slump in the late fall, but had seemed to have come out of it. Maybe she felt as though she were going to lose all of her friends now that high school had ended. Maybe she was afraid for the future. Tsukiko’s father lamented how the telepathy quirk had skipped a generation. If only he could use that power, he said, maybe he could figure out what was hurting his daughter so deeply.

Tsukiko sat up quickly with a sudden thought. It wasn’t unusual for Aizawa-sensei to stay late in the afternoon. Of course, the school year had ended and he had no real reason to stay afterward today, but if there was any chance at all that he was still there… Tsukiko had to try. This might be her one last shot, and she’d be damned if she wasn’t going to take it. She rifled through her drawers for something halfway decent-looking to put on, since she’d just thrown on an old t-shirt and a pair of pajama shorts upon arriving home. Drying her eyes, Tsukiko yanked on the fresh clothes, gathering her hair up again and tying it with the gifted makeshift ribbon. Normally, she would have wanted to re-do her makeup, but she couldn’t waste any time on that right now. Her parents seemed surprised to see her emerge from her pit of despair, looking presentable, but they didn’t protest at all. “I’m going out,” she announced curtly, making a beeline for the front door.

UA wasn’t really all that far from Tsukiko’s house, but she still worried the whole way there, heart pounding, praying that she wasn’t too late. The train seemed to run slower than usual, despite her willing it to please just go a little bit faster! She almost felt sick from the anticipation; would her sensei still be there, or was he really gone forever? As soon as the train pulled into the station, and the doors slid open, Tsukiko scrambled off, breaking into a sprint toward her old school. Please still be there! Please still be there! Please! Even if Aizawa-sensei rejected her flat-out, it would still be better than simply disappearing into the night, never knowing. Finally the school came into view, and she dashed along the sidewalk, hopeful as she saw that the front gate was still open.

Tsukiko tore through the gate, only to be greeted by an empty courtyard, the setting sun casting long shadows across the ground. “S-Sensei?” she called out weakly, though she knew it was in vain. He was gone now, never to be seen by her eyes again; she had missed her chance. Tsukiko slumped into the dust, covering her face with her hands as she burst into tears once more, entire body quaking with the force of her weeping. Her chest ached as though her heart had been ripped out of her, only to be stomped into the dirt. Aizawa-sensei was gone, she realized finally. No more last chances; time was up. Even as she had no tears left to cry, her whimpering continued, a pathetic figure cowering in front of her old school, mourning her lost love. One’s first love was always hard to forget, but to lose your first, and maybe only love? Well, that was maybe just too cruel. Tsukiko made a mental note to call Kaito and ask if maybe he’d pick up a six-pack for her.

As she wept, she suddenly felt a soft touch on the top of her head. It didn’t ruffle her hair the way
Aizawa-sensei always did, but was almost plush. Tsukiko looked up to see Principal Nedzu standing there, matching her in height as she crouched down on the ground. He seemed to understand the situation, but didn’t address it directly, knowing it would probably be an embarrassing subject for her. “It’s going to be alright,” he reassured her.

Tsukiko knew better than to fire back with “How would you know?” Despite his cartoonish stuffed-animal appearance, the principal was wise beyond comprehension, so she had to take him at his word. “It doesn’t feel that way right now…”

“I know. I can tell that you’re hurting. But you’re a tough person. Everyone thinks so. You’ve made it this far, and you will make it through this too.” Nedzu smiled in his normal, cheerful sort of way. “Remember, your life is bigger than this. You have to go beyond.”

“Plus Ultra.” Tsukiko attempted a weak smile.

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The knob on Shouta’s front door smacked against the wall, leaving a minor dent as he kicked it open a little more roughly than intended. He yanked his boots off, discarding them by the entrance to his apartment and dropping his things from school on the table. He set down a brown paper bag and unfurled the top to remove his bounty- a bottle of whiskey, a pack of cigarettes, and a six-pack of chuhai, purchased in Moriyama’s honor. Shouta hadn’t consumed the sweet beverage in years, but it was a symbolic gesture more than anything. He also wondered how his body would tolerate the cigarette smoke; he’d never been all that into it, but he had used them for a brief time to deal with stress when his hero career was beginning, and then again in the wake of Mariko’s passing. Now, Shouta was feeling overwhelmed once more, and the nicotine brought him some small peace. He rummaged through his drawers to find a long-forgotten ashtray before busting the packet open and lighting up, taking a long drag and then exhaling, watching the smoke hang limply in the air.

Cigarette sticking out of his mouth, Shouta went to dig through his bag for the sticky note where he’d written down Hizashi’s new phone number. He wanted to update the contact in his phone before he forgot, as he would likely want to call his friend tomorrow and talk for a while, hoping that such a conversation would make him feel a little better. As he thumbed through the books, Shouta noticed a slip of thick paper sticking out from inside the small leather notebook where he kept his lecture notes. *What’s this?* He hadn’t put it there. Shouta pulled out the journal and opened it up, freezing as the pages fell open to reveal the hidden item. He gasped, almost choking on his cigarette as he eyed the glossy polaroid, which he’d forgotten had even been taken. *Sensei, smile!* Shouta’s homeroom class had gotten to go on a field trip a couple of months back, and Moriyama had brought along the instant camera she’d gotten as a Christmas gift. He stared down at the photograph now, at Moriyama’s beautiful little smiling face next to his own surprised expression. *She must have snuck this into my notes when I wasn’t looking.*
It took a few minutes for Shouta to truly react to this development, for the time being just sitting there, staring as wisps of smoke left the end of his cigarette. Slowly, his hands started to tremble, a terrible ache taking the place of his feelings of emptiness. She walked away and I just...let her go… Beginning to shake all over, Shouta placed the photo on the floor in front of where he’d seated himself, running his hands through his hair, wide-eyed. Though he’d known that Moriyama was gone from his life, it hadn’t truly hit him until now. His chest felt dangerously tight, and he gasped for air, almost hyperventilating, head spinning. She’s gone… Shouta’s ears were ringing now; he felt hot. She’s gone… The lump in his chest moved up into his throat, vision going blurry. Wet drops dotted the carpet as he leaned over the photo, unblinking, utterly silent in his grief.

She’s gone...

Both he and Tsukiko drank themselves into oblivion that night, never knowing that the other felt the exact same way about this change, never knowing that they shared the exact same pain, the same hopelessness. They both woke up the next day, heads pounding, and continued on with their lives, lives that felt decidedly less full without the other in them.
To the students’ dismay, their class trip was rapidly drawing to a close. The sun rose on their last full day of vacation, and they rose with it, determined to make the most of the time they had left. By 7:00 am most of the class had already eaten breakfast and prepared themselves to head down to the beach. Of course, this meant that their chaperones would have to rouse themselves as well, even as they did not feel quite as well rested as their youthful counterparts. Shouta struggled to keep his eyes open as he and Moriyama waited for the coffee pot to sputter to a stop, churning out the life-giving brew. She seemed equally worse-for-wear this morning, head resting in her hands, dozing lightly as she waited, seated on the kitchen countertop. Before, Shouta had watched in mild amazement as she gave a little hop, using her arm strength to hoist herself the rest of the way up. Though, maybe it wasn’t really all that incredible; Moriyama was still young, and stronger than she looked.

Truthfully, Shouta had actually really enjoyed the trip this time around. Normally, this kind of thing was exhausting for him, running around, making sure no one got hurt, waking up at the crack of dawn to take a group of rowdy teenagers to the beach. He did feel tired, and looked forward to taking a loooong nap after arriving home, but the fact remained that he did have fun this time. Of course, other than being their typical hyperactive selves, none of the students had gotten themselves into trouble, allowing things to go smoothly. With plenty of chaperones, Shouta could sneak in the occasional siesta on the beach while the other adults supervised. Lazily, he lifted his drooping eyelids, and, seeing that the coffee maker had finished its task, nudged Moriyama to wake her. Of course, he could just make his own damn coffee, but she always seemed to make it better than he did. It always tasted sweeter when Moriyama made it. Then again...she seemed to make a lot of things sweeter.

Perhaps what had made this trip different from the others was her presence. Moriyama had come along as the second girls’ chaperone, and Shouta had ended up spending a decent amount of time
with her. Though Nemuri and Hizashi were dear friends to him, their loud, extroverted personalities could sometimes be a bit much. Hanging out with Moriyama didn’t take quite as much out of him; they had a quiet, easy sort of friendship. Yes, Shouta could call it that now. Even as she refused to call him by his given name, and though she continued her role as his therapist, they were friends. Moriyama had even accompanied him on a brief nighttime stroll down the shore, almost conducting a sort of mini-session as they walked. It didn’t go too in-depth, considering the context, but she did want to know how Shouta was feeling, how things were going for him. Once or twice, he’d gotten distracted by the way the pale moonlight framed Moriyama’s face, dancing on her cheekbones and the tip of her nose, but he quickly disregarded it, convincing himself that he was just tired, and being tired made people delusional.

Shouta had to question whether he had started to fall back into his old pattern, if he was growing too attached to Moriyama again. He hoped that this wasn’t the case, as he’d already broken his own heart over her once. To do the same thing all over again would be too much. Cringing, he thought back to that night, the one he’d spent staring at that polaroid, drinking and smoking and crying real tears on his living room floor, entire body aching at Moriyama’s sudden absence. Shouta wouldn’t willingly put himself through that again. Besides, he was only attached to her now as a friend. Even if he were to have those kind of feelings for Moriyama again, she’d never reciprocate them. She probably wanted someone closer to her own age, someone livelier, more pure of heart than Shouta. Moriyama already knew more about him than he liked; if she were to know every sordid detail, she’d be appalled by him. No...it wasn’t like that this time.

Even though the sky remained just as clear and bright as it had been for the whole trip, the surf seemed different today. For the past few days, the waves had been so gentle, lightly massaging the shoreline as they moved in. Today, they were rough and choppy, raising swimmers up and down and crashing violently onto the beach. Was a storm on the way? The students would certainly be disappointed if they had to spend the end of the trip indoors. For now at least, the sunny atmosphere seemed to hold up. Shouta spread out a towel under the already-raised umbrella, sitting down in the shade to supervise while Moriyama dumped her things in the sand, stripping off her shorts and t-shirt to join the students already enjoying the water.

Once or twice she turned back toward the shore, only to be hit from behind by some massive wave, dunking her underwater. Moriyama gasped for air as she surfaced, making Shouta nervous, but she quickly shook it off, laughing at her own misfortune. He began to wonder if it was really safe for anyone to be out there right now with the water as chaotic as it was. Several students ventured out a little farther than he liked, fighting the riptide as they swam back toward the shore. Moriyama seemed to notice the potential danger as well, calling out to them and imploring them to move back into shallower waters, where they could at the very least touch bottom. The water seemed to churn more and more as time passed, and Shouta began to wonder if he should make everyone get out for their own safety. He knew it wouldn’t be a popular decision, but it was always better to be cautious when it came to safety.

Shouta should have known to trust his gut. Before long, the waves climbed wildly high as if caused by some sort of tropical storm. The water swirled and the students had to grab each other’s hands to avoid being swept away by the undercurrent. Shouta scrambled to his feet, trying to call out to
them, but at the moment, they were all too concerned with getting each other back into the safety of the shallows. This was all too strange; this sort of pattern wouldn’t happen in the absence of a storm. No, something else had to be going on. Shouta had a feeling, grabbing his cell phone to call the other teachers outside. A potential danger lurked in the deep, a villain, intent on causing chaos. Moriyama was still out there with the students, helping bring everyone back to where it was safer. None of them seemed to realize what was really going on, simply believing that they needed to be more cautious with their maritime play. The other chaperones made it outside quickly, also concerned by the strange aquatic phenomena.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Nemuri murmured, equal parts awestruck and terrified.

With one final massive wave, a figure began to emerge from the water, almost appearing to be comprised of it himself. His feet rested lightly on the rippling surface and he said nothing, instead making a small gesture with his hands to create a strong undercurrent, jerking several frightened students toward him. They cried out in surprise, fighting the pull as much as they could. “What are you going to do now, heroes?” he laughed mirthfully, creating a small whirlpool to suck one student under. The others protested, but he simply feigned that he intended to do the same to them, and they grew quiet quickly, realizing that this might be a task for the pros. Moriyama submerged herself, and Shouta’s heart skipped a beat as he realized what she risked, but moments later, she re-emerged with the sputtering student, his classmates guiding him back to shore. The villain seemed shocked that she’d been able to recover his hostage so easily, and even more so when she jutted her hand out, pulling the others back to safety with her unseen psychokinetic force.

“We need to get everyone back to shore!” Shouta barked to his colleagues, motioning directions to them. The teachers waded into the shallow water, helping the students out as they hurried away from the action, as much as they wanted to stay and help. With everyone else safely back on the beach, Moriyama started to wade back. Realizing that she’d be a strong opponent, the attacker hit her with wave after wave, hoping to knock her off balance and sweep her under. Water rushed over her head, and she stumbled, but managed to grab Shouta’s hand just in time, and he quickly pulled her back. She coughed hoarsely for a few moments, having inhaled a small amount of seawater, but ultimately stood up straight, bracing herself for the fight ahead. Though, Shouta had to admit that she didn’t look too intimidating right now, more akin to a stray cat that had been caught in the rain than to a professional hero.

“Everyone, go inside,” Moriyama instructed the students, not wanting any of them to be hurt further.

“Let us help you!” Midoriya pleaded. “If we all work together…”

“Go inside,” Shouta repeated. “We can handle this one.”
“But…”

“It’s too dangerous.”

The students grumbled in disagreement; they’d survived situations much worse than this, but they did as they were told, running for the safety of the lodge as their adult chaperones faced off with the villain. Shouta turned back to catch his opponent in his gaze, activating his erasure, making the watery figure sink down into the surf, which stopped its violent churning for the time being. He seemed to notice quickly what had taken place, observing Shouta’s eyes which seemed to glow red as he used his quirk. The villain dove underwater then, easily negating the previous effects. This fight wouldn’t be quite as simple as rendering the enemy powerless.

It seemed as though the pros’ powers weren’t quite suited to defeating this specific villain. Shouta couldn’t use his erasure on an opponent that he couldn’t see, the sound waves of Hizashi’s booming voice couldn’t travel as well underwater, and Nemuri had to be mindful of her narcotic pheromones, lest she knock out everyone save for herself, Moriyama, and the villain, who had demonstrated that he could breathe underwater. Sensing the unbalanced power between himself and the heroes before him, the aquatic enemy raised the biggest wave he could, ten stories tall and with the potential to flood everything within a two-kilometer radius. Such an attack would cause a massive amount of damage, and put hundreds, if not thousands, of people in danger. He sent the wave careening toward the shore, much to the heroes’ terror. At the last moment, Moriyama threw out her hands, effectively ripping the wall of water apart as it was thrown backward, taking the villain down with it. It was a feat that took several tons of force, more than Shouta had ever seen her use before.

His eyes widened at the sheer extent of her power, pulse quickening. Gone was the girl he had known before, frustrated by her failure to understand and control her power. In her place was a woman, fully assured of her abilities and courageous in the face of danger. Moriyama was a force to be reckoned with, her gaze intense as it glowed bright white. Something stirred in Shouta, chest tightening in a way that it hadn’t in a long time. Try as he did to keep them locked away, those feelings were all rushing back now, and he was powerless to stop them. Loving her, it seemed, was an inevitability. How could he not adore someone so determined, so powerful, so alive. Though, it was a different Moriyama that he loved now. This one was stronger and happier than before, self-assured and just as hard-headed as she’d always been. If Shouta had fallen for the old Moriyama, then this version could only pull him in further. She turned back to face him, grinning as if to say, “Are you proud of me, sensei?” He wasn’t so much proud as he was completely in awe.

“I have an idea,” she told him suddenly, bringing Shouta back into the moment.

“Tell me.”
Moriyama grinned fiercely. “Next time he resurfaces, I’ll grab hold of him with my telekinesis. Then, you erase his quirk, and I’ll reel him in.” It was a relatively simple plan, but it had few variables which could go wrong. She knew that the villain would have to come up out of the water again, if only to see what the heroes were doing. He did finally, when wave after massive wave did nothing to dissuade them. The enemy didn’t bring himself up all the way, but it was enough, and Moriyama jerked him sharply out of the water. “Now!” Shouta refocused his attention, and the swirling ocean became still and serene. Sensing that his powers had been stolen once more, the watery figure moved to dive back down, only to be held perfectly frozen in place. With the villain rendered powerless, Moriyama pulled him back toward the beach, with his visage human now rather than watery. Hizashi retrieved Shouta’s capture weapon from where he had left it in the lodge, helping Nemuri tie their prisoner up tight.

Since the heroes didn’t necessarily know the full extent of this villain’s power, Shouta kept his erasure carefully trained on him until the proper authorities arrived to take him away. In the meantime, he prayed that Moriyama wouldn’t take this opportunity to crawl inside his head, as he still questioned what he had felt in that moment. At least everyone seemed distracted right now, and Shouta breathed a sigh of relief as she went to inform the students that everything had been taken care of, and that they would be allowed to come back out as soon as the police took the attacker away. All the same, he still felt distracted even as everyone else was still able to focus on the task at hand. What had he really felt in that moment? Was it really that? Or was it just pride in his former student? Shouta wanted to believe that it was the latter, that he wasn’t doing this all over again. He didn’t know if he could handle going through all of this a second time.

But that was exactly what was happening. As much as Shouta wanted to deny it, all of those feelings that he’d hidden away for so long were bubbling up once again. He almost couldn’t look right at Moriyama because she shone so bright. Maybe he just hadn’t seen it before. Maybe he’d just chosen not to notice. Everytime she caught his eye, his chest would throb in a way that it never had before. As strong as those feelings had been the first time, they were even more potent now. It wasn’t good, and Shouta wasn’t proud of it, but it was the truth. He didn’t want to feel like this, but it wasn’t really something that he could help, either. Now that things were like this again, he began to wonder exactly how long he could hide things from Moriyama. Wouldn’t it inevitably come up in one of his sessions that he had feelings for someone again? What then? And it wasn’t like the activation period for his erasure was getting any longer. If these feelings were this strong, and his time ran out, she would find out what he was thinking whether she made a conscious effort or not.

In the end, there wasn’t a damn thing Shouta could do about any of this, because whether he liked it or not, he was falling in love with Moriyama all over again.
As much as it shocked her to feel such a way, Nemuri was actually looking forward to heading home. Of course she loved the beach. Of course she loved the fresh seafood on which she’d been able to dine every day since their arrival. However, today had been exhausting, with the surprise villain attack and all, and Nemuri very much looked forward to sleeping in her own bed. Tatami floors and flat pillows just didn’t stack up against her memory foam mattress, and her spine was feeling the difference. “I know it sounds crazy, but I honestly can’t wait to get back,” she admitted sheepishly to Shouta, who didn’t seem to notice that she’d said anything. He had a far-off look in his eyes, seeming to gaze out at the horizon. Not far away, Miss Moriyama had engaged several students in a game which involved keeping a volleyball in the air for as long as possible.

“Well, maybe I shouldn’t get too ahead of myself.”

“Hmm? What?” Nemuri’s words seemed to register finally, and he looked up, but not before his friend could put the pieces together. He’d been looking at Moriyama, his gaze dreamy, a soft smile adorning his lips. Shouta had unknowingly confirmed Nemuri’s suspicions, and, on the inside, she rejoiced. She was gonna get that man remarried if it was the last thing she did, goddammit!

“Moriyama was your student, wasn’t she?” Nemuri asked, trying to get Shouta talking about her. Perhaps he would confide in her his feelings, and, with her encouragement, find the strength to confess those feelings to Moriyama herself, and…

“Y-Yeah, that’s right. She was in the 3A class my first year teaching.” He furrowed his eyebrows. “I can’t believe it’s been long enough for her to be working in a school now… I’m getting old…”

“Hey, if you’re getting old, that means I’m getting old, so watch it,” Nemuri joked. “Has she always been...that strong?” She was referring to Moriyama’s telekinesis, the ability she had used earlier to blast away the massive waves that attacked the shore and threatened travelers and locals.

Shouta sighed, thinking. “In terms of raw power, yes, but she hasn’t always been able to control it that well. She didn’t even know she had the telekinesis until she was in my class. Until then, she’d just been using telepathy.”

“Mind reading, huh? So that gal knows every perverted thing that goes on in our heads?”
“Don’t be inappropriate, Nemuri.” Shouta never could take a joke, it seemed. “Besides, it’s a little more complicated than that. Moriyama has a firm grasp on her power. She can pretty much turn it on and off at will. The only time it’s automatic is if a person is focusing really hard on a specific thought, or if they’re feeling a particular emotion strongly.”

Lucky you’ve got your erasure, or she’d be sure to find out how hard you’ve been mooning over her! “What do you think it’s like, having a quirk like that?”

Shouta thought about it for a few minutes, and then he sighed again. “I think it’s probably lonely. If she wants to, she can know everything about a person, down to the ugliest, most putrid part of their person, of their psyche. It probably makes it hard for her to get close to people.” He looked sad for her, face seeming to sag. “I won’t say too much, but I know it’s been stressful for her in the past, because in addition to her own thoughts, she’s been bombarded with those of other people too. She learned way too young how ugly the world can be.”

“I didn’t think about it that way, but I think you’re probably right.”

“I don’t envy her. It’s a hard way to move through the world.”

Nemuri could tell there was more to the story than Shouta was telling her, but those secrets were his to keep. His empathy for Moriyama clearly ran deep. Her pain was his pain, and Nemuri hoped that the reverse was true as well. At the very least, the sessions Shouta had been having with her seemed to be helping him, even if the change was gradual. Of course, it didn’t hurt that he loved her. This wasn’t just a sudden infatuation, either. Nemuri could see that much. This love was deeply ingrained in him; she had to wonder how long he had loved Moriyama. It was in his eyes, in the way he spoke to her. It was a love that had persisted for a long time, a love that would last forever.

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After several long days of chasing after high schoolers, and keeping them out of trouble, the chaperones felt that they had earned some fun for themselves. All of the students had been secured to their rooms for the night, and Hizashi had turned up to the common room with an obscene amount of alcohol. The sight of it had set Shouta on edge. Moriyama had told him before that she didn’t have a drinking problem anymore, but it still worried him. His concern had since been alleviated as he watched her slowly sip her drink, rather than shotgunning it in ten seconds flat and reaching for another. She was on her second beer now, but didn’t really seem inebriated, tempering her alcohol consumption with pretzels from a nearby bag. Nemuri and Hizashi, on the other hand, were drinking like a couple of teenagers who’d managed to get an older sibling to buy for them,
and wanted to take advantage of their luck. Shouta prayed that neither of his dumbass friends had noticed his blooming affection for Moriyama, lest they say something about it in their drunken stupor.

“Let’s play truth or dare!” Nemuri sputtered suddenly, an evil glint in her eye. Both Shouta and Tsukiko stiffened, knowing how badly things could go if their friend went too far with this.

Shouta gave an irritated scoff, gathering his long hair back and trying to play it cool. “Aren’t we all a little old to be playing a game like that?” He watched Moriyama breathe a sigh of relief. She clearly didn’t want to be a part of such a thing either, which was understandable, considering the kind of secrets she kept.

“Oh, come oooooonnnnn!” Nemuri pleaded. “Don’t be a buzzkill, Shoutaaaaa!” She turned her attention to Moriyama in attempt to get more people on her side. “You’ll play with us, won’t you, Moriyama-chan?”

Tsukiko shifted her gaze to the side, reluctant. If she agreed, then Kayama might end up asking her weird questions about Aizawa-sensei! “I don’t know...a game like that can be really embarrassing for some people…”

“Oh, don’t worry,” Yamada reassured her, I’ll make sure Nemuri isn’t too hard on you.”

Well...maybe if I just choose “dare” most of the time... “Well, maybe it could be fun…” Tsukiko didn’t want to be a wet blanket.

Shouta made an irritated noise. Now that Moriyama had gotten sucked into this, he had to play too, so that he could make sure no one asked her anything too inappropriate. “Fine, just keep it PG, please.”

That was the only opening Nemuri needed. “Okay then, Shouta; truth or dare?”

Either choice had the potential to go bad fast, with Nemuri asking. “Truth,” he decided finally. Surely she didn’t know too much about what he was thinking. She would probably just ask some sort of inappropriate question about whether he preferred breasts or buttocks, or if he had any kind of kinks. Shouta could maneuver and dismiss questions like that pretty easily. He lifted the beer can to his mouth.
“If you had to kiss one of your students, present or former, who would it be?”

Shouta spat out the liquid he’d just taken from the can, coughing in shock. Moriyama looked alarmed. Of course she would, this was a terribly invasive question after all. The answer was obvious, of course, there was never any question about it. Shouta wished that he could easily lie and say that there’d been a girl a couple of years back, who’d matured rather nicely since her graduation, but such a statement was too vague, and too far from the truth to be compelling. In the end, it was “truth or dare,” not “make up a nice story or dare.”

*Maybe a half-truth would suffice.* Shouta made another disgruntled noise, hoping his face didn’t betray the true feelings behind his answer. “I think it would have to be Moriyama.” He couldn’t bring himself to look her in the face until he explained himself. “She’s old enough that it wouldn’t be grossly inappropriate, and we’re friendly enough that she would understand what kind of situation I was in, seeing as you said I ‘had’ to kiss a student.” Nemuri looked visibly disappointed. She’d clearly posed the question hoping for something juicy, only to be let down. Shouta knew now that she had too much information, and that he shouldn’t accept another truth or dare coming from her.

Tsukiko stared down into her beer, heart still racing, praying that the hot flush on her cheeks would just subside already. She’d nearly keeled over and died when Aizawa-sensei had answered Kayama’s inappropriate question (which was very nearly entrapment, an argument could be made). However, there had been a logical explanation for his choice, smacking down any chance that he did have romantic feelings for her. Tsukiko shook her head, chasing the thoughts away; it was best she didn’t dwell on this for too long.

Nemuri seemed to still be mulling over it. “Moriyama, huh?”

Shouta shifted uncomfortably. “Yes…”

Suddenly serious, Nemuri turned to look at him, her gaze sharp. “Do it then.”

“Oh-KAY then!” Tsukiko stood up, padding over to the other woman and grasping her under the arms to pull her to her feel. “I think someone’s had a little too much to drink. Time for bed, drunkie.” From a quick glance taken as she started to rush Kayama out of the room, Aizawa-sensei looked relieved. Even if Tsukiko had been the sensible choice, the prospect of actually going through with such an act made him uncomfortable. At the same time, she found herself just slightly disappointed...

After sending Nemuri down the hallway toward the girls’ room, Moriyama turned back to tell
Shouta and Hizashi good night before heading out herself. “Moriyama, wait just a moment. Can I speak with you right quick before you go?”

“Sure.” Tsukiko’s heart jumped as Aizawa-sensei followed her out of the room. “What is it?”

“Listen, I’m sorry about all of that, if what Nemuri or I said made you uncomfortable.” Shouta had to wonder if it would be better for him to leave it alone, but he didn’t want Moriyama to think that he wasn’t taking her feelings into consideration.

“Ah, don’t worry about it, it’s fine.” Her cheeks tinted pink, Shouta could see that she still felt a little strange about it, but she wasn’t upset. She smiled, rather unbothered. “After all, we were all drinking. No one meant anything by it.”

“O-Of course. Good night then.” Shouta’s secret was safe, it seemed, and he turned back to drag Hizashi back to the room where they both belonged.

As she watched Aizawa-sensei turn away, the sound of Kayama’s voice behind her made Tsukiko jump. “I guess it’s time for bed then?”

“Jeez! You startled me!”

“A little on edge, are we?”

Tsukiko frowned. “You shouldn’t have provoked him like that.”

“Oh, come on! You know you wouldn’t have minded!” Kayama raised her eyebrows knowingly.

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Tsukiko maintained the best poker face she could, but it didn’t help her case. Kayama somehow managed to raise her brows higher. “I...wouldn’t want him doing something just for the sake of a stupid truth or dare game!”

“So if a kiss had been freely given, you wouldn’t have minded.”
“If it had been freely given…” Tsukiko’s voice trailed off, the bright color of her face betraying her true feelings. “D-Don’t be ridiculous!”

Though she looked like she might explode with joy, Kayama kept quiet until she and Tsukiko had returned to the girls’ room. As soon as the door closed, she let loose with her jubilation. “Miss Moriyama has a crush!” she gushed to anyone who was listening.

“Shh! Don’t go around saying things like that!” Tsukiko knew she had little chance of convincing her colleague that she felt nothing besides friendship for Aizawa-sensei, but she still didn’t want her running around gossipping about this!

Mina’s eyes sparkled. She loved talking about things like this, and Uraraka was always so tight-lipped about what boy she liked. Maybe Miss Moriyama would be more excited to share. “What’s he like? Is he cute?”

Kayama burst out laughing at the question, and Tsukiko cringed. No one in the world would ever consider Aizawa-sensei cute. Of course Tsukiko found him attractive, but in a different kind of way. “Not cute,” Kayama wheezed, “Not cute at all!”

“Oh, so he’s more of the handsome type,” Jiro concluded. This, of course, sent Kayama into another fit of giggles, as she didn’t really think “handsome” was the right word either.

“Well...looks aren’t everything,” Yaoyorozu remarked. “He might be really kind. Miss Moriyama’s quirk is telepathy, right? She’s probably looking for someone with a good mind, and a good heart, rather than someone who’s good-looking.”

That was true. Asui seemed to be thinking hard about it. “I think I might know who it is,” she said finally.

“Who is it?” the other girls demanded. “Tell us!”

Asui shook her head. “I’m not going to say, because I don’t think Miss Moriyama wants to talk about it very much.”

“I-I think that’s true,” Uraraka agreed. “It’s kind of private.”
Still drunk, Kayama couldn’t take it anymore. “It’s Aizawa-sensei!” she blurted out, sending all the girls into the room through the five stages of grief, or at least into shock.

“Is...Is it really?” Jiro asked finally, trying (and failing) to hide her bafflement.

For all of her ability to detect the lies of others, Tsukiko herself was actually a pretty bad liar. “No...of course not! He used to be my teacher! That would be...silly...”

Uraraka looked sympathetic. “Whether it’s true or not, I don’t think we should talk about it anymore. I think Miss Moriyama wants to keep this kind of thing to herself.”

“You’re right,” Yaoyorozu added. “We probably shouldn’t be talking about the teachers’ private lives anyway.”

The others agreed reluctantly, busy themselves discussing upcoming school events instead. Tsukiko breathed a sigh of relief. Hopefully what they’d learned tonight wouldn’t get around too much.

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In the boys’ room, Shouta was having a similarly bad time. Hizashi was being, well, Hizashi, and Shouta didn’t know how long his friend could keep his trap shut about all of this Moriyama business. At the very least, Shouta hoped, teenage boys wouldn’t care too much about romance gossip. Unfortunately, he would be dead wrong. “I’m so happy my best friend is finally falling in love again!” Shouta cringed at the word “again,” and he had to wonder how Hizashi really felt about all of this deep down, if it hurt him to see the man who had devoted himself to his sister falling for another woman. Of course, Hizashi had been his friend before he’d been his brother-in-law, and it had been a long time since Mariko’s passing. After all this time, it was natural for someone who had been widowed to move on. On the surface at least, Hizashi seemed happy, as though he’d been wanting Shouta to find someone else to love, as though he’d been worried that his friend might be lonely if he kept to himself forever.

“What do you mean ‘falling in love?’” Kirishima perked up. Uh-oh. “Does Aizawa-sensei have a girlfriend?” He gave a thumbs-up. “Nice job, sensei!”

“No, I don’t have a girlfriend,” Shouta replied flatly, hoping that his students would leave it at that.
“Well, not yet,” Hizashi teased. “But soon!”

“Oh, so there’s someone you like, but you haven’t asked her out yet,” Kaminari concluded, continuing the display of disregard for people’s boundaries.

“No, there’s not. Let it go, Hizashi.”

“Oh, you’re no fun, Shouta.”

Shouta settled down inside his sleeping bag, mildly annoyed as his students began to pester Hizashi in hushed tones, hungering for information that they DID NOT need. Why were they so interested in his (nonexistent) love life, anyway? Suddenly he could hear one of the teens squawk in surprise as Hizashi had apparently spilled the beans. “Are you spreading dumb rumors again, Mic?”

“Is it true?” Sero asked, grinning broadly, excited. “Do you really have a thing for Miss Moriyama?”

“I don’t have a ‘thing’ for anyone.” Shouta turned over, his back facing the ecstatic group. “Go to sleep.”

Despite his protests, the fervent whispering continued, speculating where Shouta might take his lady love on a date, if and when they might get married, that kind of stupid thing. As predicted, most of the boys weren’t really interested in his private life, but of course, most of them were the more mature members of his class. Iida thought it was improper to discuss their teacher’s private life, and Bakugou just thought it was stupid. While he didn’t seem interested in participation in this dissection of Shouta’s personal business, Shinsou observed his classmates’ animated conversation with great amusement.

Izuku studied his teacher’s reaction to the other students’ discussion carefully. Aizawa-sensei seemed more irritated about all of this than he would normally expect. Typically, the man would brush this kind of thing off as silly, but wouldn’t let it bother him too much. Watching his teacher brood silently off to one side of the room, Izuku was inclined to believe that what Present Mic had told them was true, and, if that was the case, of course Aizawa-sensei wouldn’t want them talking about it at length. He was the kind of person who would want to keep those things private. “Guys, I think we should leave it alone. This is Aizawa-sensei’s private business, and if he doesn’t want to talk about it, then we shouldn’t either.”
“You’re probably right,” Kirishima admitted sheepishly. “I guess we got carried away.”

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If the exhaustion that came along with supervising teenagers all day and sleeping on a hard floor all night wasn’t enough, this cemented it. This trip really needed to come to an end.
If going on vacation with a bunch of high-schoolers was tiring, then the work week that directly followed was like running a marathon after staying awake for two days straight. Yes, the return to one’s comfortable, quiet home, and to normal structure and routine was refreshing, but the chaperones hadn’t gotten much time to rest and regroup after the trip before returning to work, and the students, disappointed that their travels had ended, couldn’t be made to pay attention if their lives depended on it. All of it grated on Shouta’s nerves, and he looked forward to spending the weekend resting. That is, his body would be able to rest. His mind, not so much. Before the trip, he’d been in a calm, sort of peaceful place mentally, thanks to his sessions with Moriyama, but now his thoughts raced. The return of his feelings for her stressed him out. Shouta couldn’t be sure how this would affect his daily life, leaving him constantly on edge. Their meetings had resumed this week, which forced him to be more vigilant than before, since his attraction was no longer past-tense.

Because of Nemuri’s meddling during the course of their vacation, a little bit of awkwardness had briefly lingered between Shouta and Moriyama. After that night, they hadn’t talked much on the way back home, or at school the following day. Really, they’d only fallen back into their normal patterns at their next session. Both of them had acted a bit stiff when he first entered her office, but they had quickly relaxed once they got to talking like normal. They didn’t discuss Mariko very much anymore, as they’d already spent so much time treading through that territory, and Moriyama could see that Shouta had thoroughly processed his grief. Now, she danced around the topic of the USJ attack, sometimes bringing up the dream that had initially driven him into her office, but
Shouta resisted. That event still felt so... raw. He didn’t know how much control he could keep over himself, over his emotions, if they waded too far into the heavy details. Every time it came up, Moriyama pushed a little harder, as determined to discuss it as Shouta was to avoid the topic. Eventually, she would back off, and return to whatever dead horse they’d been beating for weeks.

It wasn’t just that Shouta was worried he would get too emotional about what had happened at USJ. Of course, he didn’t like the idea of being seen in a state of grief, of fear, of weakness, but he was more concerned that if he lost control over his mental stability, that everything would come flooding out. It wouldn’t just be about how the attack had traumatized him. It would also be about how he loved Moriyama, and how he feared that someday he might be in a situation where he couldn’t protect her, and the terrible prospect of mourning yet another lost love. He couldn’t lose her again. He couldn’t... Not again.

Ever since her presence had once again filled his heart, she was all he could think about in his down time. It wasn’t anything inappropriate. It was the little things; the slight smirk that would curl her lip when she made a snide remark, the way her eyes squinted, bottom lip pouting out just slightly when she concentrated on something, the prospect of her standing in the kitchen early on saturday morning, dressed in one of his shirts, sleeves rolled up to her elbows because they were otherwise too long. Shouta didn’t like being so consumed by this, but he’d already given up on trying to resist it. It would be enough if he could keep it hidden.

Rather, it was a matter of how long he could keep it hidden.

Being that it was friday, Shouta would have to go in for another meeting today, and, inevitably, Moriyama would want to bring up USJ. He knew that she wouldn’t give in, wouldn’t consider him “fixed” until they as least discussed it, but he still didn’t look forward to it. On some level, he knew that they would have to get to it eventually. Shouta himself knew that until he got help with it, the trauma would just sit there below the surface, festering, until he let Moriyama cut him wide open and drain the poison. Maybe he hoped that there would come a time when he could talk about it calmly, without losing control, but was that realistic? Not really. For now, he was just buying time, until he could think of a different plan. Of course, he could always transfer to another therapist, but if Shouta did that, there would be a lot of questions about why he decided to change when he’d been making so much progress with Moriyama. That was a can of worms that he really preferred to avoid.

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Tsukiko breathed a heavy sigh as she looked over her schedule for the rest of the day. As she had predicted on her first day, the number of students wanting to meet with her had grown exponentially as they became more comfortable with her presence. She grimaced, eyeing the last name of the day. This student had the tendency to be rather long-winded, often taking much longer than his intended time slot, and Aizawa-sensei usually arrived pretty promptly after school. He
needed to know that they might have to begin a little bit late today; Tsukiko hoped that that wouldn’t conflict with his evening plans too badly. She imagined that he would probably be going out on patrol like normal, but that in itself was important work, and she didn’t want to keep him from it. Of course, Aizawa-sensei would tell her that it was no problem, because that was how he was with her; always polite, always gentle, never coarse the way he could be with others. It tickled her a bit to receive this special treatment, but Tsukiko didn’t want to take advantage of it.

The school was between classes now, perhaps she could catch the teacher in the hallway, and let him know what was going on. Tsukiko poked her head out, looking one way, then the other. Of course, she was in the administrative area right now; Aizawa-sensei was more likely to be near the classrooms. Closing the door behind her, she took off down the hallway, searching. At last she noticed the familiar cascade of tousled black hair, increasing her pace to pursue it. He was distracted right now, concerned with getting to class. Tsukiko reached out to touch his arm, hoping to get his attention. “Aizawa-sensei…”

The second her fingertips grazed his elbow, something snapped within Aizawa-sensei. He went rigid at first, every muscle in his body contracting simultaneously, and then moved quickly. Without even turning to see the person behind him, he grabbed the wrist of the hand touching him, grasping it with his full grip strength, which was much greater than one would expect just looking at him. His fingers dug sharply into Tsukiko’s flesh, making her wince in pain before she could even get the chance to feel surprised. She would find bruises later. Grip solid, Aizawa-sensei twisted her wrist roughly, and Tsukiko could hear an unpleasant snap before searing agony spread throughout her arm, radiating up toward her shoulder. She inhaled sharply, clenching her jaw as her eyes started to water. Tsukiko had broken a bone before; it wasn’t uncommon in her line of work, but she had never broken her wrist, always careful to wrap her hands and arms for support.

The bizarre nature of the event, combined with how quickly it took place, kept either party from realizing the full implications of it for a few moments. Several students, and even a couple of teachers, had stopped, staring at them in shock. It hit Tsukiko first. Aizawa-sensei hadn’t gotten the chance to erase her quirk yet, so she used her telekinesis to wrench his hand away, stumbling backward and using her other hand to support the now-deformed joint. She could tell that he hadn’t quite realized what he had done. “Wh-Why would you do that?” she asked sharply, trying to get Aizawa-sensei’s attention. Tsukiko couldn’t believe that he would ever do something like that, and she could feel her bottom lip trembling. Even if this had hurt her inside as much as outside, she wouldn’t let herself show such emotions in a public place like this. Aizawa-sensei studied her face for a minute, and his eyes finally went wide as he was able to process what he had done. Horror washing over his face, he reached out toward Tsukiko, but she shrank away from him on instinct, and he relented, looking sick with himself.

Shouta wanted to speak, to express to Moriyama how truly, deeply sorry he was, but he couldn’t make a single word come out. Frankly, he was shocked with himself; he couldn’t believe that he’d gone and done that. Of course, he knew why, but he hadn’t expected to ever act in such vicious self-defense against someone who wasn’t trying to hurt him. On top of that, the look Moriyama gave him cut deep, the combination of fear, of betrayal on her face was something he had hoped to never see. And yet, here it was. She had even shied away from him before turning and hurrying
How could I fuck things up so badly?

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Dabbing at her eyes which still watered from the surge of pain that coincided with the setting of her wrist bone, Tsukiko sulked inside her grandmother’s clinic as the tiny woman did what she could to reduce the time it would take the joint to heal. She still couldn’t quite get over what Aizawa-sensei had done, grabbing and twisting her arm hard enough to break bone. Recovery Girl had been able to limit the severity of the injury, turning the complete break into a simple hairline fracture, but Tsukiko would still have to wear a brace for a couple of weeks while her wrist healed. She dreaded the inevitable questions that would barrage her soon. Or, maybe they wouldn’t. Several people had witnessed the incident, and word was sure to spread. Tsukiko cringed, not fond of the idea of being pitied. At the same time, she felt bad; anyone who heard what Aizawa-sensei had done was sure to think poorly of him now. It was a weird feeling, worrying about someone who had just injured you, but Tsukiko felt concerned nonetheless.

Recovery Girl gave a disapproving grandmotherly cluck. Tsukiko had been honest with her about this incident, and now the woman cursed Aizawa-sensei under her breath. “You should stay away from that man from now on.” She called him “that man” now, rather than his actual name. “I didn’t know he was so dangerous!”

“It was an accident,” Tsukiko explained. “Aizawa-sensei would never do something like that intentionally!”

Her grandmother made a harrumph sort of sound. “An ‘accident.’ How do you ‘accidentally’ break a girl’s wrist?!”

“It’s a little bit more complicated than that, Oba-chan.” Tsukiko wouldn’t break confidentiality in order to explain the situation, even if the truth would protect Aizawa-sensei’s reputation. When people asked if he really had broken her wrist, she would simply have to tell them that he had, but it was an accident. Tsukiko’s heart sank, realizing how much that excuse sounded like a domestic violence sort of situation.

Her focus had shifted now to how she could protect Aizawa-sensei. Tsukiko’s brain couldn’t leave
it alone, and so she had managed to figure out rather quickly why he had reacted the way he did. During the attack at USJ, Aizawa-sensei had sustained a severe injury to his elbow, the same one that Tsukiko had touched to try and get his attention. That injury had involved the stripping of his flesh down to muscle and bone. Supposedly, as this information was hearsay and not widely-dispersed news, the villain who had inflicted the damage had been able to do so just by touching Aizawa-sensei. As much as Tsukiko had theorized that much of his post-traumatic stress stemmed from his fears for his students, anecdotal evidence indicated that it stemmed from fears for his own safety, too. Of course he would react drastically if he believed that someone was trying to hurt him in that same way again.

Looking at it in that light, Tsukiko didn’t really feel upset by Aizawa-sensei’s actions anymore. Moreover, she worried that others would start to feel afraid of him, when they really didn’t need to. This made it that much more apparent that Tsukiko needed to start addressing the USJ attack in their sessions. Aizawa-sensei had been resistant to discussing it, and with good reason. It was a traumatic event for him, and it was hard to talk about it. However, the stress was starting to affect his daily life, and his relationships with others. Tsukiko needed to start doing what she could to alleviate that stress before things got worse. She bit her lip, realizing that Aizawa-sensei himself probably felt terrible about the whole thing; Tsukiko would have to make it clear that she wasn’t upset with him at all, that she understood why he had acted in that way, and that it wasn’t his fault. Tsukiko doubted that she’d be able to eliminate his guilt completely, but she would do what she could.

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Even though Shouta still questioned whether Moriyama would still be willing to meet with him after what he had done, he still made his way down to her office at the end of the day, mentally chiding himself that she probably didn’t even want to look at him right now. His heart sank at first, seeing her closed door, but then the burst of relief hit him as he noticed the sticky note placed on the outside. "Sensei, I am currently meeting with a student. Please wait for me, and we will begin after I am finished with the student. Thank you, Tsukiko." Moriyama had asked Shouta to call her by her given name, but he still couldn’t bring himself to do it. It felt so personal, so intimate, and he worried that as the name came off his tongue, it might be tinted with his affection. On occasion, he whispered the name to himself; it made him feel warm, his chest tight. Such a sensation set Shouta on edge. Surely he was in way too deep if a simple name could make him feel so strongly. He hadn’t spoken the name after what had happened; for now, it only brought him guilt and shame.

It had been an accident. Of course it had been an accident, but the fact that it had happened at all made Shouta’s heart ache. No one had told him anything about the extent of Moriyama’s injury, or her condition now, but he had heard that sickening snap, had seen the deformity and swelling associated with an ulnar fracture. I broke her fucking arm. Every time Shouta closed his eyes, all he could see was the pain in how Moriyama set her jaw, the utter betrayal, the “how could you do this to me,” that she left unspoken, but communicated through her eyes. He felt as though he couldn’t apologize enough for it.
Shouta tensed as the door opened, a student exiting. He poked his head inside tentatively, seeing her organize some papers on her desk, sporting a wrist brace that made his stomach turn. Moriyama looked up, and smiled. “Good, you’re still here. Come inside and have a seat.” How could she act as though nothing had happened? How could she welcome, with open arms, the man who had handled her so roughly that he was able to break her bone?

Even as he closed the door behind him, Shouta spoke in a hushed tone. Perhaps he was afraid of spooking her. “Moriyama, I am so, so sorry. There is absolutely no excuse for what I did to you earlier. I hate myself for it.”

Moriyama looked at him sharply. “Don’t say that.”

“W-What?”

“Don’t say that you hate yourself. Please don’t ever say that.” Moriyama looked hurt, as if it made her sad to hear Shouta say such a thing about himself.

“I hate that I hurt you.”

“That’s a better thing to say. It’s okay to hate something that you did, but please don’t feel that way about yourself.” She grabbed her pen and notepad, going over to sit in her normal spot, gesturing for Shouta to sit on the couch like usual.

“You’re not upset about it?”

“I was a little bit upset at first,” Moriyama admitted, “but not now. I think I understand why you reacted the way you did.”

Really, it didn’t surprise Shouta. Anyone who knew that much about his history would be able to put the pieces together rather easily. Still, even if she understood, he felt bad about not being able to control his reaction. He thought for a minute, carefully constructing his words. “I am sorry that I wasn’t more careful with how I responded to being surprised in that way. I am sorry that the side-effects of my trauma ended up hurting you.”

Moriyama looked at him, her expression gentle. “I forgive you. Please don’t feel too bad about it. Instead, please work on getting better.”
Shouta swallowed hard. “I’ll try.”

“Right, then let’s get started.” Moriyama sighed, taking off her reading glasses and sharpening her gaze. Her eyes squinted, jaw set firm in determination.

“I want you to tell me about what happened at USJ.”
All of My Fears

Chapter Notes

Content warning for Shouta talking about his trauma and for some semi-gross medical stuff.

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“I want you to tell me about what happened at USJ.”

The question hung in the air, heady and turbulent, warning Shouta that there was no getting out of the dreaded conversation this time around. Moriyama looked at him intently, waiting for any kind of response, her pen poised just above her pad of paper. She raised an eyebrow as Shouta continued to stare back at her in silence. Surely it was clear to her by now how difficult it would be for him to start this conversation. For that reason, she didn’t seem impatient, per se. At the same time, she wouldn’t be willing to sit here in silence for the entirety of their session as he wasted her time. Regardless, Shouta wasn’t quite sure where he should even begin with this. There was so much to say, but all of those words caught in his throat before they could escape.

Furthermore, he didn’t want to talk about it. Yes, Shouta knew that it was necessary, and he couldn’t exactly pretend that it wasn’t, seeing as his latent trauma had resulted in the injury of another person, perhaps one of the people he cared about most. Still, what would happen once everything came flooding out? Would certain unpleasant truths come out along with everything else? Opening up like this was so risky, and Shouta questioned whether it was all worth it. His mind raced, searching for a way to share just enough that Moriyama would be satisfied, but he wouldn’t be torn open, all of his dirty little secrets laid bare. He couldn’t risk that she would see all of that, that she would be revolted and turn away from him forever. If that happened, Shouta would
just be disappointing her in the same way every other man had. It was bad enough to know that he was just the same as the others, but at least Moriyama didn’t know that, couldn’t be hurt by that heinous fact.

If only there was a way to delay this conversation a little longer… “You know, I just realized that we never talked about what happened with Miss Joke.” That would be a terribly uncomfortable conversation, and Shouta would have to be careful to avoid slipping up and sharing exactly why he’d had sex with Fukukado that one time, but it would be far less risky than talking about USJ.

Moriyama sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers. “You’re stalling. Why?”

Fuck. She’d seen right through that weak tactic even without using her telepathy. “Well…maybe I’m just not ready to talk about it yet.” That wasn’t a lie, exactly. Shouta’s reasons for not being ready might not have been the same as what he implied, but a half-truth was more convincing than a whole lie. He wondered if he should elaborate, talking about how the experience was “so traumatizing” and how “nervous” he felt all the time, but decided against it. Shouta was a man of few words by nature, and he knew that Moriyama knew that. Talking too much would only clue her in that he wasn’t exactly being truthful.

Moriyama shook her head. “No, you’re just stalling. If you truly weren’t ready to discuss it, you would have a stronger reaction when I say anything related to USJ. You don’t.” She made an irritated noise. “You’ll be able to get through this without being retraumatized, I am certain. Besides,” Moriyama held up her arm, showing him the bulky brace on her wrist, “I think you owe me a little bit of an explanation.”

Shouta’s blood ran cold. His therapist was playing hardball now. She knew that he felt bad about how he had hurt her, but he hadn’t expected her to use it as a means to getting him to talk. All the same, he did owe it to her, didn’t he? He couldn’t exactly pretend like he was just fine, and brush off Moriyama’s injury like it was nothing. No, he’d grabbed her seemingly out of nowhere and snapped her bone like a twig. And for what reason? Because her attempt to get his attention had triggered a reaction in him which resulted from his experiences on that day. Shouta didn’t have a choice in how things proceeded from here; not really. Moriyama deserved the truth.

But not all of it.

“I…” Even though the memory remained vivid, Shouta still found himself at a loss for where to begin. “That day…” He sighed, shaking his head.

“It’s okay. Take your time.”
“That day, I took my students to USJ for training related to disaster rescue. It was supposed to be a collaborative teaching effort between myself, Thirteen, and All Might. All Might couldn’t be there for the beginning of the lesson, so we intended to start without him.” Shouta paused for a moment. “I’m sorry. That’s not really relevant. I don’t know…”

“No, no,” Moriyama reassured him. “It’s good to have as many details as possible. It might not seem like it’s something that needs to be included, but it’s something that sticks out in your mind, isn’t it? Every piece you share with me helps me understand how everything went down. Please, go on.”

Shouta swallowed hard. “Just as we were about to begin the training exercise, this kind of... portal opens up- we know now that it was an ability called ‘warp gate,’ used by a villain called Kurogiri- and the League of Villains was able to invade the facility.”

“And that includes Shigaraki Tomura, correct?”

“Yes. As it turned out, they were there in hopes of attacking All Might, but as I said before, he hadn’t come to the training. I told Thirteen to protect the students while I did what I could to hold back the League’s first line of attack. It wasn’t difficult; they were mostly lower-level street thugs, more a distraction than anything. It didn’t take too much of a toll on me physically.”

“Other than using up your energy.”

“Yes. That was the problem. It might not have ended so badly, but then the students got involved. I didn’t want that to happen, but...you know how they are. When they tried to attack Kurogiri, his warp gate scattered them throughout the facility, where they could be…” Shouta stopped suddenly, feeling sick about his choice of words. “Where they could be picked off more easily.”

“If I remember correctly, they actually handled themselves quite well.”

Shouta nodded. “They did.” He managed a small smile, proud of his class.

“Let’s get back to what was happening to you during this time,” Moriyama prompted him.
“R-Right. I had been fighting these…lackeys, but then… But then Shigaraki attacked me.”

“And what happened when he did?”

“He… I blinked, just for a split-second, and when I did… God, if I just hadn’t fucking blinked. Stupid…” Shouta smacked himself on the side of the head.

Moriyama’s face softened. “None of this was your fault. You can’t blame yourself-”

“I should have known. I should have realized that he was watching me, studying me… In that one second, he grabs my arm-”

“The same way I did.”

“-and suddenly my elbow is nothing but muscle and bone. That man can just lay his fingers on something, and it’s just… gone. It all crumbles away to dust.”

Moriyama scribbled furiously on her pad of paper, but Shouta could tell that hearing this story affected her, even more than the story of Mariko’s death. Of course, this was a much more recent event, one that had put him in grave danger. Moriyama probably worried about him. “After he did that, he called that… monster to, uh, finish the job.”

“That was when you sustained most of your injuries.”

“Yes. For a short while, I thought…” Shouta clenched his jaw, a chill running down his spine as he recalled the memory. “I thought it was going to kill me.” Moriyama closed her eyes, frowning sharply. “It smashed my face into the dirt, trying to damage my eyes, so that I couldn’t use my erasure.”

“And your ability to use your quirk had deteriorated since then, correct?” It was apparent in her voice that she found this conversation just as unpleasant as Shouta did, but she powered through, just as he did.

“Yes. I...I believed that I would be the only casualty at USJ, and I was at peace with that.” He
wince as Moriyama inhaled sharply at that comment, not wanting to upset her, but it was the truth. “But then...” Shouta stopped briefly, his throat feeling tight. “But then Shigaraki noticed a few of my students nearby.”

“Take a moment if you need it.”

Shouta swallowed hard, continuing. “He attacked them. He was reaching out for Asui’s face.” His voice cracked, and he grimaced at how weak it made him sound. “He would have... Fuck.”

A few minutes of silence passed. Tsukiko so badly wanted to reach out toward Aizawa-sensei, to sit with him and wrap her arms around him, but she knew that it wouldn’t be proper, or even something that he would want. In some ways, he talked about the USJ incident with more ease than she would have expected, but when it came to his students, he was clearly more anxious, more afraid for them than for himself. When he had said that he was at peace with the idea of his own death, it had felt like someone had stabbed Tsukiko through the heart. *You're too selfless, sensei.*

Gathering himself, he was finally able to continue. “I was able to lift my head at the very last minute and stop him, but it was just... It was just too close. All Might and the other pro heroes showed up after that, and everyone survived, fortunately. I kind of passed out after that, so I don’t remember too much other than what I was told later on.”

“That’s understandable, considering the physical trauma you sustained. Just how bad was it?” Moriyama asked. “They didn’t really report anything about it on the news. I could probably get your records from Recovery Girl, but I’d rather just ask you.

Shouta sat back and sighed, trying to recall everything his body had been through. “I had multiple facial fractures and lacerations, broken collarbone, the injury to my elbow, fractures in my other arm, multiple broken ribs, internal bleeding... I think that about sums it up.”

“What was your recovery time like?”

“It wasn’t as long as it could have been, thanks to Recovery Girl. I guess I should give the younger Miss Moriyama credit as well. I think she was there too, helping. Of course, I didn’t realize at the time that she was your sister...” Shouta realized he was rambling, sitting up straight. “Anyway, it took a couple of months for me to recovery completely.” He shifted uncomfortably. “As you can imagine, I’ll never be quite the same as I was before. Along with the deterioration of my erasure, I experience the periodic aches associated with healed fractures, and I don’t have as much stamina as before.”
Shouta could tell that Moriyama wanted to say something about him needing to take it easier now, but she left it alone for the time being. “How did you feel after the attack? I mean, other than the physical stuff. I mean—”

“I know what you mean.” He didn’t really want to talk about this part; it made him look weak, and pathetic. It was embarrassing. Though, Moriyama would understand better than anyone, wouldn’t she? She would be used to hearing about this kind of thing. “I...wasn’t doing well. They… I was on diazepam for that first month.”

“Was anyone there with you while you were being treated?”

This is going to sound depressing. “Not really. I mean, Hizashi and Nemuri came as much as they could, but…”

“Can you tell me what your behavior was like? I mean, I’m sure you were bedridden for some time, but other than that…” She wanted to know how unstable Shouta had been, but clearly didn’t want to phrase it in that way.

“They assigned a psychiatrist to my case. What I was experiencing, he called them ‘night terrors.’ Of course, I was on so many painkillers and then the sedative. Some of it’s a blur.”

“You had night terrors?”

“The doctors said I would wake up screaming, about Shigaraki, and the Nomu, and…” Shouta’s eyes widened as he remembered something that he’d originally brushed off.

“Mr. Aizawa, I know the name ‘Shigaraki,’ but who is ‘Moriyama Tsukiko?’”

“Aizawa-sensei?”

“Hmm? Yes...sorry. I was just, uh…” Shouta brushed the thought away again. “They actually had to sedate me a few times.”
Moriyama screwed up her face, thinking. “Did they… Did they put you on a psych hold?”

“If they did, no one told me about it. Maybe I just don’t remember. Anyway, they let me out after a few weeks, after I stopped waking up at night. I had that diazepam prescription for the rest of the month, but…”

“But it wasn’t enough, was it?”

“No. They should have given me refills on it. I probably would have done well to take it for another couple of months.” Shouta gave Moriyama a sheepish look. “Sometimes I wonder if I should still be on something.”

“We can look into medication. I don’t think it’s necessarily a bad idea. I uh, I was on an anti-anxiety for a while after I stopped drinking and let a doctor medicate me instead of trying to self-medicate,” Moriyama admitted.

“You were?”

Tsukiko nodded. She didn’t tell Aizawa-sensei about the anti-depressants she’d taken after graduation, but he didn’t need to know about that. “I can get you a referral for a psychiatrist. I can’t write you a prescription myself, since I’m not a medical doctor.”

“I-I don’t need anything as strong as before. It’s gotten easier over time.”

“Of course. It would just be something to help you manage your symptoms. It won’t get rid of them completely. It’ll just make things easier, even if they’ve gotten better since you were in the hospital.”

“Well,” Shouta shrugged. “That’s it. That’s what happened to me.” Internally, he let out a sigh of relief, having managed to get through this difficult conversation without revealing anything too deep. “What do you think?”

Moriyama put her pen down. “You have post-traumatic stress disorder with comorbid anxiety. I mean, you were traumatized before when your wife died, but a lot of the symptoms of that were covered up by your obvious grief, and those symptoms subsided somewhat over time. The villain responsible was…gone, so you didn’t have the ongoing anxiety that you do with your fears for your
students’ safety. Furthermore, what happened to you at USJ was a near-death experience, which…

Well, it changes you. To feel at peace with your own death…” She made a noise and shook her head, at a loss for words. Then, she gave Shouta a funny look. “You don’t ever feel like you want to die, do you?”

“What? No! God, no!”

“Good. I’m glad.” Moriyama rearranged herself in her chair, picking up her pen and tablet again. “I think we should take another look at what Shigaraki Tomura did to you. That wound is healed now, but when it happened, it was extremely severe.”

“Yes,” Shouta agreed. “So much skin was stripped away, and what remained around the site was…what word did they use? Necrotic. It was necrotic tissue. That had to be removed as well—they used maggots to do it, I think. I had several skin grafts to replace all of that flesh…” He paused suddenly. “I’m sorry, that’s probably too disgusting to talk about.”

“What? No. That kind of thing doesn’t bother me. I mean, I’m sorry to hear that you went through so much, but the medical aspect doesn’t upset me.” Moriyama waved it off. “Please, go on.”

“The doctors said that it was the most complicated injury to treat, and out of everything, it had the most complications.”

“Complications?”

“It got infected a couple of times. The first time, one of the grafts had to be replaced, because it had started to, well, rot. I was worried that it was a side-effect of Shigaraki’s decay, but that wasn’t the case. It’s just something that happens sometimes.”

Moriyama tilted her head. “You seem pretty concerned about that decay quirk.”

“Well, of course. There’s still a lot we don’t know about it. We were concerned that it might continue to have an effect even after he had gone. Of course, now we know that the decay can only take place as long as Shigaraki’s four fingers and thumb are touching an object, but at the time, I could only see just how destructive it could be,” Shouta explained.

“You’ve never seen anything like it, have you?”
“No, it was beyond anything I could ever imagine.”

“And, to some extent, you’re frightened that it might happen again.” Moriyama looked up from her notes, catching Shouta in her intent gaze.

He flinched back, a little put-off. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“What I mean is, even a touch that feels similar to that man’s is enough to set you off. You’ve developed a defensive response tailored specifically to that kind of attack.” Moriyama held up her wounded arm again. “Being touched in that specific place, especially by a person’s fingertips, is a trigger for you. That injury didn’t just cause physical trauma.”

“But…” Shouta frowned. “But it’s not like I’ve never been injured in the field before.”

“You said it yourself. This quirk was more destructive, more dangerous than anything you’ve ever encountered before, right?”

“That’s true.”

“And it’s not just that,” Moriyama continued. “This whole incident; you had a near-death experience. Yes, I’m sure you’ve had numerous encounters in the field where you were wounded. But this was one of only two where you experienced emotional trauma. And this was the only one where you were put in grave danger! What happened at USJ was nothing like anything you’d ever been through before that day. I’d be worried if it didn’t affect you on a psychological level.”

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“I think this might be a good place to end for today, even if it is a little bit earlier than normal. It’s been.”

“It’s been a day, hasn’t it?” Shouta groaned. “That’s on me, after what I did.”
Moriyama tilted her head, raising her eyebrows. “I was referring more to what we talked about. I know it was a difficult conversation for you, and I imagine it’s taken a lot out of you.”

“It actually wasn’t as bad as I was expecting, but I don’t mind ending here.” Finishing things up, Moriyama wrote down a phone number for a psychiatrist that she knew, assuring him that she would call and get his file transferred over.

“Try to take it easy this evening. It’s been a long day.”

Shouta did take Moriyama’s advice that evening, but not because he was tired. After a conversation that he had initially believed hadn’t affected him too much, he felt a little too on-edge to do much of anything besides mull around at home. Today’s session had brought up a lot of unpleasant memories that he had spent a lot of time and energy keeping shoved down deep inside. Now, they clouded his mind, making him anxious even when he knew that, logically, he didn’t really have anything to be actively anxious about. Moriyama had given Shouta some suggestions of things he could do when he felt this way, but they all seemed cheesy to him. Shouta wasn’t exactly the meditation type, and he certainly wasn’t the journaling type, either. No, he was the type to sit in an almost-too-hot bath until his head got fuzzy, either from the temperature of the water or from the glass of whiskey in his hand. He knew that this kind of coping mechanism would be frowned upon, and that it was exactly what he had discouraged when Moriyama was younger, but for now, it was the only thing that put his mind at ease.

Of course, it wasn’t just the lingering thoughts of USJ that worried Shouta. As had apparently been the case for some time, he was worried about Moriyama too. He knew that the League of Villains might try to target UA again, and if that happened, she would be at risk this time around. Once again, he wasn’t all that worried about protecting himself, but what got him all stirred up inside was the prospect of not being able to protect those around him, of not being able to protect the person he loved. His mind flashed back to that dream, to the fact that her name had somehow come up during his episodes immediately following the attack. Had those feelings really gone away before, or had they just lain dormant all this time, along with the worries that went along with them?

Tsukiko...I never really stopped loving you, did I?
Like-Like

Having not yet risen to its midday zenith, the early morning sun cast soft rays across the floor of Tsukiko’s silent office, specks of dust dancing in the subtle bands of light. Though it was her own space, Tsukiko felt hesitant to disturb the quiet, padding carefully across the floor in her flat shoes, depositing her bag behind her desk before turning the blinds all the way open and taking the electric kettle from its resting place so that she could fill it with water. Her weekend had been uneventful, spending the majority of her sunday curled up on her couch with a book that she’d been meaning to start for some time. Normally, she would have gone out on patrol on friday night and saturday afternoon, but with her wrist out of commission, Tsukiko found herself lounging around, binge-watching Webflix. Most women spent their weekends with loved ones, or going on dates, but, then, those women didn’t have the misfortune of knowing their companions’ deepest faults. They could place trust in others, uninhibited in their ignorance. Tsukiko had once envied them, but had long since been able to let go of that anger. She was fortunate in her knowledge, never having to risk wasting her time on someone unworthy of her love.

Actually, she had spent a significant amount of her time thinking about what she and Aizawa-sensei had discussed on friday. She had finally convinced him to detail his own experience of the USJ attack, and his recovery after that. The conversation had taken more out of Tsukiko than she’d been expecting, even if she had known that it would be an unpleasant topic. She internally chastised herself for not realizing just how painful the gritty details would be. This event had been traumatizing enough to evoke post-traumatic stress disorder in the normally-stoic Aizawa-sensei; of course it would be a hard story to hear. Since then, Tsukiko would periodically find herself distracted from whatever task currently occupied her, thinking about the injuries he had sustained, or his peace with the prospect of his own demise, or how the mental strain would tear him from his sleep at night, making him cry out in terror. It made her feel ill if she got to thinking about it too much. Of course, she welcomed the opportunity to share his pain. It was too bad her sharing the grief couldn’t alleviate any from Aizawa-sensei’s shoulders.

After their last session, Tsukiko worried about him. Even if Aizawa-sensei had made enough progress for the topic to not retraumatize him, it could still be upsetting. She surmised that he probably spent at least some of the weekend feeling anxious, and for that reason, she had suggested some possible coping mechanisms before sending him home. I really hope you didn’t go out on patrol if you were feeling upset. Despite her advice, she had to wonder if Aizawa-sensei would really use any of them. He had been the type to eschew that sort of thing, thinking he could get by if he just ignored his feelings, or worse, invalidated them. Tsukiko hoped that he would meet with her recommended psychiatrist soon. Truthfully, she didn’t think medication should be the end-all-be-all of treatment, that it should go hand-in-hand with therapy and healthy coping mechanisms. On the other hand, she could more realistically see Aizawa-sensei taking a pill once a day than doing positive affirmations in a mirror. It’s better than not doing anything at all.

They would be meeting again this afternoon, and Tsukiko wondered if they should go a little easier this time. She didn’t think it wise to jump right back into the heavy details of Aizawa-sensei’s near-death experience. It would be better to ask about his weekend, about how he had been feeling since their last conversation. She did want to ask about his mental state from when he’d been released
from the hospital up until he had started therapy. Tsukiko already knew about his sleeplessness and his strange dreams, but how had he gotten there? He couldn’t have just gone from night terrors straight to sleep dysfunction. It did make sense, Tsukiko realized suddenly, that most of Aizawa-sensei’s symptoms were sleep-related. It was the only moment he would ever allow himself to process all of the things that had happened to him. During the day, he distracted himself, shoving his emotions to the side; at night, his subconscious would inevitably get the better of him, bringing up all of the shit that he’d refused to deal with before. Perhaps they should talk about that today.

Sighing, Tsukiko poured the now-hot water over the coffee grounds in her french press before stepping back out into the hallway to take a look at the sign-up sheet for today, copying down the list of names along with their preferred time slots. It was a short list, only five names, so today wouldn’t be all that hectic, which was probably best on a slow-starting monday.

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“That’s why...uh,” Aizawa-sensei shook his head, seemingly distracted. “Sorry about that. I’ve lost my train of thought.”

Ochako looked up from her notes, frowning. Her teacher had been like this in homeroom at the beginning of the day as well. Normally, he was a serious type of person, giving straightforward lectures that never meandered or went off on irrelevant tangents. Today, he was a little...off. Aizawa-sensei had something on his mind, and it was keeping him from being able to focus as easily as he did normally. Looking back, Ochako could recall him being like this on friday too. Oh, right! He was probably still thinking about what had happened then! Word had gotten around the school quickly that he had accidentally injured Miss Moriyama, and Aizawa-sensei probably still felt guilty about his mistake. After all, the story was, she had tried to get his attention, and he’d reacted strangely, grabbing her wrist hard enough to fracture it. It was unspoken knowledge at UA that Aizawa-sensei was having a hard time after what had happened at USJ; everyone assumed that this accident stemmed from that. Poor Aizawa-sensei...you must feel bad about what you did.

There was more to it than that, too. Since the class trip, rumors had been circulating amongst classes 1A and 1B that Aizawa-sensei had romantic feelings for Miss Moriyama. Apparently, Present Mic had shared that piece of information with the boys’ room on the same night that Midnight had stumbled into the girls’ gushing about Miss Moriyama’s crush. Of course, Aizawa-sensei had thoroughly denied it, but the whole thing still raised suspicions. If it were true, then he probably felt even worse about hurting Miss Moriyama. How sad. Furthermore, if Miss Moriyama’s feelings were indeed for Aizawa-sensei, then she must have been shocked and heartbroken for him to be so careless with her. It was an unfortunate situation for both of them, to have accidentally harmed the person you would most want to protect, or to be harmed by a person by whom you wanted to be held gently. Ochako could empathize with their feelings, having romantic inclinations of her own.
Actually, she wanted to talk to Miss Moriyama about those feelings. Ochako had all of these thoughts and emotions swirling around inside of her, and she didn’t quite know what to do with them, exactly. She liked… Ugh, I know it’s bad if I can’t even bring myself to admit it inside my own mind! Fortunately, Ochako had signed up for a time slot today to meet with the counselor. They could talk about what Ochako was feeling, and what she should do next. Should she tell...how she felt? Should she keep it to herself for now? Maybe it was a little extreme to meet with a professional about a simple crush, but Miss Moriyama had always emphasized that the students could come and talk to her about anything that was bothering them, whether it was hero-related, school-related, or just personal. Ochako’s time slot was the last one of the day, and Aizawa-sensei knew that she would be slipping out to make her appointment. Hopefully her classmates wouldn’t take too much notice, or ask her about it later.

To be honest, she did feel a little bit nervous about her meeting. Ochako hadn’t told anyone about the person she liked, so it seemed like a big deal. Luckily, she knew that Miss Moriyama wouldn’t tell anyone else what they talked about. That was literally part of her job. Still, these feelings had been so private to Ochako before, and now she was letting them out, sharing them with someone else. It was almost a little embarrassing to tell the truth, even if it was normal. At least Miss Moriyama wouldn’t have the same kind of reaction that Ochako’s classmates might have. The counselor would take it seriously, and have a neutral reaction, while teenagers would hoot and holler about it, asking lots of invasive questions that Ochako wouldn’t want to answer. Miss Moriyama, on the other hand, would probably want to help the student understand her own feelings, and give her advice about what she should do next.

If Miss Moriyama really did like Aizawa-sensei, then she could probably speak from her own experience about this kind of thing. She could empathize with the situation, understand where Ochako was coming from. Furthermore, Ochako had worried that other people might find her preference strange. People certainly found Miss Moriyama’s preference strange, if it were really true. If so, she might be able to give advice on how to stop worrying about what other people thought, to be confident in her choice. Ochako certainly liked… him, but if other people found out, they might question her choice, and she wanted to be able to defend her feelings with certainty. Just another half-hour now… Ochako’s stomach turned a flip-flop. There was no going back now, but it didn’t make her any less nervous!

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Tsukiko had just finished filing her notes from her previous visitor when she could hear a tentative knock at her office door. Uraraka, from Aizawa-sensei’s homeroom, had signed up to meet with her. “Come in please.” The door opened just slightly, Uraraka’s bright eyes peeking through the crack. Her hesitation was apparent; she likely had never been in a situation like this before. “It’s okay; come inside and make yourself comfortable. You don’t need to be nervous,” Tsukiko flashed a smile, and the student seemed to relax a bit, finding her way to the couch and sitting down, resting her hands on her knees. “How are things going with your classes?”

“They’re fine, thanks. We have a test coming up, but I don’t think it will be too difficult.” Uraraka
seemed to be in good spirits, though she obviously had something on her mind.

Closing the office door, Tsukiko picked up her legal pad and pen once more, taking her seat and arranging herself to get comfortable. “What did you want to talk about today?”

“Well…” Uraraka’s grip on her knees tightened, her face turning pink. Well, pinker than usual, rather. A flush of excitement, of simple zest for life, typically tinted Uraraka’s face, but it was darker than normal now. “I… I like someone.”

Hearing this, Tsukiko relaxed a little bit. She had been concerned that maybe the girl had been having difficulties with one of the multiple incidents that had plagued 1A since the beginning of the school year. Instead, it was just one of those things that almost every teenager went through. Of course, that wasn’t to say that it wasn’t important; it would just be an easier situation for Uraraka herself to cope with. “I see.” Uraraka turned away, her cheeks darkening further. “You don’t have to be embarrassed about it. I’m sure you know that this is completely normal.”

“I know, but… it’s still so strange. I’ve never felt like this before.” She covered her face with her hands, eyeing Tsukiko from between her fingers.

“Ah, so you’re not used to having feelings like this. You don’t need to worry. You’ll start to get used to them with time.”

Uraraka groaned. “How much time?”

“I can’t really answer that,” Tsukiko told her. “It’s different for everyone, and you will experience them differently over time. At times you will feel them strongly, and sometimes they’ll be more faint, just lingering under the surface. Furthermore, some crushes come and go quickly, while others… Others never really go away.” She sat quietly for a minute, ruminating on her own emotions, but suddenly realized that she’d been quiet for a little too long. “S-So! Have you told anyone else about these feelings?”

“I did tell the other girls in my class that I liked someone, but then they all just wanted to know who it was, and I wasn’t ready to share that yet, so we just kind of stopped talking about it. I knew that if I came to you, I wouldn’t have to say more than I was comfortable with.”

“That’s right. And anything you say here will stay here. A friend, no matter how trustworthy, might accidentally let your secret slip, while I am legally bound to keep everything you say
private,” Tsukiko reminded her.

Uraraka had relaxed quite a bit since the beginning of their conversation, but she still appeared concerned. “I guess I’m just not quite sure what to do next. I’ve got all these feelings and I don’t know what to do with them.”

“The best thing you can do right now is to try and understand them, and to try and let them out in a constructive way. It was a good idea for you to come and talk to me. It let you share what you were feeling in a safe, nonjudgmental space,” Tsukiko explained. “Another thing you can do is write them down in a journal. Taking time to talk through or write down exactly what you are feeling will help you think through and understand them.”

“That might work. I’m glad that I can keep this to myself while I’m still trying to understand it.”

“Of course.” Tsukiko nodded. “You don’t have to tell anyone about it until you’re ready, or until you actually want to share it with others.”

Uraraka bit her lip. “But...if I tell others, don’t I run the risk of that information spreading around?”

“Yes. That is always a possibility. You may only want to tell your friends about it if you’re okay with the person you like finding out how you feel, or if you are certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you can trust a friend to keep your secret.” Tsukiko continued. “Furthermore, if you decide to tell this person that you like them, make sure that you are completely clear about your feelings. You don’t want them to be confused.”

“And...if they like me back, what do I do then?”

“That would be up to you and that person. You might decide that you want to start going on dates, or you might decide to wait for a while. It’s completely up to what makes you and your special person feel the most comfortable. You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for just because another person expects it from you. Once you start spending time around someone like that, you might realize that you don’t like them as much as you thought, and you might break up. You might start to like them even more, and have a relationship with them for a long time.” Tsukiko cleared her throat. “In the end, it’s all your choice what you want to do.”

“Did...you ever like anyone when you were in school? I-I don’t mean to ask anything inappropriate!” Uraraka looked mortified to have asked.
The question caught Tsukiko off-guard, and she nearly choked on a sip of water. “Uh, yes. I liked someone… And don’t worry, you’re not asking anything improper. It’s just us girls here.”

“W-Was it someone in your class?”

“It was someone at school.” It wasn’t technically a lie, but rather a misleading truth.

“What did you decide to do?”

Tsukiko played with a piece of her hair nervously, choosing her words with care. “Well, uh… I never actually told him how I felt about him. My best friend knew; she had figured it out on her own, but she didn’t tell anyone else about it.”

“Were you too shy to tell him how you felt?”

“Kind of. It was more a matter of me knowing that it would never work out, so there was no point in risking making things awkward between us. He was older than me, and I knew that he wouldn’t be interested. I figured it would just be better to get over him over time.”

“Did you? Get over him, I mean?”

Tsukiko was quiet for a minute, and then she sighed. “Sometimes I wonder. I thought I had, but he came back into my life recently, and…” She knew that she was treading dangerous territory here; Uraraka might be able to put the pieces together if she said too much. “…and I realized that sometimes you never truly get over your first love.”

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Opening the front door of her darkened apartment, Tsukiko let out a heavy sigh. Her meeting with Uraraka had led her to a difficult conclusion, and, as a result, she had been somewhat distracted throughout her session later on with Aizawa-sensei. She hoped that he hadn’t noticed, or worse: assumed that she wasn’t taking their conversation seriously. As she changed out of her work clothes into a pair of lounge pants and a soft, long-sleeve t-shirt, a little smile settled on Tsukiko’s lips. She had noticed something during their meeting; like her own hair playing, Aizawa-sensei too
had a nervous tic. When he got anxious, he would place his hand on the back of his neck. He’d done that today after making some kind of double-entendre that had made her blush. Aizawa-sensei probably thought that he had embarrassed her with the comment, and felt mortified himself for causing her to feel that way. Really, he hadn’t embarrassed Tsukiko at all, but blushing was much more socially acceptable than biting your lip and squeezing your thighs together, delighted at the off-color remark.

Tsukiko quickly brushed that memory to the side, grabbing the television remote and pressing the power button. As she waited for the late afternoon news program to begin, she busied herself heating up one of the pre-prepped meals she had made the day before, settling into a chair with her chicken, quinoa, and squash bowl.

“Tonight! Police investigate a string of murders recently committed in Hosu City! Detectives say there may be a pattern.” Tsukiko leaned in, the hero in her growing interested. The news anchor introduced the top story before cutting to the on-site reporter.

“Investigators in the red light district of Hosu City report that at least five women have been murdered here over the past three nights. The police department has declined to release all of the crime scene details, but autopsy reports confirm that these deaths are indeed the result of homicide, and the circumstances of the deaths are markedly similar to the murders committed by the villain ‘Ripper’ seven years ago.” Tsukiko nearly choked on a bite of quinoa. “‘Ripper’ disappeared after his murders, leading the police to believe that he is dead. Could this be the work of an impostor? We’ll keep you updated on this story as we learn more. Back to you, Natsuko.”
Deep Down, I Can't Let Go

Chapter Notes

Y'all gonna hate me for this one. Content warning for somewhat explicit sex, but not the sex that you've been hoping for.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Five Years Ago

Even if Shouta wanted to feel excited for the new school year, for his new crop of third-year students, he just couldn’t. Months had passed since his former class’s graduation, but it didn’t feel that way; his own existence felt...stagnant, like time was marching forward without him. Of course he put the same amount of effort into his teaching, but Shouta just couldn’t bring himself to feel interested in what he was doing. His new class was filled with brilliant students, bright-eyed and full of potential and genuinely thrilled to be there, but their teacher didn’t come close to matching their enthusiasm. They deserve better than this, Shouta thought to himself as he looked out over the silent room, the quiet punctuated only by the scratching of pencil on paper as the students completed a test. He hoped that they couldn’t tell just how disinterested their instructor was in them, in their scholastic endeavors. Shouta brought a hand to the side of his face, running his palm over the rough stubble. For christ’s sake, he didn’t even bother to keep himself clean-shaven anymore. He looked a mess, he knew, but he didn’t exactly have anyone to look good for nowadays.

Moriyama was long gone now, and he hadn’t seen or heard from her since her graduation. Shouta
couldn’t even bring himself to look up news articles about her to see what she had been up to; it hurt too much, the idea of her moving forward without him. It was selfish, he knew, but it was the truth. Certainly, this was why he no longer looked forward to school days. It made his heart ache, going into that classroom only to see some other student in the desk where she had once sat, attentive, looking up at him with those big, lavender eyes. Shouta missed her, every second of every day, save for the few hours of rest he got each night as sleep overtook him. It still felt wrong to some extent, to feel this way about a student, but he had long ago stopped trying to resist those feelings; such an attempt was futile. He often wondered if Moriyama missed him as well, and, in the occasional weak moment, considered trying to find a way to contact her; surely she had a website with a functioning email address. Every time, Shouta managed to talk himself out of it. What would Moriyama think of him, reaching out to her after all this time, confessing all of these inappropriate feelings and pathetically begging her to call him. It’s pitiful is what it is.

Obviously, he knew that he needed to move on, to have a life that didn’t hinge on another person; maybe Shouta hadn’t realized before just how important Moriyama had become to him. He had even gone to Mariko’s grave, and confessed to her how he felt, but it didn’t really help any. Mariko was resting easy now; she couldn’t help her widower carry this weight. Web searches suggested seeing a therapist, but Shouta believed that that would be a bit of an overreaction. He just needed time; surely this would pass eventually, wouldn’t it? He didn’t feel nearly as agonized as he had that first night, truly weeping over a photo of Moriyama before passing out in a drunken stupor. Of course, he had since hidden that photo, afraid that it would send him spiraling once again, and he’d begun smoking cigarettes regularly. I’m just moving from one addiction to the other, aren’t I? Eventually Shouta intended to quit again, maybe after a year or so, but for now, it was the one thing that brought him any sort of relief.

Knowing that he had to get back into some kind of routine if he ever wanted to get better, he had done his best to adhere to his normal behaviors: nighttime patrols, going grocery shopping instead of eating delivery every night, and actually spending time out in public with friends. At the very least, it was hard to think about depressing things when Hizashi or Nemuri was around. They’d somehow convinced Shouta to come with them to a party tonight. It would be at some bar popular with pros; he didn’t know what the party would be celebrating exactly. Maybe it would just be partying for the sake of partying. Either way, it was probably better than moping around in his apartment, accompanied only by his loneliness. Though…if it was a party attended largely by pro heroes… Was there any chance at all that Moriyama might possibly be there? It wasn’t likely, Shouta knew, but if, by some miracle, she turned up, he swore that he wouldn’t let her get away without at least knowing how he felt. Not this time.

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A few hours later, as Shouta stared at his own reflection in the bathroom mirror, he regretted taking Hizashi up on his offer. He hadn’t even left home yet, and already couldn’t wait to be back, to get out of these stupid clothes that his friend had suggested. For some-ass reason, Shouta had decided that maybe he was right, that maybe he should try to clean up a little, and potentially put himself out there to meet someone. If he were able to find someone at least tolerable, then maybe the memories of Moriyama wouldn’t hurt so damn much. In any case, Shouta still hated this tighter-
than-usual button-up shirt, and the equally stiff pants. Of course, he couldn’t just show up in sweats, but fuck were these clothes uncomfortable. Shouta dreaded the bar atmosphere— the loud music, the pushy, obnoxious patrons, and just the general feeling of too many people in one place. At least there would be booze, and he would be permitted to smoke as much as he wanted.

Despite his hesitation, Shouta kept to his word and arrived at the bar as he had promised Hizashi, who seemed relieved, as if he’d expected his friend to flake out at the last minute. “Oh, good!” he blasted across the bar. “You’re here, Eraser! You guys, Eraserhead is here!” Shouta cringed, not really needing his presence to be announced to the entire northern hemisphere, but he knew that Hizashi’s intentions were good. The pro heroes packed into several back-to-back booths looked up and waved; it felt strangely like an intervention. Hizashi pulled up a chair for him, knowing that Shouta would prefer not to shove himself into the already cramped booth. “What’re you drinkin’?”

“Uh, whiskey, on the rocks, I guess,” Shouta replied, reaching over to an empty table to grab an ashtray. Hizashi frowned as he observed this, but didn’t say anything, not wanting to make anything of it in public, but Shouta knew exactly what he was thinking. He hadn’t been a regular smoker since the period following Mariko’s death. If he was back on his bullshit, then something had to have happened.

Once Shouta got a little bit (or a lot) of liquor in his system, his prior irritation started to fade away. The other heroes’ lively chatter distracted him from the more unpleasant aspects of his life, and reminded him of the greater purpose they all shared. No one seemed to mind his smoking, except for Hizashi, who continued to hide his disdain, allowing him to chain-smoke in peace, lighting a new cigarette off the smouldering butt that he then ground out in the plastic tray in front of him. Shouta felt glad to have come now, even if he still felt uncomfortable in these stupid clothes. A slight whiskey haze had settled over him, dulling the depression he’d felt regularly as of late. Even if Moriyama was gone, he still had his friends to keep him company. Besides, he’d grown used to living alone since Mariko; why should he feel any kind of way about it now? Furthermore, it wasn’t like Moriyama would have ever felt the same what about him, so what difference did it make that she was gone now?

Hizashi looked up toward the door, then, smiling. He did not holler across the room this time, but instead got up to meet the young man who had just entered, his long, shiny, black hair tied back into a neat bun. Hizashi led him back over to the group, who eyed the newcomer with interest. “I have someone I want you all to meet.” Though it was still on the loud side, his voice had softened in tone. “This is Ido Tadashi, my boyfriend.” The corners of Hizashi’s mouth tweaked upward at the word “boyfriend,” and Ido gave a wobbly smile of his own.

“Hi, nice to meet you all.” He seemed nice enough, if a bit more reserved than Hizashi. Though, between them, it was probably a good balance.

“Tadashi, this is my oldest friend, Aizawa Shouta.” Shouta stood up to greet Ido properly, bowing
slightly.

“I’ll go get a drink for you. What would you like?”

“Oh! I guess a beer. Usagi Super Dry. Thank you so much!”

Shouta nodded curtly, going to get Ido’s beer and to freshen up his own drink. Honestly, this whole thing had taken him by surprise. He’d been so caught up in his own bullshit that he hadn’t even known that Hizashi was seeing someone.

Back at the table, the conversation had turned toward the happy couple; how they’d met, how they’d started dating, that sort of thing. Shouta didn’t mind talking about that kind of thing, but it did sting a bit to watch his friend fall in love and find happiness when he was so desperately trying to fall out of love and pining over someone who could never love him in return. I should just be happy for them. This is a good thing. It was a good thing, Shouta knew, but it still made him feel just a little melancholy. He downed another whiskey, then another, and another, until his head swam, too cloudy to feel any kind of emotion for too long a period. Hizashi seemed to note that Shouta had drunk a few too many, bringing him a glass of water as he pried the almost-empty whiskey glass out of his other hand. No one else said a word about his drunken state, even if they most certainly noticed it, eyeing him with discomfort.

Shouta started to feel ill, very ill, and he stood abruptly, shuffling toward the bathroom as quickly as he could, a familiar lightheadedness starting to take over. He blasted into one of the stalls, not even bothering to close the door behind him before bending down and pushing his hair back as his body rejected those last few whiskeys. Even as he couldn’t bring anything else up, he continued to dry-heave for a few moments, trying to breathe deeply to stop the spasming. Sickness leaving just as quickly as it had come over him, Shouta slumped onto the tile floor, wiping his mouth with a piece of toilet paper. He felt absolutely pathetic, absolutely miserable.

Feeling slightly more sober than before, he managed to drag himself off the floor, slowly making his way over to the sink. Shouta turned on the cold water, splashing it onto his face and cupping his hands underneath to collect it, bringing it up to his mouth to rinse it out. The bar had thoughtfully put out a bottle of mouthwash and a stack of disposable cups to which he helped himself, cleansing the vomit taste from his mouth. Shouta stared at himself in the mirror for a short period of time, simmering in self-loathing. What would Moriyama think of him if she could see him like this, drinking himself sick trying to forget her, trying in vain to replace the taste of her memory with the taste of cigarette smoke?

He returned to the table, and Hizashi leaned over to him, lowering his voice as much as he could. “Are you alright, Shouta?”
“I’m fine. I just had to use the restroom.” Hizashi seemed to realize that this wasn’t the whole truth, but he let it go for now. Shouta was certain that he would hear about this again later. His buzz had begun to wane, and he decided to get another drink, although he had decided to take things a little slower now, opting for a whiskey cocktail instead.

“Oh, good!” An unfortunately-familiar voice called out from across the room. Shouta looked up from his place at the bar and immediately grimaced, seeing that Fukukado had joined the party. She immediately bounced over to Shouta, intent on giving him hell as she normally did. He hadn’t seen much of her since beginning his teaching job, which had been a peaceful respite from her teasing. “I’ve missed seeing you around the office!” she beamed.

“Wish I could say the same,” Shouta quipped back, hoping that, if he was short enough with her, she might get bored and leave him alone.

Not one to back down easily, Fukukado brushed it off. “Oh, you’re so mean!” she pouted, crossing her arms. “You know you’ve missed me! I’m delightful.”

Maybe I should switch back to straight liquor. Shouta signalled to the bartender, who poured another round over ice and added it to his tab. Maybe if he drank more, Fukukado would annoy him less.

“In all seriousness though, how have you been? It really has been a while.”

“I’m fine,” Shouta replied, not really wanting to get into things with her of all people, not that there was anyone in the world he would be willing to tell about his feelings for Moriyama.

Fukukado frowned, seeing through the lie. “You seem tired. Are you sure you’re doing okay? Something seems...off.”

The hard alcohol had begun to make its way through Shouta’s body, his tough exterior fading. “I’ve...been having a hard time lately. I don’t really want to talk about it, but...you know,” he confessed.

“I’m sorry to hear that.” For once, Fukukado shed her playfulness, seeming genuine in her concern.
“I’m really not looking forward to going home to an empty apartment.” In retrospect, Shouta would come to regret those words, but at the time, he didn’t think anything of it.

“Maybe…” Fukukado’s hand slowly crept up to the side of his face, lingering there. “...you don’t have to go home alone.” Though he normally would have rejected the absurd solicitation outright, Shouta’s inhibitions had all but disappeared. It didn’t actually sound like the worst idea in the world; if he wanted to move on, he had to try being with someone else, even if it was Fukukado. She was fond of him, so how bad could it be?

Fuck it. Shouta called over the bartender to close out his tab while Fukukado looked on in shock, surprised that her come-on had actually worked. He led her out of the bar as Hizashi watched, horrified as he witnessed his friend engaging in his most recent episode in a series of self-destructive behaviors.

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“Don’t worry about it. This kind of thing happens sometimes. Besides, you’ve been drinking a lot. We’ll just have to keep trying,” Fukukado reassured Shouta. They’d been back here in his bedroom for a good twenty minutes now, trying and failing to initiate sex. As much as Shouta was fine with doing this, his body wouldn’t quite cooperate. “Whiskey dick,” Fukukado called it. Shouta knew that wasn’t the only problem at hand. Still, he was determined to go forward with this; how could he truly move forward if he couldn’t even have sex with someone else. You know you wouldn’t be having this problem if it was Moriyama in your bed, a vile voice whispered from deep inside. He forced the thought away; maybe he was just that disinterested in Fukukado. But why not? She was pretty enough, nice enough. Shouta convinced himself that if he could just go through with this, everything would be fine. He stared down at his half-hard dick, giving it the stank eye as an idea occurred to him.

“Sorry, but do you think you could turn over?”

Fukukado gave a wry grin. “Okay, Ass Man.” She flipped over onto her stomach, bringing her backside into full view. Shouta stared at it as he groped himself, trying desperately to achieve enough of an erection to stick it in. Otherwise he’d just be pushing rope, which wasn’t very pleasurable for anyone. He took Fukukado by the hips, effectively dry-humping her, trying to imagine that she was literally anyone else. She seemed to enjoy it, moaning lightly at the lewd act. Shouta finally found his window, a blessed few seconds of full stiffness that allowed him to spread Fukukado open and slip himself inside. She moaned in delight at the intrusion, finally getting what she wanted after so many years of unwanted advances. The inside of her was already quite slick, making things a little bit easier.

Shouta found an angle that she seemed to like, repeatedly rutting into her. Fukukado moaned like a
cat in heat, which, had she been anyone else, would have been a good thing. Coming from her, it just seemed gratuitous. It was authentic however; Shouta could feel her tightening around him as she was already finding her completion. He, however, had an unfortunate realization: achieving enough of an erection to begin was just the first obstacle. If Shouta already felt disinterested in the act, how in the world was he supposed to reach his own climax. He wouldn’t be able to do it. Not with Fukukado. Well, not as things were now, anyway. Maybe he could close his eyes and think about something else. Maybe something from a porn? Fuck. Shouta didn’t actually look at much of that; so much of it just seemed so absurd and over-the-top. How could he enjoy something when the subjects were so clearly faking it. He closed his eyes, desperately trying to come up with some other scenario; something truly erotic.

Maybe... just this once... he could let himself think about Moriyama like that. It would be strictly out of necessity of course. No, that didn’t make it any better, but it felt like the only option at this point. Shouta clenched his jaw, letting the obscene part of his mind run wild. I wouldn’t want to have you like this... No, I’d have you on your back, with your legs wrapped around me. Oh, you’ve got such a cute voice! What will you sound like when you whimper my name? Shouta’s eyes snapped open. No, no, no. He couldn’t bring himself to go there. He couldn’t even bring himself to imagine Moriyama’s naked body. It was a vile thing to do, even if she was technically an adult. No, he’d rather not even have an orgasm at all if this was his only option. Shouta wouldn’t betray Moriyama by thinking about her in the way that she hated.

Fukukado didn’t appear to notice Shouta’s dysfunction, even if it had begun to affect him physically. She remained too wrapped up in her own bliss, ramming her body backward to continue the vigorous contact, paying little care to whether or not the neighbors could hear the sounds she made. For her, it had become much more about her own pleasure than Shouta’s, and he might have been offended if he wasn’t already so ready to have this over and done with. “I’m close,” he lied, before withdrawing and spitting on Fukukado’s back. Hey, it had to be believable; he wasn’t about to tell her that he couldn’t complete sex with her because he was still too in love with someone else.

“Was it good for you too?” she asked, pulling back the covers and crawling under them after Shouta cleaned the spit from her back.

“It was fine. You should get going.” Maybe it was a bit cruel, kicking a woman out just after being intimate with her, but Shouta just wanted to be alone now, to run the shower and scrub his body.

“Just like that?” Fukukado seemed taken-aback, and rightfully so. She scoffed at him, reaching for her clothes.

“I realized that I would prefer to be alone after all.”
She shook her head at him. “You know, I usually say it teasingly, but you really are a mean person. Maybe it is better that you like to be alone.”

After Fukukado’s hasty exit, Shouta stood in the shower for a long time, regretting his choices. How could he have been so stupid to think that this would be a good idea? He didn’t want to do that kind of thing with her. He didn’t even like her! The person he did like, a) was gone from his life now, and b) would never feel the same way about him. Maybe he would just have to convince himself that he was content with loneliness.

Chapter End Notes

I know the sex in this was written in a decidedly non-sexy manner. That was intentional. All future sex scenes will be written in a much more erotic fashion.
Feelings, Old and New

Chapter Notes

Content warning for both sex stuff and for the description of a (homicide) crime scene.

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After what she had seen on the previous night’s news program, about the string of murders that eerily mimicked those committed by the villain who had killed Aizawa-sensei’s late wife, Tsukiko worried for him. She wondered if he had seen the reports, and if so, how did they make him feel? Sad? Scared? Tsukiko doubted that she would be able to get Aizawa-sensei to talk much about it; he would put on a mask of stoicism like always, pretending that nothing in the world bothered him. However, she knew that this would inevitably bring up his grief for Mariko again, as one would expect. Even if he had processed said grief, he couldn’t be unaffected by the idea that her murderer might not be dead after all, or that there was at least a copycat out there who admired the criminal, imitating his vicious attacks. Tsukiko and Aizawa-sensei didn’t have a session planned for today, but she still wanted to ask him about it, to see what he was thinking and feeling. Thus, she had asked him to come down to her office when he got the chance; if he had seen the news story, he likely would know what this was about.

Aizawa-sensei stuck his head inside the open doorway. “Moriyama? You called for me. What is it?”

Tsukiko knew that her worry was apparent on her face. “Ah...did you happen to see the news last night?” she asked, her voice wary.
“Yeah, I did.” Aizawa-sensei stepped fully into the office, closing the door behind him. “You want to know if I saw about those killings, right?”

“Yes.” Tsukiko raised her eyebrows. “You know how it looks, don’t you?”

“Yes. I know.” Something seemed to click inside Aizawa-sensei’s mind. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

Tsukiko scoffed, casting her gaze to the side. “How could I not worry?! Surely you must feel some kind of way about this!”

“I’m not going to lie; it does make me feel a little bit sad, but it’s nothing too severe.”

“Sad because of what happened to Mariko?”

“Yes. Of course it makes me remember what happened the night she died,” Aizawa-sensei explained. “But I also know that there are always going to be things that remind me of that, so I’m not letting myself get too bogged-down by it.” His gaze softened as he eyed Tsukiko’s concern once more. “Look, there was a time when this would have absolutely destroyed me, but since you’ve been helping me… Saying this, a tiny bit of color dusted his face, but Tsukiko assumed that it was because he always struggled to be candid with his feelings. “Since you’ve been helping me, things are a little easier. I feel a bit better.”

Tsukiko cleared her throat, careful not to let her heart be moved too far as a soft blush of her own claimed her face. “You don’t feel... frightened at all?”

“Why would I feel afraid of this? I’m a professional hero.”

“Are you sure…” Tsukiko bit her lip. “Are you sure that that villain is dead?”

Shouta searched her face. “Of course I’m sure. He had no pulse after what I did to him.” You don’t need to be afraid, Tsukiko. “He’s dead. I don’t know everything about what’s happening now, but I am absolutely sure that the person out there now is a fake. Someone who admires what that bastard did. It’s going to be okay. They’re going to catch this person. It’s going to be okay.”
“Are you trying to convince me, or yourself?”

Shouta didn’t have a good answer for that. He knew that this couldn’t be the true Ripper. The true Ripper was dead. Shouta had stomped his head in until blood coated the soles of his boots, sticky and thick, hot, smelling ancient and primal. No. It was absolutely a copycat. If this were the real deal, Tsukiko might have been in danger, but that wasn’t the case...right?

Deep down, really deep down, part of Shouta felt uneasy about this. Why would something like this just...happen...all of a sudden, and after so many years? What if somehow it really was Ripper? What if he had somehow survived what Shouta had done to him? Was that even possible? If so, then the villain would most certainly want revenge for what was done to him, and was most likely surveilling Shouta, planning an ambush. And he most likely knew about Tsukiko. Shouta couldn’t bear to imagine experiencing that awful night all over again, to have his second great love torn away from him by the same demonic bastard. It made him sick to think about it.

No. Shouta was just being paranoid. This was a phony. He was safe. Tsukiko was safe. There was no way that Ripper could still be alive. This was just an alarmingly-timed imitator. It was normal to feel on-edge, with so many details lining up, but he didn’t need to really worry.

He laughed nervously. “It’s stupid.”

“What’s stupid?” Tsukiko knit her eyebrows together, looking at him seriously.

“I know that man is dead, but…”

“But...?”

“But I still feel a little bit paranoid. Like I know I’m being paranoid, but…” Shouta trailed off. “But I still feel that way.”

“It’s not stupid. It’s completely understandable,” Tsukiko reassured him. “When you’ve been through something as traumatic as that, your brain rewires itself to be on high alert anytime something comes up as a potential threat similar to what you experienced before. It’s a survival mechanism. Don’t ever feel like you’re being stupid for something like this.”

“I still feel like I’m overreacting.”
Tsukiko half-laughed, half-scoffed. “On the contrary, I’d say you’re under-reacting. A lot of people would be much more upset than this. You’re very calm considering the situation. But then again, you’ve always been so stubborn when it comes to emotions.” She flicked Shouta in the forehead playfully.

“Hey!”

In stark contrast with her previous action, Tsukiko went solemn for a moment, her face knitting up in concern. “You know… You don’t have to go through all of this alone. We’re all here for you.”

*I don’t necessarily want to go it alone...but your definition of “getting through this together” is probably different from mine.* “I know…” Shouta didn’t know what else to say, not quite able to meet her eyes at this particular moment.

“But it’s hard for you to be honest and open about that kind of thing. I know, I know...but I think everyone else is more worried about you than you realize. They want to be here for you, but they’re not quite sure how to help you right now.”

Shouta brushed it off. “They shouldn’t waste their time.”

“It’s not a waste of time. You’re not a waste of time.” She had that look on her face again, like it hurt her to hear him say such a thing.

Every time Tsukiko made that face, every time she refuted the idea that Shouta wasn’t important, or that he wasn’t deserving of something, that pang of affection in his heart swelled a bit more. Her care for him, even if it didn’t swing in a romantic direction, was genuine, and she was one of those rare individuals who didn’t care if he didn’t like feelings; she wore her own on her sleeve all the same. Tsukiko made her concerns known, and she worried for Shouta even when he didn’t worry for himself. It made him feel content deep down to know that someone was looking out for him. More than that, she made him feel safe for the first time in a long time. At first, Shouta had been so anxious about the prospect of her reentering his life, but now, he believed that maybe Tsukiko had come back at just the right time. *Please...stay here with me always...*

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Moving further into the day, and even late in the evening, Tsukiko’s kind words from before
echoed loudly in Shouta’s memory. She really was too good to him, considering everything he hid from her. He’d been stupid before when he believed that he could avoid falling in love with her all over again. Tsukiko was... Tsukiko, and she had a deeper hold on Shouta than he had ever realized before. Was she this caring with everyone...or did he hold a special place in her heart? No. Absolutely not. Tsukiko was simply a deeply empathetic and caring kind of person. It would be naive to think that a beautiful young woman like her could ever have romantic feelings for her old high school teacher. She was kind to him because she was his friend, and because she was his therapist. It wasn’t anything more meaningful than that. She had always been so honest with Shouta before; if she felt that way about him, she would have confessed those feelings by now. Maybe he was one of the few men that Tsukiko actually trusted, but that didn’t mean that she was automatically attracted to him.

All the same, Shouta wished that things could be different, that Tsukiko could love him in the way that he loved her. A pang of deep longing formed in his heart; the more she showed her care for him, the further he fell. Maybe...he should tell her after all. Maybe she wouldn’t be too offended by his feelings, and she could help him move on. Or maybe...maybe she could love him in return. Theoretically, it was possible that Tsukiko had such inclinations, but kept them hidden in the interest of professionalism. Shouta knew such an idea was a simple fantasy, but it still felt nice to dream. He would have to be careful not to slip too far into this flight of fancy, lest he spiral into a depression after being confronted with reality. Besides, Shouta wasn’t really one to let his imagination run away with him. It wasn’t practical. His mind turned once again to their conversation from before, to the way Tsukiko looked at him, worried for his well-being, and visibly upset by the way he talked about himself...

...and how badly he had wanted to kiss her in that moment. Increasingly, Shouta’s feelings for Tsukiko had begun to deepen in a way that they never had before. He didn’t just want to be with her, he wanted to be with her. It wasn’t wrong, or inappropriate, but this new kind of attraction was alarming, and just different. Having only ever felt this for one person previously, Shouta was uneasy about it, unused to the sensation. He imagined that this was probably what most teenagers went through; this sudden, intense desire. This development was extremely recent, but it had come on strongly, and he would often find his thoughts wandering during his sessions with Tsukiko. On some level it felt disrespectful, but he took great care to never indicate that he desired her in the physical sense. As he would look at her, seated in her chair, the impulse would come over him to kneel in front of her, spreading her thighs wide and burying his face between them. Shouta longed to hear the sounds she would make as he did such a thing.

He exhaled heavily as he remembered the thought now, brow furrowing as a tingly heat spread through his lower body. It was an autonomic reaction, but Shouta still resented not being able to control it much. Fortunately, during his sessions with Tsukiko, the sheer terror of being found out kept anything from, ahem, coming up, but in the privacy of his own home, such a physical response wouldn’t be so reigned in. This had happened on a couple of other occasions, but the...effect...wasn’t so severe that Shouta couldn’t simply ignore it, willing himself to settle down. Tonight, however, the long-repressed desire stirred to the surface as he stood in the shower, fully hard and consumed with lewd compulsions. He was too aroused to feel annoyed, and Shouta struggled to figure out where to go from here. This issue wasn’t going to simply disappear, but could he really do that while thinking of Tsukiko? Well, he could, but it still seemed wrong to some extent. Then again, he needed some kind of stimulation to reach gratification, and
pornography didn’t exactly interest him. Doing this meant Shouta would have to be *that* much more careful to keep her out of his head. Having her know about his love for her would be bad enough, but if she were to find out that he’d gratified himself with the idea of doing intimate things to her? She’d never speak to him again.

All the same, thinking of her was the only thing that promised to bring him any enjoyment. Shouta would do this, but as quickly as possible, so as to not let himself get too excessive with his fantasizing. Furthermore, he needed to *try* and be as respectful as possible, and not think of anything too perverse. Wondering how much he would regret this in the end, he reached down to grip himself firmly, slowly starting to rock his hand back and forth. Shouta gave a low groan, using his free arm to brace himself against the tile wall, leaning his forehead against it. Gradually, his thoughts began to turn toward Tsukiko and he shivered slightly, both mortified and excited as he recalled how her clothing would occasionally be pulled taut as she moved, hinting at the shape of her body underneath. She’d grown lean and strong by necessity, as indicated by the musculature of her arms, displayed any time she wore a short-sleeve shirt. Still, her maturity had made her soft in certain places. When Tsukiko would sit down, her skirt would ride up *ever so slightly*, displaying her smooth, supple thighs which continued up into her full backside. Shouta loved the look of it, though he was careful not to stare.

He gasped at the thought of it now, as his thoughts drifted back to the delightful idea that had come over him before, of using his mouth on her, making her squirm and shiver. Tsukiko would be surprised at first by the bold act, ultimately melting against the pleasurable sensation, spreading her legs a little wider and gripping the upholstery of her chair.

No...Tsukiko wouldn’t be into something so *public*. Shouta regretted being so presumptuous. He shifted his train of thought, pursuing fantasies much more chaste. Shouta had to note the irony of it. Internal fantasy was typically the one context in which perverse desires could run wild, and, yet, he actively reined his own predilections in. Perhaps...a scenario in which Tsukiko would come on to him, with no conceivable doubt about whether they were doing things that she wanted. Maybe...if he had conceded to Nemuri’s ridiculous proposal that one evening during the class trip, if he *had* kissed Tsukiko as directed.

“*Do it then.*** Nemuri, of course, referred to Shouta’s revelation that, if required to kiss a student, former or current, he would choose Tsukiko.

“*Don’t be stupid.*** He brushed off the suggestion as he had in real life, noting the considerable blush on Tsukiko’s face.

“*I-It’s okay. You can do it.*** Her words caught the entire room by surprise, and her face darkened just a little bit more, unable to meet Shouta’s gaze of shock. He ran his hands through his hair. He didn’t want to force Tsukiko into this scenario, and he didn’t want her to feel obligated, but, when she offered, refusing just seemed rude.
He sighed. “Alright. Fine. But in private, okay? Don’t need the two of you making this any more awkward than it already is.” Doing his best to put on an air of annoyance to hide his nervousness, Shouta stood, taking Tsukiko by the hand and leading her out of the room, closing the door behind them. “I’m sorry about all of this. You don’t need to do this if you don’t really want to,” he told her.

“Do you...want to?” She asked breathily, looking up at him with those wild lilac eyes that pierced right into the depths of his soul.

“I...” Before Shouta could finish his sentence, Tsukiko stood up on her toes, laying one tiny hand on the side of his face and pulling him closer to close the gap between them. Neither moved at first, too shocked or too shy to deepen the kiss at all, but as she reached forward to wrap her arms around her neck, Shouta let go of his inhibitions, devouring her mouth with every bit of pent-up, reckless desire that he’d kept to himself for so long. Tsukiko whimpered in response, both of them stumbling backward, searching desperately for a hidden corner where they couldn’t be seen.

Shouta backed her up against the wall before falling to his knees, using his hands to widen her stance before reaching underneath the skirt of her dress to pull her panties down to her knees. She trembled, realizing with anticipation what he intended to do. Tsukiko nodded, giving him permission, and he carefully lifted the remaining fabric out of the way to look at her fully. Embarrassed by this exposure, she covered her face with her hands, moaning as Shouta gave a low groan of approval. She was just so damn cute, and...

Shouta’s whole body shuddered then, shaking at the knees as he exhaled sharply, squeezing his eyes shut in ecstasy. He continued to brace himself, feeling a little shaky after such a powerful climax. Head spinning, he blinked his eyes a few times, returning to reality, faced now with the implications of what he had done. This would just be another thing that he would have to hide from her, another thing that would cause her to hate him, and yet...it had felt so damn good. Shouta hadn’t had any doubt that he did indeed love Tsukiko, but this settled it. He wanted her in every conceivable way, and he always would.

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Sansa shook his head and sighed, visibly disgusted by the crime scene in front of him. “Another one, huh?”

The beat cop who had first arrived at the scene nodded, still shaken by the grisly display. “I’m afraid so.”
“CSU will be here soon, but I think we can attribute this to the Ripper copycat just like the others.”

“I’m not so sure.” Detective Naomasa looked up from where he had crouched down to study the body, pointing out the cartoonish eyes that had been carved into the victim’s face. “This detail was never released to the public. Unfortunately, we might not be dealing with an imitator, after all.”

Sansa seemed puzzled. “But...why come back now, after all this time?”

“I’m not certain yet. And there’s something else, too.” Naomasa signaled for Sansa to come and look, noting the characters that had been carved into the skin just below the body’s gouged-out eyes: “愛” under the left, and “翔” under the right. “See these kanji? This is new.”

“‘Ai’ and ‘sho.’ Any idea what it means?”

“Not a clue.”
Ripper

Chapter Notes

Heavy heavy content warning for this one: gore, body horror, and violence. Like really, this chapter focuses on a serial killer.

This chapter wasn't in the original outline, but y'all were so curious about Ripper and Boo-Boo, I got you.

Takeuchi Utaro was only a few years old when he discovered that he possessed an amazing and useful quirk. It had grown late in the day, but Utaro continued run and play in the park with the children that lived in the apartment next to his family’s. He plopped down in a vacant swing and pushed off with his feet, climbing higher and higher with each back-and-forth movement. The little neighbor girl had shown him how to jump off the swing in mid-air, landing safely in front of it, and Utaro wanted to try now. As his seat whipped forward again, he let go, momentum propelling him through the air. His landing was imperfect, leaving a nasty scrape on his little knee. Utaro wanted to cry at first, frightened by the blood that beaded up on his flesh, but he felt no pain. All the same, he knew that he needed to have his injury cleaned and bandaged, so he and his friends headed back to their building. At home, Utaro explained to his mother what had happened. “Mama, I hurt my leg!”

His mother knelt down to examine the area. “Where is it, sweetie? I don’t see it.”

“It’s right here!” Utaro pointed a chubby finger at his leg, but was astonished to find that the angry red scrape had disappeared. “It’s gone!”

“Utaro, are you making up stories?”

“No, mama! Ichiro and Hanako saw it too!” Mrs. Takeuchi asked the neighbor children the next day if Utaro had indeed been hurt, and they confirmed what her son had told her. Ultimately, it wasn’t all that surprising when she thought about it. Her child had simply inherited his father’s ability, and now that regenerative power had begun to manifest for the first time.

The following week, Utaro’s mother took him to see his doctor, to confirm that he had indeed obtained his father’s quirk. To the boy’s chagrin, he ended up having to undergo a lengthy series of tests, from blood sampling to full-body scans. The whole process took almost all day, but yielded quite a bit of useful information. Based on analysis of Utaro’s blood samples, and the genetic material therein, the lab technicians could confirm the inheritance, and also note an interesting mutation. Not only was the boy able to heal rapidly, but he was incapable of feeling physical pain.
According to the doctor, it seemed that Utaro would indeed age, as his father had, and that he would have an average lifespan, but that life would almost certainly end due to old age. Utaro could not die due to physical trauma, or of shock resulting from such an incident. No, the universe had given him an incredible gift, which would certainly lend itself to a long and fruitful hero career, should he choose to pursue it.

While Mr. and Mrs. Takeuchi had initially been thrilled about their child’s gift, they began to grow concerned over time. As Utaro grew older, and started to understand what regeneration truly meant to him, he became more and more curious, especially about anatomy, and how the body worked. Eventually, he would start to put that curiosity into practice, with what he called his “experiments.” These experiments started small, with Utaro cutting off a small piece of his own skin to see how quickly he could recover, or purposely spraining his ligaments. Unfortunately, such relatively minor tests quickly grew boring. To the horror of his parents, he would begin to conduct dissection-like procedures on his own body, carefully flaying off the flesh and muscle of his limbs in order to examine the blood vessels and connective tissue underneath. On one occasion, Utaro rigged up a mirror over his bed before laying down and using surgical tools procured online to open up his own chest cavity, watching his own inflating and deflating lungs, his own beating heart, as the opening slowly fused shut. Another time, Mrs. Takeuchi fainted at the sight of her son calmly sitting and examining his own intestines. When she regained consciousness a few minutes later, she begged him to stop doing things like this, if only for her own sanity. Utaro agreed, but his shifting expression indicated that he might simply be more careful with when and where he enacted his procedures.

After some time, he did actually stop experimenting on himself, but only because it eventually became boring. To cut into something that felt no pain seemed...so clinical, so sterile. Utaro wanted to observe something more visceral. He wanted to experience the wet heat and thumping heart rate of something that could actually hurt. It had been so long since he’d known such a physical sensation in his own body. Inflicting it on something else was as close as he would get now. Thus, Utaro began the second phase of his experiments: animals. It started with little things, like sparrows and mice. The piercing screams as he would slice them open made him shudder in delight. There was something so primal about it; the sheer terror was delicious. Never satiated, he began to escalate, going after stray cats, and raccoons and even a deer or two, when he could manage to trap them. He knew that, theoretically, what he was doing was cruel, but Utaro really only wanted to learn, so how bad could it really be? He felt no remorse for the creatures he killed, easily becoming numb toward their cries of agony, the terrified thrashing, the empty look in their eyes after their last breath left them.

Utaro tried to be careful about keeping his activities a secret, but after he went home one day, he put his clothes in the laundry basket, not noticing the large splotch of blood on the sleeve of his shirt. His parents discovered it, and the next day when he went out again, Mr. Takeuchi followed him, discovering what his son had been up to. Disturbed, he and his wife insisted that Utaro see a psychiatrist. Surely there had to be something wrong with him psychologically if he thought that torturing animals was an acceptable thing to do. The doctor commended their decision to bring him, explaining that such behavior could be indicative of sociopathy. She spoke with Utaro on several different occasions, trying to discern his reasoning for his actions. Utaro explained that he just wanted to learn, but his doctor remained skeptical. She asked if he enjoyed hurting the animals, and he balked for a moment before saying that he didn’t. That little pause created reasonable doubt,
and she urged his parents to continue keeping an eye on him, recommending that Utaro begin regular therapy, and prescribing antipsychotic medication, just in case.

In attempt to reduce the frequency of his ethically-dubious pastime, Utaro tried to entertain himself by watching crime dramas on television. He particularly enjoyed those that described or depicted homicide in great detail. These allowed him to live vicariously through some imaginary killer without actually harming anything, or anyone. Sometimes he would go and see slasher movies at the theater, but such films often left him unsatisfied; they were too unrealistic, the violence and gore played-up and overly dramatized to get a reaction from the audience. Utaro’s favorite programs, however, were the true crime documentaries, the ones that discussed real-life murders, often unsolved. The attacks were often horrific, with the added bonus of being authentic. His parents couldn’t quite understand why he enjoyed them so much; Mr. Takeuchi jokingly referred to the shows as “murder porn.” At the same time, they felt relieved that their son spent his free time simply watching television, instead of torturing animals or performing vivisections on himself.

Though Utaro didn’t exactly advertise his strange hobbies, there were still rumors, whispers among his classmates that he was some kind of psychopath. The other students in his school tended to avoid him, even if they never said anything to him about what they had heard. They were nice enough to him, but it might have been more out of fear than anything. After all, you didn’t want to be on the odd kid’s bad side when he eventually snapped. Utaro knew that he wasn’t exactly popular, but it didn’t really bother him. He preferred solitude anyway. His parents would sometimes ask about any friends he might have, or if he planned on meeting up with anyone on the weekends, but he would always just shrug and brush it off, even if he knew that they worried about him. Their meddling had begun to annoy him. Of course every parent wanted to have a “normal” child. Well, too bad. You can’t always get what you want.

Even if he wasn’t too friendly with his classmates, Utaro did eventually develop an interest in one of the girls at school. He planned to ask her out, leaving a note in her locker to meet him after school, when they could talk privately.

“I, um… I’m not really interested in dating anyone right now.” She couldn’t meet Utaro’s eyes as she rejected him. That was fine. If she wanted to focus on school, that was her choice to make, and it was a responsible one. Utaro felt disappointed, but he wasn’t really all that upset.

That is...until the next weekend when he saw her out on a date with another one of their classmates. Utaro knew it was a date, because of how the two held hands, because of the look in her eyes as she gazed at him...that jerk. She would never look at Utaro like that; it seemed like she’d only looked at him with fear.

Well maybe he should make her feel fear. In that moment, he could only think about that pretty face wrought with terror, a clean cut across her slender neck, marring her smooth skin with a single line of hot red.
Utaro managed to move on after that, continuing to keep mostly to himself throughout the rest of his high school years, through college, and moving into the workforce. He managed to get a job working for a medical examiner’s office, giving him access to detailed accounts of murders committed in the area. It was a good fit, and Utaro did his job well. He even found a person that he could consider a friend: the young, pretty M.E. who seemed to be a kindred spirit. Like Utaro, she was a true crime fan, and didn’t feel uncomfortable dealing with dead bodies all day. On occasion, she would call him away from his office, to show him a particularly interesting, or gnarly cadaver. Utaro felt as though he had found his perfect match.

“Would you want to have dinner with me on Friday night?”

“Sure! We could grab a burger after work!”

“Ah, no…” Utaro stammered. “I meant...like a date.”

Her eyes went wide in sudden realization. “Oh, Utaro… I uh, I don’t...have those kind of feelings for you. I-I like being friends, but… I think I just want to be friends.”

“I see. Thank you for being honest with me.” After she had left the autopsy lab, Utaro ran his hand across the cold, smooth stainless steel slab. She had spent so much time leaning over that table, never knowing that she would wind up laying on it.

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Maybe...the depiction of gore in slasher movies wasn’t so unrealistic after all. Utaro considered the idea as he gazed at the walls of the autopsy suite, at the thick, sticky blood spattered across the tile. He had arrived early to work today, before most of his coworkers, leaving only himself and the medical examiner. She hadn’t thought anything of it when Utaro let himself into the room, though she failed to notice that he locked the door behind him. She had simply thought that he wanted to talk about their conversation the day before, when she had turned him down for a date. In fact, she hadn’t found any of his actions strange until he reached over to the instrument tray to pick up a scalpel before pressing the stop button on her tape recorder. When she saw the sharp instrument in her “friend’s” hand, she put up her hands, as if trying to calm him. “Utaro…” That would be her final word before he grabbed her, restraining her hands and taping her mouth tightly shut. It had been quite some time since Utaro had been able to perform one of his experiments.

What he had done before to those animals had been fun, but this was so, so much better. You could
see fear in an animal’s face, but you couldn’t see betrayal, you couldn’t see the awful realization of imminent death. There had been times that Utaro had the urge to kill other human beings, but until now, he had resisted. Having broken the seal, having finally done it, he questioned why he’d waited so long. Surrounded by puddles of blood and viscera, he felt alive for the first time, like he’d finally found his true calling. Of course, with DNA evidence everywhere, he would have to torch the whole place; it was almost a shame, to destroy such a beautiful sight. The next time, he would have to be much more careful, putting his years of true crime knowledge to good use. Yes, he would be doing this again. How could he not? The delicious scent, the glorious sight of true human terror, the long, clean cut to expose the glistening, pulsating organs hidden within...it was intoxicating.

The years passed, with Utaro growing more and more deranged. He disconnected completely with his family, knowing that they wouldn’t want to be associated with him anyway. He abandoned his “normal” career completely, devoting himself to his villainy on a full-time basis. As he committed more and more murders, each one more grisly and disturbing than the last, he began to garner a bit of fame, or perhaps infamy. The media had christened him “Ripper,” in reference to the 19th-century killer to whom, admittedly, Utaro bore a striking resemblance. Utaro himself found the choice a bit gauche; the reference was just so obvious. However, he did have to admit that it was somewhat appropriate. He would simply have to try harder to set himself apart. Utaro adopted a signature, a way of displaying his victims so that any onlooker would immediately know just who had made the kill. He started flaying his victims wide open, with every organ removed and organized neatly around the corpse.

It wasn’t long before Utaro found himself being pursued by one particular hero. Other heroes tended to leave him alone for the most part, leaving the investigation up to the police and only interfering if they caught him in the middle of his work. But this guy, some young upstart who maybe thought just a little too highly of himself, of his capabilities, was different. This hero liked to hang out around the red light district, where Utaro did most of his work, hoping to stop and capture him in the midst of a kill. He almost did on a couple of occasions, though Utaro was luckily able to escape. To throw this kid off his case, he began working in different areas, though it was difficult to find a setting conducive to procedural torture and murder. He had to begin working quicker, which he didn’t much like. It left more margin for error than Utaro preferred, leaving him vulnerable to having his identity revealed. His mind raced at all times, searching for a solution to all of this nonsense.

Inevitably, Utaro grew to hate this hero, going and sticking his nose where it didn’t belong. Why couldn’t he just mind his own business? He wasn’t even a particularly powerful hero; not like All Might or anything. One thing did interest Utaro, however. It seemed that whenever this hero engaged him in combat, any hits he landed hurt. The sensation had confused him at first; it had been so long since he had felt any kind of pain. Sometimes, Utaro almost looked forward to their brawls. All the same, he hated this man, since he was the only one who seemed to have any chance of actually harming him. And he had such a stick up his ass about stopping the one thing that brought Utaro any kind of joy. The nerve of some people. He needed to put a stop to this hero, once and for all. With a little bit of research (and a little bit of meddling around on the dark web), Utaro had a name to put with a face. This hero used the name “Eraserhead,” though his true identity was Aizawa Shouta. He had the ability to nullify another person’s quirk, so long as he was able to see them. Furthermore, he had a wife.
Somehow that was the part that got to Utaro the most. He himself wasn’t particularly bad looking, and he’d never been able to get a girl to look his way. But this Aizawa fellow...he was honestly kind of homely-looking, and somehow he had a woman? It was infuriating. How would Aizawa react, Utaro wondered, if his wife was taken away from him? With a little more digging, he was able to find out where the couple lived, he was able to get a phone number. He began to monitor the house, noting when Aizawa went out. It was at those times that Utaro started to make his phone calls. He would use a pair of binoculars to spy into their home as he hassled the wife. Mariko was her name; petite and blonde, she was very pretty, her voice kind. It would always waver delightfully when she realized that it was Utaro on the line. Once his wife had been involved, Eraserhead began to pursue him much more aggressively. He was angry that this villain was terrorizing his wife, but Utaro could tell that he was frightened, too, for her safety. He was right to feel that way.

Eventually Utaro had had enough. This little game had run its course, and now it was time to put a stop to Eraserhead. In preparation, he ceased his phone calls for a few weeks, laying low and holding off on any new killings. At the same time, he was building up the anticipation for himself, knowing that after abstaining for a while, this kill would be pure ecstasy, experiencing the terror and agony of two people at once.

Believing her prior threat to be gone, Mariko returned to her normal self, no longer afraid to venture out on her own. On that fateful evening, she was just returning home from some errand. As she searched through her bag for the keys to her home, Utaro appeared behind her, covering her mouth so she couldn’t scream. She trembled the entire time he held her in an alley, waiting for her husband to come after him. “Please,” she begged. “You don’t have to do this.”

“I know I don’t have to,” he told her coldly. “I want to do this.”

“Please ,” her voice cracked. “I’ll do anything! I’ll ask him to leave you alone! Just don’t hurt us, don’t hurt…”

“Don’t hurt what?”

“I haven’t even gotten to tell him yet…”

“What haven’t you told him?” This was shaping up to be even more fun than Utaro had anticipated.

“We’re… I’m… I’m pregnant . Just about a month, but…” Tears began to fall from her eyes as she
realized that she would never get to hold her child, never see her husband bouncing their baby on his knee.

The tears continued even as Utaro drew the blade across her throat, her husband looking on in abject horror.

He could feel every bit of it, every stomp of Eraserhead’s boot as he tried to smash Utaro’s brains in. He could smell his own blood, hear the crunching of bone, and he really thought for a moment that he might die. And such a prospect didn’t particularly bother him. To go out feeling and experiencing every visceral moment...what a rush.

Utaro woke hours later, his head starting to piece itself back together. Maybe if Aizawa had completely killed him while using his erasure...that might have done it, but this time he had failed to finish the job. He had, however, done quite a bit of damage. It might take some time before Utaro was back to his old self, and so, he would need to lay low...maybe somewhere, some other country where crime wasn’t so heavily monitored, where there weren’t so many nosy heroes intent on stopping him.

The years had passed, and Utaro had managed to regain his strength. His head bore telltale scars, an unsettling dent that told of his unfortunate encounter that night. Still, he had his health again, and he was more than happy to return to his old stomping grounds, to start up an old feud that had never quite burned out.

*This time, Eraserhead, make sure you finish the damn job.*
In Your Arms

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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After months of improvement, of better sleep than he had had in years, Shouta felt as though he’d now begun to regress. Once again, he found himself lying awake at night, uneasy for reasons he himself couldn’t quite put into words. He did manage to get a few hours most nights, but it was of the restless sort, fraught with strange dreams and sleep paralysis. During the latter, he would hallucinate a shadowy figure crouching in the corner, staring at him with those cold eyes, from which the light had disappeared ages ago. Shouta had told Tsukiko about what he was experiencing now, and she could detect his frustration with himself even if he didn’t explicitly voice it. She tried to reassure him that this was normal, that even as a person progressed in their healing, they would sometimes still have difficulties, but she couldn’t do much in the way of helping his sleep problems, other than offer the same advice as before. Even if it was left unsaid, Tsukiko had probably already formed an opinion as to why Shouta was struggling now, and she was probably right.

It annoyed him to no end, but this whole Ripper-copycat business had him all out of sorts. Shouta knew that it was an impostor, but it still nagged at him in the late hours of the night as he closed his eyes and tried to sleep. What if... somehow... this was the real deal all over again? If that were the case, then he was in danger. His students might be in danger. Tsukiko might be in danger. But there was no way that man could have survived what Shouta did to him, right? It was stupid to worry about it. And yet... the possibility lingered in the depths of his mind. And it pissed him off. Of course, it wasn’t really realistic for Shouta to think that this wouldn’t bother him to some extent. Someone was out there, mimicking the crimes of the villain who had murdered his wife. It was only natural that he would be somewhat unsettled by this. However, it surprised him just how much it bothered him. He felt constantly on-edge, as if something bad were about to happen at any moment. Shouta knew that he was safe, that those close to him were safe, but he couldn’t help feeling... off.
Well, to say that he was never at ease wasn’t quite accurate. Twice, sometimes three times a week now, he would get an hour, hour and a half of respite. It was in those moments, seated on the couch in Tsukiko’s office, that he felt even close to okay. In that room, he managed to feel completely safe. Well, it wasn’t so much the room itself as it was the person who occupied it. Being in her presence, Shouta felt as though he had returned to reality, able to re-center his mind and calm down. On his own, thoughts of his past clouded his consciousness, but with Tsukiko, he could think much more clearly, seeing his present, his future. It was too bad he couldn’t be with her constantly. Of course, it probably wouldn’t be good to form that kind of dependency on her, and so Shouta accepted that, most of the time, he would have to rely on himself to get through all of this. He had attempted meditation, after hearing Tsukiko speak so highly of the practice, and he’d become rather adept at quieting the voices in his head, letting the thoughts come and go like a gentle tide. It had even aided Shouta’s sleep, at least until all of this bullshit started up. Now, he couldn’t seem to sit still, couldn’t let certain ideas exit his mind so easily.

Granted a conference period at last, Shouta dragged himself down to the teachers’ offices, hoping to grab a short nap the way he had in the past. His old sleeping bag hadn’t actually gotten as much use lately, but it brought him some comfort now as he settled down into it, laying his head down on the desk. As comfortable as he had managed to get, and as tired as he felt, he just couldn’t manage to fall asleep. The room was just too bright, and too noisy, in ways that had never bothered him before. Was there somewhere else Shouta could go? That was darker, quieter, and not too far away? Come to think of it, Tsukiko’s office was always on the dimmer side, lit only by a single lamp, creating a comfortingly cozy ambiance. Had he really gotten that accustomed to it? It was a long shot, since she likely needed to meet with students, or at least do work of her own, but the room was bound to be quiet, with a soft couch where he could actually lay down. Furthermore, Shouta knew that he would feel comfortable there, anxiety eased by her mere presence.

Too bad he couldn’t ask her to curl up next to him… It would be nice to have someone to hold as he rested.

Dragging his sleeping bag along with him, Shouta found his way to Tsukiko’s office, feeling hopeful when he noted that no one had signed up to meet with her during the next few hours. The door was open, so he stuck his head in, tapping lightly on the door to get her attention. “Hey, are you busy right now?”

She looked up from her work. “Not too busy. Did you want to talk about something?”

“Actually, I have an…odd request.” His gaze shifted awkwardly. “Would it be alright if I slept on your couch for a while? I mean if you don’t have anyone coming in?”

Tsukiko appeared surprised by the question, but not bothered. “No, no…that’s fine. I guess it is a
little quieter and darker in here, isn’t it?”

Shouta nodded, declining to expound on his request. She got up from her desk and closed the door, shutting away any hallway noise, and gesturing for him to make himself comfortable on the couch.

Finally back in his safe place, he easily made himself comfortable, much preferring the plush couch to the rolling chair and desk where he had always napped before. Tsukiko continued her work, across the room but close enough for comfort. Shouta closed his eyes, feeling just a little bit pleased as he realized that she had gotten up to close the curtains, darkening the office just a touch further. It was a little gesture, but she had done it for him. He almost had to laugh darkly at himself. Certainly he was desperate for affection if such a little thing made his heart stir in such a way. Feeling safe and cared for, Shouta found himself falling easily into unconsciousness, content in a way that he hadn’t been for weeks now. The last thing he noted before sinking under was the soft sound of Tsukiko’s breath as she passed by the seating area, just to make sure that everything was alright. *You worry too much.*

The dreams he encountered after passing out, however, proved strange and unsettling. The setting was familiar enough; Shouta’s classroom at UA, but certain things weren’t quite right. The details were off; a light that had gone out here, a strange and unidentifiable purple sludge there… It made his dream self uneasy. His class seemed to appear in the room, but only momentarily. They flashed away in an instant, and the overhead lights began to flicker. Shouta could hear a sound coming from out in the hallway, so he went to investigate, peering out of the classroom hesitantly. He couldn’t easily discern what had made the noise, and he stepped out, venturing slowly down the hallway. The school looked to be in disarray, as if it had been abandoned for some time. Loose wires hung from the ceiling, water leaking from moldy spots along the baseboards…desks and other school equipment had been tossed around carelessly. One door bore a heavy dent near the top, as if someone had headbutted it while wearing a cast iron helmet. Before long Shouta found himself walking out of the school’s front doors, and right into the middle of USJ. This space, in juxtaposition with the rest of UA, remained perfectly pristine, just like it had been on that fateful day right before the League of Villains had attacked.

Shouta’s stomach dropped; he knew what would happen next. Like before, the swirling black portal opened up, villains swarming the place, along with that awful inhuman creature. Something was different this time, though. Shigaraki was nowhere to be seen. Shouta searched desperately, but could not locate the young man. Instead, a familiar voice called out to him, a voice that made his blood freeze inside his veins. That voice was so chilling, so dull, as though all humanity had left it long ago. “It’s been a long time, Eraserhead.” Shouta whirled around to see that man standing there, eyes cold as always, body completely unharmed. *Impossible.* “I’m going to pluck out your eyes, you miserable bastard.”

“You’re not real!” Shouta called back to him. “This is just a dream, right? It’s not real! You’re dead!”
Ripper laughed; it was a horrible sound. “No, it’s not just a dream. And I’m not dead. You didn’t finish the job, Eraser.”

“No!” Shouta shook his head violently. “No!”

“It’s real! Please!” Tsukiko’s voice rang out now, sounding terrified and desperate. “Don’t look away! Please!”

Shouta looked up to see Ripper holding her firmly, her hands secured behind her back. “Tsuki…” He willed her to use her telekinesis to try and escape; she could use it to force her captor away and then make a break for it. Unfortunately, she appeared to be frozen in terror, unable to move or think. Everyone knew about the “fight or flight” response, but most didn’t realize that there was a third option: freeze. Shouta knew that one all too well; it had prevented him before from being able to save Mariko’s life, and he swore that he would never again fall victim to it. Tsukiko looked at him again with wide eyes, whimpering in fear.

“Is this what you want?” Ripper asked teasingly. “Is this what you fantasize about at night?” He slowly undid the buttons of Tsukiko’s blouse as her brow knitted together, puzzled by what the villain had said.

“W-What?”

“Oh, you didn’t know? It’s hard to believe that you’ve never noticed how he looks at you. Just like every other filthy man, right?” Ripper took a knife, beginning to make small cuts all over her flesh, not deep enough to cause serious harm, but just enough to make her feel pain, to frighten her.

“Stop! Let her go! I’m the one you want, right?”

“But we’re having so much fun, right? It’d be a shame to stop now!” Ripper gave a sickening grin.

Shouta moved to run forward, hoping to free Tsukiko before engaging the villain in combat, but a meaty claw on his shoulder stopped him, instead smashing him into the dust, just like before. He lifted his head, but his vision was gone. He heard her cry out a few more times, still being slowly tortured.

“No... No, no, please don’t! No, no n-” Tsukiko’s final word was cut off by an awful gagging
sound, and then...silence.

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“Mmm…” Aizawa-sensei made a small noise in his sleep, and Tsukiko turned to look at him. He’d been making these kinds of sounds pretty frequently, and it made her feel a little bit concerned. Of course, he was probably just dreaming, but she couldn’t imagine what kind of dreams would make him act so restless. For the past half-hour or so, Aizawa-sensei hadn’t lain still for more than a few minutes, changing position over and over. He had told her that he had been having strange dreams recently, and his current behavior seemed to confirm it. Clearly, something bothered him greatly, but he refused to consciously acknowledge it. Thus, it came through in his unconscious mind, terrorizing him in his resting hours. Tsukiko frowned, wishing she could do more to help. She had suggested that he talk to his psychiatrist about maybe taking a mild sedative, but Aizawa-sensei had refused that kind of thing, worried that it would make him sluggish, that it would alter his mind too much. Truthfully, he probably just didn’t want to admit that there was anything wrong.

The light shifting suddenly turned to thrashing, and the muffled little noises became real words. “No! No!” Tsukiko stood abruptly, speed-walking over to the couch to observe what was happening. Aizawa-sensei was likely experiencing something similar to a night terror, which he hadn’t had for a long time now. This made her uneasy; he really had to be struggling if he was regressing back into this. As much as she wanted to make the fear go away, Tsukiko knew that she shouldn’t wake him up. A person having a night terror would eventually wake himself up; she needed to let this one run its course. As she waited, her heart ached for him. Against her better judgment, she got close, trying to soothe him as much as she could without waking him. She put a hand on the side of Aizawa-sensei’s face, stroking it gently.

“It’s going to be okay,” she whispered. “It’s just a dream. You’re going to be alright. It’s not real.” The thrashing stopped momentarily, much to her relief, but really, he had just gone rigid in fear.

“No,” he breathed again.

With a quick shout, Aizawa-sensei sat up suddenly, eyes wide in fear. His breath was short, uneven. Still disoriented, his eyes searched the room. He put his head in his hands, starting to hyperventilate. Tsukiko sat down next to him, tentatively putting her hand on his back. “Everything is okay now. It was just a dream.” Aizawa-sensei went quiet for a few moments, and it took her a second to realize that he was shaking. This was a side of the teacher that she had never seen before. After all this time, he finally felt okay showing her this raw pain that he’d been hiding for so long. He gasped, and when he finally lifted his head, Tsukiko could see that his eyes were wet. She bit her lip. “I’m here,” she whispered. As if he had just realized that she was next to him on the couch, Aizawa-sensei quickly turned to look at her. His expression was hurt, but almost...relieved?
“Aiza-” Before Tsukiko could finish her thought, he reached out and pulled her close, embracing her tight against his side, one hand holding onto her upper arm while the other came to rest on the narrow part of her waist. She could still feel him shaking a little bit, but the contact seemed to help. Tsukiko almost wanted to place her hand on top of his, the skin-to-skin contact allowing communication by telepathy, so that she could figure out what was going through Aizawa-sensei’s mind right now. She didn’t, having too much respect for the fact that he had asked her so many times to not do that. For the time being, she would have to wait. Maybe he would want to talk about this after he was able to calm down a little bit more, maybe it would remain a mystery. Being a therapist didn’t grant Tsukiko full access to a person’s thoughts and feelings.

Even so, she was dying to find out why Aizawa-sensei had reacted the way he did. Maybe he just needed some kind of physical human contact after what he had seen in his dream. Maybe...he wanted to hold her specifically. Tsukiko’s heart fluttered at the prospect, involuntarily leaning her head against him and then blushing as she realized what she had done. She wanted him to want to hold her, even if she felt a little silly for wishing for such a thing. This wasn’t a romantic bond he had with her, but rather the sort a person had with their therapist when they didn’t have many other people in their life. All the same, she was content to just sit here like this for a little while, held tight, his head coming to rest on top of hers. As long as she was any sort of comfort to him, it would be enough for her...wouldn’t it?

“Aizawa-sensei...what happened?” she asked finally.

He went rigid in response, not quite sure what to say. “I, ah...it was just a bad dream.”

“I think it was more than a bad dream,” Tsukiko said softly. “Please tell me what’s going on. I want to help you.”

Shouta held his tongue for a few moments. Could he really tell her what had happened in his dream without exposing himself? “I’m afraid,” he told her finally. He realized now that he was still holding Tsukiko tightly against him, and his face grew hot as he considered the implications of what he had done. He quickly drew his arms away, clearing his throat.

“Afraid? Of...the villain?” She never spoke Ripper’s name, which Shouta found odd. It wasn’t like the name itself would trigger him or anything.

“It’s stupid…” He shook his head. “I know he’s dead now, but…”

“But?”
“But, what if... somehow...”

“After what you’ve been through, you’re not being stupid. You feel threatened, which makes perfect sense.” Tsukiko had reassured him in this way before, but there was more to it than she knew.

“I’m worried...” Shouta bit his lip, breaking his steady eye contact with her. “I’m worried that, if somehow, Ripper isn’t dead, he’s going to come after you.”


*Because you’re the one that I love now.* “Because he’s going to come after anyone that’s close to me, and yes, that includes you.”

“Aizawa-sensei...” He really was terrified about all of this, which set Tsukiko on edge. Could it be possible that Ripper really had survived all this time? She didn’t want to acknowledge the possibility, since it would only make Aizawa-sensei more upset. Besides, he himself had stated that he was just being paranoid. *Jeez, sensei, you’re gonna get me all riled up, too.* “You said it yourself. Ripper is dead. And even if he wasn’t, you wouldn’t have to face him alone. Besides...” Tsukiko gave a mischievous smirk. “You know that I can hold my own in a fight.”

Aizawa-sensei sighed, looking a little relieved at last. “Yes, I know.”

They continued to talk for a while, until he seemed to be in much better spirits. Now, it was Tsukiko that felt just a bit suspicious. If it were true, that Ripper was somehow still alive, she would need to make plans to protect Aizawa-sensei. If need be, she would take responsibility for keeping him safe. Tsukiko suddenly felt very grateful for the attache case she kept tucked deep in her closet.

Chapter End Notes

P.S. I made a youtube channel to document my IRL adventures. I'll inevitably talk about anime and my writing in my videos, so come check it out if you're into that sort of thing.
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCPrwN6gdi2S16EbfE-ybf7DQ?view_as=subscriber
Sitting down on the edge of her bed, Tsukiko took the little pot of moisturizing cream from her nightstand, scooping out a small glob and rubbing it between her fingertips. She smoothed the cream across the skin of her face, gently massaging the flesh, eyes starting to close. Truthfully, she felt a little bit restless tonight, when she was normally tired and ready to sleep after a long day of work. After fluffing her pillow and laying down on her back, Tsukiko opened up her phone, choosing the MeTube application and searching her watch history for the “Full Chakra Cleanse and Realignment” video. She didn’t really know if such a things as chakras existed, but she did always find the gradually shifting frequencies soothing; excellent background noise for meditation. Shifting occasionally, Tsukiko eventually found a comfortable position, closing her eyes and trying to shift her focus. She needed to let the thoughts come and go, never lingering in her consciousness for more than a few seconds at a time. Tonight however, such a task proved difficult, and she found herself dwelling on the events of the past few weeks.

Her wrist injury, courtesy of Aizawa-sensei’s Post-traumatic Stress Disorder, had healed by now, and it seemed like old news, paling in comparison to everything that had happened since. On some level, Tsukiko had to wonder if maybe the serial killer, Ripper, had returned after all. Aizawa-sensei kept trying to reason the idea away, but deep down he was frightened, and he had shared as much with her. She didn’t say anything, lest she worsen his fears, but Tsukiko put a lot of stock in gut feelings, especially those that just wouldn’t go away. The average person had more psychic energy than they realized; Tsukiko didn’t have a monopoly on it. She shook her head, banishing those thoughts for now. She needed to focus as much as she could on her meditation. If Ripper...
were to return, she would need her consciousness to be as clear as it could be, her psychic abilities at their most powerful. Eventually, the droning frequencies faded away into silence as the video ended, and Tsukiko found herself more at peace, finally starting to sink into unconsciousness.

Falling quickly into a deep sleep, the nightly slew of dreams began. Tsukiko found herself dreaming most nights, though they didn’t ever really stick, more foggy and ephemeral. Sometimes, this period saw her clairvoyant abilities most active. While she tended to rely more on her telepathy, her telekinesis, she was psychically gifted in this way, too. It was more mercurial than her other abilities, difficult to control. If she focused hard enough, Tsukiko could receive flashes of the immediate future, but visions in the distance came only intermittently, and often while she slept. On these occasions, it was difficult to determine whether it was a true vision, or just a dream.

Her dreams tonight proved more vivid than normal, and Tsukiko found her dream self wandering the city, the darkness of late night punctuated by the warm glow of fluorescent signage. She didn’t quite know where she was going, but in the moment, it didn’t bother her. A few familiar landmarks caught her eye; she was near the red light district now, close to where Aizawa-sensei had once run into her while they were both on patrol.

*Speak of the devil.* Tsukiko could see a familiar silhouette up ahead, capture weapon slung loosely around his shoulders. Aizawa-sensei turned his head a bit to the side, light glinting off his lower lip. He had a habit that he likely didn’t realize himself, of pouting just a bit when he focused on something. Tsukiko clenched her jaw; she always had such a strong urge to kiss him when he did that. She was likely the only person in the world who could ever consider anything he did cute. Despite her attraction, she didn’t try to interact with Aizawa-sensei. Instead, she remained in the shadows, observing him from a distance. As he moved, Tsukiko would follow behind, careful to not disturb him. Because this was a dream, it didn’t seem odd at all, even if she would normally have said something to him back in the real world. Of course, in a dream setting, even the strangest phenomena didn’t seem out of place.

From what Tsukiko could tell, Aizawa-sensei was out on patrol, just like normal. She tailed him for what felt like close to an hour, watching him do his thing. He picked up two or three petty criminals, just purse snatchers and a college student who had had a few too many and had begun to cause a ruckus; nothing out of the ordinary. Still, something felt...off. Tsukiko had an uneasy feeling, but she couldn’t really put her finger on why. If she had known that she was dreaming, she would have written it off; things always seemed weirder in this kind of context. However, this instance felt so utterly vivid that she swore up and down that this was all real. Thus, the strange gut feeling bothered her. Something was going to happen soon. Something was about to go wrong; she could feel it in every fiber of her being. Tsukiko swallowed hard, her chest feeling tight, skin crawling.

Before she knew it, it was happening.
“It’s been a long time, Eraserhead.” The voice was dull, inhuman in a way that made Tsukiko’s skin crawl. A man stepped out dramatically from around a corner; he looked normal enough, save for the unsettling dent in the side of his head. He didn’t introduce himself, but he didn’t need to. Aizawa-sensei knew who he was, and it was easy enough for Tsukiko to figure things out. This was the Ripper, in the flesh, alive even after that vicious assault all those years ago. Regeneration quirk. Tsukiko gathered the information easily using her telepathy. Ripper reached his right hand into his left pocket, and his left into his right, drawing two long knives, light gleaming off their polished blades. “Maybe this time you’ll learn how to mind your own fucking business, after I carve out your eyes, you miserable bastard.” He launched himself forward, but Aizawa-sensei remained frozen in place, his eyes wide in horror. Move! Fight! Tsukiko willed him to act, but the absolute terror kept her beloved sensei rooted in place.

“Damn it! Shouta! Do something!”

“Fuck!” Tsukiko sat up in bed, her heart racing. She wasn’t there with Aizawa-sensei after all, but rather in her bed, safe and warm, her hands shaking. It didn’t take long for her to get her bearings, but she didn’t really feel any better once she did. A dream that vivid...what if it wasn’t a dream at all? Tsukiko hoped, prayed that if it really was a clairvoyant vision, that she wasn’t seeing things as they happened. Gods willing, she might have a little bit of time left to find Aizawa-sensei before the shit hit the fan. Tsukiko tore out of bed, yanking off her nightgown in favor of her hero suit, recently upgraded. She scrambled into it as quickly as possible, snatching a roll of gauze and pocketing it; she would have to tape her hands and wrists on the way, as there wasn’t a moment to waste. Tsukiko stuffed her feet into her boots, thanking her lucky stars that they were already broken-in, not that she really had too far to go- fifteen blocks maybe. Strapping on her goggles and throwing her respirator around her neck, should she need it, she threw open her closet door, digging into the back for that attache case.

After fumbling for a few seconds with the combination lock, Tsukiko finally popped the case open. She suddenly felt very glad to have just recently given the double-barrelled 12-gauge a good cleaning. For transport purposes, she slung the tastefully subtle holster across her back, loading the firearm into it, and stuffed several boxes of shells into the pockets along her suit’s belt line. Even though it was legal to possess a shotgun for hunting and sport shooting purposes, professional heroes weren’t legally allowed to carry any kind of gun while on duty. But...Tsukiko wasn’t technically on duty, was she? And besides, she didn’t exactly give two shits about what was and wasn’t legal if Aizawa-sensei’s safety was on the line.

Certain she had absolutely everything she might need- shotgun, shells, her keys, ID, and credit card, she bolted out the front door, scarcely remembering to lock it behind her. Tsukiko took off down the street, probably looking like a crazy person to onlookers. Of course, it might not have seemed so odd since she was in uniform, and it wasn’t like she cared how she looked right now anyway. The only thing on her mind was getting to Aizawa-sensei before it was too late. Tsukiko realized that there truthfully was a chance that she had been dreaming, seeing such images out of worry, but it wasn’t a risk she was willing to take. She would rather look like an utter idiot when she showed up to find no threat whatsoever than stay at home and… Tsukiko didn’t even want to think about it.
On a night like this, with the moon hiding behind foggy clouds, Shouta wished the city would be more consistent with where it placed lighting. There were so many dark spots, potential hiding places for villains, and it set him on edge in a way that it never had before. Though, it wasn’t like things were out of the ordinary. Shouta had picked up three criminals tonight, and none of them had been taken in for severe crimes. One purse snatcher, one vandal, and one drunk-and-disorderly. Really, this was a tame night. He kept to the rooftops like usual, where no one could get the drop on him. All the same, he had an odd feeling in the pit of his stomach, like something was about to go horribly wrong. Shouta couldn’t say for sure what it was, or why he felt this way; maybe this was just a culmination of everything he had been dealing with lately, all of his anxieties coming together just to give him trouble.

He hadn’t told Tsukiko, not wanting to make her worry more than she already did, but Shouta had been uneasy about going on patrol for some time now. Honestly, ever since the police had first released information regarding the copycat Ripper crimes. He just couldn’t shake the feeling that somehow, the real deal was still out here prowling around, just biding his time before coming back to finish the hero who had injured him so gravely. Shouta tried to keep Tsukiko’s words of comfort in his mind, along with his own common sense, but it grew more difficult by the day. Maybe he was just getting himself worked up, but he knew that he wouldn’t feel better until the police caught the person responsible, and proved once and for all that it had just been an impostor all along. Shouta made a low sound of annoyance, shaking his head and also trying to shake off the feelings of nervousness that continued to plague him. That psychiatrist to whom Tsukiko had referred him had prescribed a low-dose anti-anxiety medication, but it didn’t really feel like it had much effect. Fuck. Shouta needed to snap out of this funk, and fast.

Unfortunately, he didn’t really get a chance to do that. Coming to the edge of the rooftop, a familiar odor flooded his senses; the meaty, earthy scent of blood. Shouta jerked his head this way and that, searching desperately for the source. In the alley below, he could see something, and very carefully, he began to descend from the roof to investigate. This alley passed behind a men’s club. It was one of the more popular ones, despite being on the seedy side. Near the club’s back door, a young woman, ostensibly one of the dancers, lay bleeding and whimpering in pain. She was still alive, but had grown pale from blood loss. Hot red seeped from a deep gash in her abdomen. As Shouta knelt over her, examining the wound, another employee stepped outside for a cigarette. She yelped in surprise at the sight, not sure whether the man in front of her was the one who had attacked her coworker. A flash of black fabric caught Shouta’s eye as it passed quickly between buildings, seeming to be fleeing the scene.

“Call 1-1-9, and ask for an ambulance. In the meantime,” Shouta reached into one of his pockets and produced a sealed sterile gauze pad. “Hold this firmly against the wound until the bus arrives.” He could still make out the figure blasting ass down the street, and took off after him, gaining on the culprit, who wasn’t really all that athletic. Deep down, he knew what this was. Attacking a worker in the red light district, cutting her gut open… Shouta wanted to believe that he was finally about to catch the impostor-killer, but that wasn’t what this was… As much as it horrified him, he
continued his pursuit, knowing that it was only a matter of moments before he caught up with that
terrible man, before he looked Mariko’s killer in the eyes once again. *This might be the end.*
Shouta didn’t know how this fight would go, how the years might have sharpened Ripper’s
abilities. He himself was getting older, too, and his erasure *certainly* wasn’t what it was before. It
made him sick to think about, the idea that he might be running toward his own death...but he
wouldn’t back down. This was his fight.

*Tsuniko...if I don’t make it out of this alive...please know that I love you more than anything.*

Eventually the alleyway ran into a dead end, and the man whom Shouta pursued slowed his pace,
not at all intimidated by the hero chasing him down. In fact, his posture remained rather casual as
he turned slowly, bearing that sinister grin which had, for a time, haunted Shouta’s nightmares.
“It’s been a long time, Eraserhead.”

“It was you, after all.”

“But of course. Who else has built a career on the deliciousness of the slaughter?” Ripper tilted his
head, now marked with a worrying dent from being stomped in so many years before. “You look
so *tired.*”

“Why did you come back? Why now?” Shouta ignored the remark about his appearance. “What do
you want?”

Ripper shrugged. “I just want to kill.”

Shouta thought back to all of the recent victims, how they had been so ceremoniously displayed.
Knowing now that this nemesis had returned, it all seemed like a come-on. “But you wanted to get
me out of the way first, since you knew there was no way I’d just let you get away after what you
did to my wife.”

“One of these days you’re going to have to learn how to mind your own fucking business.”

Though he had to admit that he felt entirely terrified deep down inside. Shouta clenched his fists,
altering his stance in preparation for what he was certain would be a lengthy and greuling combat.
The weight of responsibility sank onto his shoulders. If he were to die here tonight, those close to
him would likely be in danger.
“You know, you’ve got quite a pretty colleague there at the school, with the silvery hair and the nice ass.” That evil smirk somehow grew wider. “I can only imagine how beautiful those eyes would be with all of the life drained out of them.”

“I’ll fucking kill you.” Of course Ripper was just trying to upset him, and Shouta was ashamed to say that it had worked. He wouldn’t dare let his second love meet the same fate as his first, even if protecting her was the last thing he ever did.

“You’ll have to be quick! I’ve a mind to gouge out your eyes, you filthy, miserable bastard!” Ripper launched off the ball of his foot, racing forward to try and close the still-sizable gap between himself and the hero, drawing two long blades from his pockets. Shouta steeled himself, blinking one last time before activating his erasure, grabbing tight onto his capture weapon with one hand. To his shock, Ripper stopped short, gaze traveling to the space behind his enemy. “Oh, hello, lovely girl!”

Thinking it was only a trick to distract him, Shouta didn’t turn to look, but almost immediately, he felt two hands pressing down on his shoulders, using them as means for vaulting up and over him. He could only see a vague, shadowy figure flipping overhead, but the two fingers that grazed his cheek told him everything he needed to know, the words “Don’t look away” echoing in his mind. There was no time for him to wonder how in the world Tsukiko had found him, or how she had even known that he might be in danger; Shouta could only watch, bewildered. There was the sharp clack as the break of a shotgun was snapped into place, and then a deafening POP that blew Ripper back a few feet, leaving a garish hole clear through his midsection. Strangely, the expression on his face wasn’t of anger, or fear, but of sheer delight.

Shouta remained confused about everything that had just happened, but he did as Tsukiko had told him, keeping his gaze locked on the villain. She opened the break action again, shaking out the two empty shells and replacing them before snapping it closed and widening the gory hole, strings of bloodied and burnt flesh dangling into the negative space. Over and over she repeated the act until Ripper crumpled to the ground. He gave a horrid, empty laugh. “By all means, don’t stop now! Unless...you don’t have enough shells to get rid of my friends, too!” Indeed, rapid-paced footsteps could be heard approaching, and he took advantage of the moment of panic that passed through Tsukiko, making her pause ever so briefly. With shocking speed and accuracy, he threw one of his knives, and it planted itself firmly in her shoulder.

Though she had initially intended to finish things here, once and for all, Tsukiko was forced to make a change to her plans. She ripped the knife from her body and tossed it aside, wincing as she did before turning back to Shouta, who remained dazed. Tsukiko grabbed his hand, locking eyes with him.

“Run.”
Shouta was certain that he hadn’t run so fast, or so far, in quite some time. Keeping to high places, lurking in the shadows; his M.O. was not to run, but to hide. However, when fleeing for one’s life, one has little time to think much on regular habits. Besides, he was following Tsukiko’s lead, anyway. He could see her eyes glowing bright behind her goggles, her clairvoyance wide open, monitoring their surroundings for potential threats. She felt certain that they had managed to escape that alleyway before Ripper’s comrades arrived, but there was no such thing as being too careful. It seemed they were uptown now, far away from the villain’s typical stomping grounds. Swarming people surrounded them, visiting bars or dance clubs or one of several 24-hour department stores. It almost seemed like the middle of the day here, with all the flashy neon lights, the high energy of the individuals around them. Finally able to stop running, and get his bearings just a little, Shouta had a few questions; Tsukiko had essentially come out of nowhere, but she appeared to know exactly what she was doing, not hesitating even for a fraction of a second before whipping out a firearm (which no pro hero was supposed to have while on duty) and blasting a hole in the man facing him.

He let her continue to lead, but found a place beside her, leaning in close and lowering his voice. “You know you’re not supposed to carry a gun while on duty, right? I know I taught you better than that.”

“I wasn’t on duty,” Tsukiko replied flatly.

Tilting his head in bafflement, Shouta stopped short. “Then how…”
Tsukiko turned to look at him, gesturing with a nod of her head as if to say “keep walking.” “Aizawa-sensei, you know quite a bit about my telepathy, and my telekinesis, but...how much do you know about my clairvoyant ability?” Shouta had to admit that he didn’t know much; the topic simply hadn’t come up too often, even when Tsukiko was in school. “It’s kind of a mercurial thing. I can use it the way I am now, but I also have...flashes.”

“Flashes?”

“Just...quick visions of the future. Sometimes it’s far off in the distance. Sometimes it’s of something that will happen in the same day, or within a few hours,” she explained.

“You’re telling me that you had a premonition of Ripper and myself?” Shouta had to wonder if Tsukiko had had any other precognizant images of him.

“Yes. That’s exactly right.”

“So what…” he made sound of frustration, shaking his head. “What do we do now?” Shouta was at a loss, but Tsukiko seemed to know what to do.

She turned to look at him, facial expression softening a little bit now. “I’m taking you to a safe location for the night. Tomorrow we’ll go to UA like normal, and explain the situation to the principal. I’m sure he’ll know what to do.”

“I guess it’s not safe for me to go home, is it?”

Tsukiko frowned. “No. It’s not. I’m certain he’s got surveillance of your place. I can’t tell you yet where we’re going, just in case someone might overhear, but...” She flushed pink just a little bit for reasons Shouta couldn’t begin to guess. “But I know you’ll be okay there for tonight.”

Though he was curious, Shouta didn’t press the issue. He could understand why she didn’t want to say where they were going, but he did wonder. It appeared that Tsukiko had a protocol in place for an event like this, and that didn’t surprise him, considering her abilities. It did raise the question, however: how long had she known that they was going to happen? He decided that he would ask her later, once they arrived at the aforementioned secure location.

“We need to blend in more,” Tsukiko said suddenly. Shouta looked over at her, fully suited-up,
with all of her equipment on, a shotgun holstered, but slung across her back. Her shoulder looked gnarly even though the bleeding had stopping, long drips of dried blood apparent on her flesh. He had to admit that he had noticed people turning to look, finding the image of a maimed hero disconcerting. His own appearance, though not particularly striking, identified him through a few key features, namely his long hair and capture weapon. Shouta had to concede that Tsukiko was right, that changing clothes, and hiding the parts of themselves that immediately identified them, would be the safe choice. Even if someone had been able to tail them without being noticed, switching things up might provide an opportunity to give such a person the slip.

“You’re saying we need to change clothes, right?”

She nodded. “There’s a store not too far from here; it should still be open.”

Tsukiko’s injury garnered more than a few stares as the two entered the department store, making a bee-line for the clothing section. She was quick with her selections, as time was of the essence: a long-sleeve t-shirt, leggings, a baseball cap, and canvas slip-on shoes. Shouta didn’t want to waste time being too choosy, but it would be a good idea to get things that he would actually want to wear- a pair of black warm-up type pants, and a rather soft long-sleeved shirt. Tsukiko snatched a knit cap off a rack, foisting it at him. “You need to cover up your hair. It’s too much of an identifier. She was right; he didn’t need to worry about whether he looked like a hipster sleazebag right now. The important thing was to disappear into the crowd, getting to a safe place unnoticed.

The dressing room attendant gave them a funny look as they entered the space, eyes flicking up and down. “Please don’t get blood on the clothes,” she remarked, gaze traveling to Tsukiko’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry, we’re gonna buy them,” Tsukiko told her.

“Besides,” Shouta added. “I’m gonna bandage her up first, anyway.”

“Oh, you’ve got first aid stuff?”

“Yeah.”

The employee said nothing as she watched the man and woman go into the same fitting room stall. They appeared to be on-duty heroes, and it wasn’t like she got paid enough to give a shit, anyway. It would only be a problem if they didn’t clean up after themselves.
“How much does it hurt?” Shouta grimaced as he pulled the armhole of Tsukiko’s suit to the side, moving it out of the way so he could examine the puncture wound where Ripper’s knife had pierced her shoulder.

She took the fabric into her own hand to allow him to work. “It’s not too bad, really.” Truthfully, it was pretty terribly painful. The blade had gone fairly deep, even if the bleeding had stopped. It needed to be closed up, and they couldn’t exactly go to an emergency room right now, needing to get out of the public eye as quickly as possible. Going to a hospital would only garner unwanted attention, and waste time. Tsukiko bit her lip. She did have *one* option to quickly close the opening, a kind of improvised cauterization. “Do you have any matches?”

Aizawa-sensei eyed her warily. “Yes… Why?”

“Give it to me.” While he was digging through his pockets for the book of matches, Tsukiko found one of her remaining shotgun shells, prying it open and shaking the gunpowder into the open wound. Aizawa-sensei’s eyes got big, not sure whether he should provide her with the means to ignite the powder. “It’ll be quicker than stitches,” she explained, taking two deep breaths to steel herself. Hands shaking in anticipation, Tsukiko took the matches from him, removing one from the pack and striking it. A swell of brilliant orange engulfed the head, and she took a couple of quick breaths, squeezing her eyes shut before lighting the gravelly, grey powder within her stab wound.

Shouta didn’t want to watch her do this, but he kept his eyes trained on her anyway. As soon as the gunpowder ignited, Tsukiko clasped one hand over her mouth, keeping her screams of agony bottled up inside as she kicked the heels of her boots against the carpeted floor. It turned his stomach, seeing her suffer, and he hated that it was because of him that she’d been hurt in the first place. Within seconds, the powder burned out, leaving only a gnarly strip of seared, but closed, skin. Tsukiko’s breath steadied, eyes blinking open. They watered from the pain, and she wiped them on the backs of her hands.

“Let me clean it up.” Shouta started digging through his pockets again. “You don’t want it to get infected.” She only nodded in return, giving permission. “This is going to sting.” The only thing he had in the way of disinfectant was a single-use alcohol wipe, which he ran over the affected area as carefully as he could. The sensation made Tsukiko inhale sharply, a few more tears escaping her eyes. “I’m sorry,” Shouta murmured, clenching his jaw and trying to pat the burn instead of scrubbing it.

“‘S’okay,” she mumbled in return, voice hoarse.
Shouta unwrapped a gauze pad and pressed it against her skin. “Hold this here for me?” She did as she was told, her hand replacing his, and he suppressed a gasp of surprise as her fingertips brushed against his. Heart racing, he secured the edges of the pad using medical tape, and added a couple of long strips to hold it firmly in place.

Finally bandaged up, Tsukiko stood, going over to where they had dumped their change of clothes in a pile. Her heart still hammered away in her chest. Aizawa-sensei had been so gentle as he got her clean and covered, his eyes holding such a tender look. She knew that he felt guilty over this new injury, believing that it was his own fault that Ripper was after them now, and she wasn’t certain she could convince him otherwise. Of course, Tsukiko couldn’t be his therapist right now, because she needed to be his friend. “Here.” She passed him his clothes, turning her back so that they could both have the smallest amount of privacy as they changed. Her heart picked back up again; she could hear the rustling sound as he took the capture weapon from around his neck, and then the shuffling as he fussed with his boots.

Right now was absolutely not the time to be getting worked up over this kind of thing, but Tsukiko still hesitated a moment before kicking off her own boots, her face heating up as the sound of her suit’s zipper being undone seemed to echo off the fitting room walls. Within seconds, she would be half-naked in the same tiny space with Aizawa-sensei. If he were to turn, he would see her, standing there in her bra and panties. Would he... like what he saw? The hair on the back of her neck stood up as she could hear the zipper on his suit as well, along with a dull *fwumph* as it was discarded in a pile on the floor. Despite the context, Tsukiko still felt all hot and weird about this. She and Aizawa-sensei were getting undressed just inches away from one another, and they would be spending the night together, too. As much as she had always wanted something to happen between them, tonight wouldn’t be the right time for it. She quickly put the thought out of her head, focusing on getting dressed.

Were they in this situation out of grave danger? Yes. Was Tsukiko in this room with him out of sheer necessity? A hundred times yes. And yet, Shouta couldn’t help the staticky feeling that ran through him as he heard her fumbling with her hero suit, removing it. Did she still wear little athletic shorts underneath, or…? He shook his head, not wanting to get too worked up right now. It was so improper to be thinking about her like that, especially considering the situation. As he reached for his clothes, Shouta thought over everything that she had done for him these past few hours. With only a premonition to go on, Tsukiko had fled her home with a firearm in tow, to protect him at the risk of her own safety. She had endured moderate bodily harm and the painful means of closing the wound. And now, she was putting herself at further risk by staying with him. It was all too much. *How can you make me love you even more with every single thing you do?*

In utter, awkward silence they dressed themselves, concealing their hero identities with a change of clothes. “Are you dressed?” Tsukiko asked.

“Yeah. Just putting my shoes back on.”
“’Kay.” There was a snap of elastic as she tied her hair back, feeding the gathered ponytail through the opening at the back of the baseball cap she had selected to cover her uniquely-colored hair. Shouta could feel fingers running through his own hair now, and he stilled for a moment. “Just putting it up for you.” Tsukiko’s voice was soft, velvety in a way that made him feel weak, sounding almost as if she were speaking to a lover, and not a colleague. Her touches were gentle, methodical as she gathered his hair in her hands, fastening it into a loose knot. Changing clothes had been a wise choice, Shouta could see as he stood up and turned to look at her. If he hadn’t known Tsukiko personally, he wouldn’t have been able to pick her out from any other person on the street.

Despite their change in appearance, Shouta still felt wary as he followed Tsukiko back outside after she paid for their things. Furthermore, he still wondered where she could be taking him that would be safe for the night. Maybe a hotel? In a part of town that neither of them frequented? No… That would leave too many opportunities for someone to slip in unnoticed. It would have to be a place with little traffic...a private residence maybe. After several criss-crossing train rides to throw off anyone who might still be tailing them, Tsukiko led him out of a train station and into a residential area. It was quiet and peaceful despite its close proximity to the downtown area. She gestured toward an apartment building up ahead, climbing the outdoor stairwell with the certainty of someone who had been there hundreds of times before. It was then that it hit him, where they would be staying for the night. Stopping at one particular door, she dug around for her keys, opening the door to a darkened apartment.

“This is…”

“My place.”

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Since she was a young person living alone, Tsukiko didn’t need to spend a lot of money renting a spacious apartment. Even though the place was on the small side, it didn’t really feel cramped. On the contrary, she managed to make the compact home feel cozy, with soft colors and ambient lighting. He’d never been to this place before, but Shouta immediately felt right at home anyway. Conscious of her unexpected guest, Tsukiko fretted about, clearing away what little clutter she could find, double-checking the locks on the front door and making sure the curtains stayed fully closed. “Can I get you anything to drink?” She looked terribly flustered for the first time that night. Blasting holes in a villain with a shotgun had seemingly been no big deal, but having a first-time guest in her home appeared weirdly stressful. It made Shouta worry that he might be intruding. “Water? Tea? Beer?”

“Ah, no, that’s okay…” he laid a hand on the back of his neck, a nervous habit. “I apologize for
inconveniencing you.”

Tsukiko stopped what she was doing, giving him an odd look. “You’re not an inconvenience at all. I’m the one who brought you here.”

“Sorry, you just seem… I don’t know, stressed?”

“S-Sorry…” she went pink, averting her gaze. “I just get like this sometimes.” Shouta hadn’t meant to make her feel embarrassed, but he’d be damned if she didn’t look cute right now.

Actually, this whole situation had him feeling some kind of way. Even if it was just for his own safety, Tsukiko had brought him into her home, into this more private part of her world. Everything about it just felt so intimate, but that very well could have been due to Shouta’s own tendency to keep others at arm’s length. Maybe he was the weird one for reading too much into things, but after everything she had done for him, he wanted nothing more than to take her into the bedroom, lay her down, and repay every bit of kindness she had given him. Tsukiko had gone into the kitchen for now, saying something about wanting to start a pot of coffee, so for the time being, Shouta didn’t need to worry about her telepathy. But he couldn’t very well nullify it all night long. Yes, Tsukiko was always good about not using her ability on him, but what if he felt something just a little too strongly? Well, she could always just look away from him; it wasn’t the most pleasant option, considering that he did like when she looked him in the eyes, but it would work. At the same time, Shouta had begun to wonder just how much longer he could keep up the charade.

“You should try to get some sleep,” Tsukiko told him as she came back into the room. Shouta had to admit that she was right. It was very late now and, considering the situation, staying up all night wouldn’t do him any good. He started rearranging the pillows on the couch, looking around for a blanket. “Ah…” Her voice made him look up. “Y-You don’t have to sleep there. You’ll be much more comfortable in the bedroom.”

Shouta could have keeled over right then and there. “Are you sure? I’d be fine right here.”

“I’m sure. You need to get as much rest as you can.”

“But… where will you sleep?” If Tsukiko had told him that she intended to sleep in her bed as well, right next to him, Shouta was sure that he would have suffered a major heart attack.
“Oh, I’m going to stay up. One of us needs to know if something happens, and I think that’s a job best left to a clairvoyant. Besides, I’ve already gotten some sleep.”

“Right…” Shouta would normally have insisted that Tsukiko needed to sleep too, but as things were now, he knew that, just this once, he needed to let go a little, and leave things up to her. She wasn’t a kid anymore; she could handle this.

He followed her into the other room, which still held evidence of her sudden departure earlier in the night— a nightgown hastily discarded on the floor, the closet open with its contents strewn out. Shouta looked over to the bed, with its turned-back covers and rumpled pillows. Tsukiko had been sleeping there before; in fact, she slept there every night. Of course she did. This was her bed! It hadn’t fully hit him until now. If simply being in her house had felt intimate, then this was practically lewd. Shouta paused for a moment, not entirely sure how to proceed. Normally, he would take off his shirt before getting into bed, but to do so now seemed indecent, with Tsukiko in the room. She would stay in here with him all night, keeping close watch over him. To expose himself to her in such a way wouldn’t be appropriate at all. Taking his hair down, and trying not to make this into more of a thing than it was, he pulled back the covers, laying down on the mattress and trying to get comfortable. If Tsukiko felt weird about this, she certainly didn’t show it, face turned to the side. Once Shouta had settled down, she got up and went to switch off the light before returning to her spot, looking like a little owl posted up in the night.

She closed her eyes, hair starting to lift from where it typically framed her face as she settled into a meditative trance. Shouta did the same, sans meditation, trying to fall asleep, and not think too much about how the sheets held her scent.
Longer Nights and Lesser Feelings

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The sound of wind smacking a tree branch against the bedroom window startled Tsukiko, snapping her out of her trance. She gathered her wits, heart steadying, and gazed about the darkened room. Everything was the same as it had been ten minutes before, the atmosphere still and peaceful, Aizawa-sensei asleep in bed, his long hair splayed erratically across the pillow. Tsukiko smirked, knowing she’d probably be finding strands of it for days afterward. She wasn’t bothered by it, of course; on the contrary, she was relieved that he’d been able to get comfortable and rest. Considering everything that had happened, she hadn’t been sure that sleep would come easily for him. With the reemergence of the villain Ripper, he had found himself in grave danger, and this time, it wasn’t exactly a fair fight. Ripper had gathered other villains to aid him in his murderous quests, and Aizawa-sensei was at the top of the list. If Tsukiko hadn’t had the premonition that she had, or hadn’t been able to arrive in time… She shivered, not wanting to think about it.

Tsukiko shifted in her chair, pulling her legs up to her chest and frowning. In the interest of logic, she had been careful until now to not let her emotions get the better of her. Acting on anything other than reason right now had the potential for disastrous outcomes. Even if she guarded them carefully, it wasn’t like Tsukiko didn’t have a lot of feelings about this. Most notably, she felt frightened, not for herself, but for Aizawa-sensei. He was the one most in danger in this situation. Tsukiko was merely collateral damage. It was strange; though she was his therapist, he hadn’t complained one bit about being afraid, even if there was no way this didn’t affect him at all. Maybe he wanted to remain calm, in hopes that she would do the same, but it wasn’t like Tsukiko couldn’t handle being the strong one in this situation. She had to wonder how all of this was affecting him psychologically- not just the fear, but the confrontation with his late wife’s murderer, all of it. Her heart ached for him; he’d been doing so well for himself, only for all of this to collapse onto his shoulders.

As selfish as it was, Tsukiko resented being in this chair across the room, instead of being curled
up next to him in bed. She hated that there was a limit to how much of a comfort she could be to him. Of course, Aizawa-sensei didn’t need that kind of distraction right now. It wouldn’t be fair to make him deal with her feelings when he was already so caught up with everything else. Even on the off-chance that he did return those feelings, it just wasn’t the right time. Aizawa-sensei needed to be able to process everything that was happening before he could move on to other things. Furthermore, it just wasn’t a good idea for Tsukiko to get too close to him right now. It would prevent her from being objective, and she might not make the best decisions for their safety. No...Tsukiko was right where she needed to be right now, even if it wasn’t right by Aizawa-sensei’s side...by Shouta’s side.

Every little while, she would settle into her trance once more, opening up her clairvoyance as much as she could, just to monitor things. Tsukiko felt certain that her home hadn’t been under surveillance by Ripper and his group, but she felt as though she should be checking in every once in a while, making absolutely sure that she and Shouta hadn’t been tracked down. Her cheeks heated up as she allowed herself to think of him by his given name. Ever since her return to UA, Tsukiko had insisted on calling him “Aizawa-sensei” out of respect, even in her thoughts. Shouta had asked her before not to address him so formally, since they were friends and colleagues, but she hadn’t humored him until now. Well, in her thoughts anyway. Her eyes flicked over to the bed again, watching him sleep; Tsukiko had anticipated that he might be restless, but maybe this whole ordeal had tired him out. Or maybe...maybe she made him feel safe. Tsukiko’s heart jumped at the thought, but she dismissed it. Shouta was just tired. Still...it was a nice thought.

Even if there was no immediate threat to speak of, she could feel deep down that something big was coming. Tsukiko didn’t know how it would end, but she did know that she and Shouta needed help. Later, once it wasn’t so obscenely early, they would go to the school like normal, and straight to the principal to explain what was going on. She rubbed at her eyes, frustrated that she didn’t have more information. There was a way of opening up her consciousness further, but it would be very hard on her physically, and likely knock her on her ass for a while afterward. Tsukiko had the means of executing this plan, but it would only be safe to do so if she had help from others to monitor her, making sure she didn’t completely overload her own nervous system, and to make sure that Shouta was safe while her mind left the physical plane.

He shifted in his sleep then, brow furrowed, moving around for a few minutes, as if he struggled to get comfortable. Though Tsukiko couldn’t make out any particular words, she could tell that Shouta was mumbling something in his sleep, probably dreaming. She got up her chair, creeping slowly over to the bed, careful not to make too much noise. Restless sleep was still sleep, after all, and he needed as much as he could get. Tsukiko bent over, studying his face. His bottom lip stuck out in that endearing way, his expression one of intense concentration. Shouta’s murmured words remained indecipherable, and she figured that was just as well; some things were better left alone.

Ever so slowly, so gently, and cautiously, as if she weren’t even sure of what she was doing, Tsukiko reached out. Her hands trembled as her fingertips lightly touched his hair, not applying nearly enough pressure to disturb him. Shouta shifted in his sleep again, and she almost flinched backward, but she continued instead, laying her whole hand against his head and stroking softly. Tsukiko took care not to touch the skin of his face, lest she use her quirk on him by accident. Even
in his unconscious state, she would keep her word. Her tender touches seemed to help his restlessness, and he stilled finally. She intended to return to her chair on the other side of the room, but Tsukiko never made it away from the side of the bed. As she pulled her hand away, Shouta, still asleep, reached out and clasped it, pulling it close. He appeared comforted by it, a light smile on his lips.

Tsukiko’s breath caught in her throat, her mouth dry. Shouta’s hands were rough and firm, but warm, and hers fit so perfectly within them, his thumb running unconsciously over her scarred knuckles. She knew that she wouldn’t be able to pull away without waking him; she didn’t want to go back across the room anyway, so far away from the man she loved so very dearly. In his sleep, Shouta had positioned himself on the far side of the bed, leaving enough room for Tsukiko to sit comfortably. Her movements painfully slow, she climbed onto the mattress, finding her place next to him. Knowing that she still needed to stay awake, she made sure to sit up straight, arm positioned awkwardly across her body so that he could continue holding her hand. Certainly she would have a sore shoulder later on, but it seemed a small price to pay. Her heart sped up as she realized that the two of them had never held hands before; what a strange context this was for such new territory.

The late night starting to get to her, Tsukiko stared off into the darkness, trying to find a balance between using to much of her remaining brainpower, and using so little of it that she fell asleep. Beside her, Shouta stayed still, but he started up with his mumbling once again; he spoke quietly, mouth barely moving. Between the whispering, and the way he stumbled sleepily over his words, Tsukiko couldn’t make out anything sensible, just broken-off syllables and hushed sighs.

“Tsuki-”

Tsukiko went rigid, her head snapping over to stare at him, wide-eyed, unable to believe what she could swear she had just heard. Could he really have said…? But why? What reason would he have to speak her name in his dream state, especially her given name? Shouta always addressed her formally, by her surname only, as she did him. Could it be that, in his own mind, he thought of her in a more familiar manner? It didn’t seem possible.

And it wasn’t, Tsukiko realized as she slowed down, really thinking about it. She had misheard, mistaking suki for Tsuki . すき だよ. Those words of affection...he must have been dreaming of Mariko. How selfish of me...to think that I could ever replace her in his heart.

Her heart sank as a familiar emotion spread throughout her body- a dizzy feeling in her head, a warm swell in her chest, heart fluttering. Tsukiko knew this feeling all too well; she felt it for Shouta every day of her life, that rush of affection. Love. But...why should she feel this so strongly right now, after the sobering reminder of what she wasn’t to him. Then it hit her. This feeling... It wasn’t her own. This love...had a deep ache to it, a sort of unfamiliar melancholy not known to her. And when had her hand gotten so hot ? It wasn’t as though his hands were particularly warm...but
his heart was. His heart was on fire. The emotion was so strong that he could give just the slightest touch, and Tsukiko would be swallowed alive by it.

Without using her telepathy directly, Tsukiko could not determine the object of Shouta’s powerful affections. Still, she had a good enough idea. This love was not for her. It was for Mariko; the realization made her heart ache. Never once had Tsukiko believed that Shouta would ever stop loving his late wife, but it surprised her how much he still felt. She would almost have believed that Mariko was still alive had she not known better. This was the kind of love that never died, no matter the passage of time. Tsukiko’s feelings would never in a million years be returned if this was the reality of things. More importantly, empathy overcame her for her friend. To love a dead person as if she were still living… You must be in agony every day of your life.

Tsukiko frowned, the sort of jaw-clenching expression that one makes to combat the lump rising in their throat, the corners of her mouth dragging dramatically downward as she fought the sting at the corners of her eyes. A deep, aching sadness came over her, filling her up so completely that she couldn’t even feel Shouta’s love anymore. The sadness of it all—the last time she had hurt this much was on the day of her high school graduation. The altruistic part of her felt sorry for her friend, but under the cover of night, her more selfish side took over, hating her regrettable situation. All she wanted to be loved as much as she felt love for this man, and at the same time felt like such a selfish piece of shit for it. Tsukiko wanted to bury her feelings way down deep, but they just kept bubbling up to the surface, like the tears that spilled over her eyelashes now. Lip trembling, she sniffled pitifully, trying to silence her crying. After all, she wouldn’t want to wake Shouta, and have him see her in such a state.

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Shouta inhaled, quick and deep, his eyes fluttering open. It was still dark out, from what he could see, and so he had a little bit more time to rest before Tsukiko woke him to head over to the school. “Mmm?” Something about his current position confused him; he was holding on to something, a hand? That was when he realized that he wasn’t alone in the bed anymore. Tsukiko was sitting beside him, one of her hands clasped firmly in Shouta’s. Heart leaping in his chest, he jerked away, sitting bolt upright. How much had that skin-to-skin contact revealed to her. She glanced over at him, surprised to see him awake. Her eyes were red, Shouta noticed right away. He first wanted to believe that it was due to exhaustion, but the salty track marks on her cheeks, faintly illuminated in the dim room, told the truth. Looking deep into her puffy eyes, she didn’t look angry, or scared; she just looked sad. He could see a single drop still lingering on her jaw, and without thinking, he reached over to brush it away. Somehow, it just made Tsukiko look even more distraught.

“You were crying,” Shouta murmured, face marked with concern.

Tsukiko didn’t say anything in return, eyes shifting. Clearly, she hadn’t expected to be found out, having preferred to keep her sadness private.
“What’s going on?” He searched her face, worried. What had she seen? What had he revealed to her unwittingly? “Please…Moriyama… Please tell me.”

“I… I know how you feel,” she said finally, shakily. Shouta’s heart sank. So this was it. The secret was out.

“Moriyama, I-”

“Even after all this time… You still love her so much.”

Relief washed over him; his cover hadn’t been blown just yet. Tsukiko still believed that all of his love was for Mariko. Still…this only created more questions. Why would his love for his wife hurt Tsukiko to the point of tears? “Then…why were you-”

“You love her so much!” Tsukiko’s voice cracked, tearing up once again. “But she’s gone! It’s just so sad! I’m so sad for you.” She covered her face with her hands, hiding her grief.

It felt like being stabbed in the heart, sitting here and seeing her cry, heart breaking over something she didn’t truly understand. If only he could explain everything to her, maybe she wouldn’t hurt so much…but that would mean explaining everything. Shouta reached over, pulling her hands away, making her look him in the eyes. “You shouldn’t hurt for me like this. Don’t waste your tears on me.”

“It’s not a waste!” she spat. “It’s never been a waste!”

It was no use. Tsukiko always had been so stubborn. “Look…I’m alright, okay? I’m getting better. I’m getting better because of you. I-I know you felt something from me, but…please don’t overthink it. I don’t want you to cry. I don’t want you to be sad. It’s a sadness I don’t need help carrying anymore, because of you.”

Hearing this seemed to calm her down, and she shook her head, laughing grimly at herself. “Jeez…I’m a mess, aren’t I?”

Shouta breathed a heavy sigh. “You’re not a mess. Try not to worry about it anymore.” Tsukiko
didn’t know just how wrong she had been about whatever it was that she had felt from him. As he had slept, he had been dreaming, but this time, it wasn’t anything frightening, or sad. It had been based on his own memories, the night he and Tsukiko had walked on the beach during the class trip. In the dream, Shouta had looked at her with so much love, and she had looked back with the same. There was no judgment, no confusion...just understanding and returned affection. He couldn’t tell her this, of course, and he couldn’t correct her understanding of his feelings. What Tsukiko believed right now was convenient. It supported the lie. It nullified any lingering questions she might have about the times he looked at her just a little too long, or why he had reached for her tonight.

Tsukiko cleared her throat, standing up quickly. “Well, I should go ahead and pack up a few things. It’s getting to be about that time,” she said, glancing toward the window, through which the early morning sun had begun to peek. She dug through her closet, grabbing some extra clothes and a silver attache case. Shouta wondered what was inside the case, but he knew better than to ask, noting the combination lock on the top. “You should tie your hair back up; we need to blend in again on the way to the school.” She still seemed on edge, but he supposed that was normal, considering the circumstances. He had half a mind to ask Tsukiko if she was doing all right, but Shouta knew her well enough to know that she bottled up her feelings as much as he did his.

Both were oddly silent on the short train ride to UA, Tsukiko’s eyes darting around the car, watching for danger. Shouta could tell how tired she had gotten while keeping watch overnight; heavy dark circles had formed under her eyes, and her whole body seemed to sag. Still, she seemed determined to go on, her gaze intent as always. At the school, she hurried down the hallway, searching for the principal. Her haggard appearance, and Shouta’s departure from his usual clothes, turned the heads of confused students, who immediately realized that something was up. “Sir!” One of his homeroom students waved to get his attention. “I can’t help but notice that you’re not wearing your normal hero suit. Is there a situation of which the students should be informed?”

“Iida, report to homeroom as normal,” Shouta instructed him. “And make sure all of the others stay in the classroom until further notice.” He set his jaw firm, not sure how much information he should be spreading just yet.

Tsukiko interjected, not really giving him a chance to decide. “I can’t say too much yet, but there’s a good chance the school is going to be put on lockdown.”

“Just tell the other students that I told them to wait in the classroom until I arrive, okay?”

“I’ll do that.” Iida seemed vaguely distraught by what Tsukiko had said, but he kept calm, leaving them and heading for the classroom.

“Now to find-”
“Aizawa-sensei, Miss Moriyama, have you been looking for me?” The principal’s voice behind her almost made Tsukiko jump. It would have been funny had the situation not been so urgent.

“We have been looking for you,” Shouta replied. He and Tsukiko exchanged a glance. “We have a situation.”
“Essentially- let me make sure I understand this correctly…” Principal Nedzu knit his fingers(?) together, looking Shouta in the eye. “The same villain who murdered your wife has returned, and is now attempting to hunt you down.”

“Yes.”

“And furthermore, you believe your students may be in danger…”

“Because Ripper has a history of targeting those close to Aizawa-sensei,” Tsukiko finished.

The principal turned his attention toward her. “If that’s the case, then you may be in danger as well.”

Shouta clenched his jaw for a minute, choosing his words carefully. “I’m certain of it. When he confronted me, he mentioned Moriyama.”
“You didn’t tell me that before,” Tsukiko whispered, voice hollow as she gripped the armrests of the chair tightly.

He hadn’t. In the hours following his meeting with Ripper, Shouta had been too shaken, and too distracted to remember that detail. When he finally recalled it, it had seemed too telling, that she had been the one the villain chose to dangle in front of him.

“Do you have any knowledge of this villain’s current whereabouts? Or that of his allies? I think it’s safe to say that they are probably tracking you down right now.” Even Nedzu, in his infinite wisdom, wasn’t omniscient.

Shouta looked distraught. “I-I don’t know anything now. I don’t know what to do next, I-”

“Sir,” Tsukiko addressed the principal. “Does the school still have a sensory deprivation tank?”

“It does. It has been a few years since its last use, but it should still be fully functional. Why do you ask?” He seemed to understand that she had something up her sleeve.

“I think I can use it to widen the scope of my clairvoyance. If I can do that, then I might be able to gather some information of where Ripper is right now, what he’s doing, and what he is going to do next.” Tsukiko stood up. “Please, take me there. We can’t afford to waste any time!” Before Shouta knew it she was scurrying down the hallway after the principal, jumping into action before he could even think. In his moment of weakness, she’d taken things over seamlessly, acting when he found himself unable.

He found Tsukiko and the principal again in the school’s basement, where the tank was located. Well, maybe it wasn’t so much of a tank as it was a shallow pool, heated to exactly 37 degrees to mimic human body temperature, and terribly saline, so that a person could float in it without even trying. “What can I do to help?” Shouta asked, at a loss.

“Go and get my grandmother, and my sister, and help them bring a heart monitor, an EEG machine, and any emergency equipment they think we might need. Tell Genkiko that it’s for Protocol Zero.” Shouta had to wonder how long Tsukiko had had this plan in place, for her to have named it. Perhaps she knew that there would come a day when she needed to do something like this.
He easily found Recovery Girl posted up in her clinic, and she eyed him warily as he entered, still unsure after the incident with Tsukiko’s wrist. “I need your help. Please come quickly.”

The tiny woman sighed. “Midoriya again?”

“No, no… It’s Moriyama.”

“What did you do to her this time?”

Shouta put his hands up. “I didn’t do anything. I swear. She’s not even hurt; she- well, to be honest, I’m not quite sure what she’s going to do, but she’s going into the sensory deprivation tank.”

That was all he had to say. Recovery Girl bolted out of her chair, dumping supplies into a bag. “I assume she’ll want Genkiko there too.”

“Yes, that’s what she said.”

Recovery Girl gave her cell phone a few quick taps, and within minutes the third-year was scrambling down the hall. “She’s going into the tank?!”

“She said something about ‘Protocol Zero.’”

“Oh, fu-” Genkiko caught herself, realizing that she was speaking with a teacher. “It’s official. She’s lost her mind.” She helped her grandmother with the machines, nodding toward a box on the wall and addressing Shouta. “Grab that, would you please?”

His heart sank as he saw what it was that Genkiko wanted him to take- a portable defibrillator. Was what Tsukiko planned to do really that dangerous? He didn’t know if he could handle her risking her life on his behalf.

Shouta had to wonder if this was going to be too hard on her. She hadn’t gotten more than a few hours of sleep the night before, and she was already stretching herself thin taking care of seemingly everything. He knew how much of a mental strain it could be when she pushed the limits of her abilities. She planned to push herself even further now, and Shouta couldn’t see it ending well. All
he could conjure up in his mind’s eye was the disquieting image of Tsukiko hemorrhaging through her nose as she overloaded her own brain. All the same, he knew that he had to trust her, he had to trust that she could make this decision for herself. She wasn’t his student anymore, and it wasn’t his place to tell her what was too dangerous for her to undertake. Downstairs, she seemed just as hell-bent as before, having traded her clothes for a pair of compression shorts and an athletic bra, as a set of loose, soggy garments would only be a distraction. In any other situation, seeing her this way might have excited Shouta, with how these items hugged her figure, but right now, he felt too worried for her safety to be anything but chaste.

Tsukiko knelt in front of the attache case, its contents no longer a mystery. She studied a scrap of paper carefully, selecting the first of three vials and using a syringe to draw out a slight amount of the liquid inside. She repeated the process with the second and third containers, flicking the side of the syringe to force any bubbles to the surface, and giving it the tiniest squirt before placing it on a tray beside her.

“What is that?” Shouta asked her, nervous.

“This...is a combination of lysergic acid diethylamide, tetrahydrocannabinol, and psilocybin.”

“Issa artisan blend of acid, weed, and shrooms,” Genkiko called from the other side of the room, her mouth full of potato chips.

Shouta shook his head. “But... why ?”

“Because I can only do so much on my own. Because this ...will rip my consciousness wide open.”

Genkiko seemed to understand his hesitation. “Hey, it’ll be alright. It’s a really low dose. I mean, she’s gonna trip balls , but, like, there’s no way she’ll overdose from this.”

Tsukiko looked deep into Shouta’s eyes. “Do you trust me?”

He swallowed hard, fighting the temptation to get lost in lilac. “I trust you.”

Against his better judgment, Shouta looked on silently as Tsukiko used a strip of rubber to tie off her bicep, making the vein deep in the crook of her arm pop up. With Recovery Girl’s assistance, she embedded the syringe’s needle into her flesh, slowly pushing down on the plunger to empty
the psychedelic cocktail into her circulatory system. Within seconds she went weak at the knees, Genkiko and Shouta catching her under the arms and easing her into the briny water of the tank. She floated easily on the surface, her eyes closed, wires trailing away from the diodes taped to her head and the sensor pads on her chest. The heart monitor beeped wildly for the first minute or so as the drugs inundated Tsukiko’s senses, but neither of the medically-trained individuals in the room seemed bothered or surprised. Shouta dragged a folding chair over to the tank and sat down, watching helplessly. He realized that he had never made it to homeroom this morning, but it was no matter now. The other classes had started, and Nedzu had already made arrangements for a substitute teacher to cover his other periods.

As severe a procedure as this had seemed to be before, the process was startlingly uneventful. Tsukiko simply floated in the pool, her eyes gently closed, hair fanning out around her. Her heartbeat remained steady; occasionally it would speed up just a little, but then return to normal. It almost seemed as though she were asleep. The other machine remained totally silent. Curious, Shouta rose from his chair, moving around to the other side of the tank to observe the screen, which recorded patterns of jagged lines. Noting its connection to the wires coming from the diodes on Tsukiko’s scalp, he whispered, “This is for her brain, right?”

“That’s right,” Nedzu confirmed. “An electroencephalogram records brain waves. It’ll tell us if her neural load is becoming too great, and she needs to be pulled out of her trance.”

That possibility was what Shouta had been most worried about. He had already seen what could happen if Tsukiko pushed herself too far. If she went beyond her own limits, she might suffer severe brain damage, or worse. She might burst blood vessels larger than the tiny capillaries that had made her nose bleed before, hemorrhaging into her brain. If the pressure was great enough, she could die. “Fuck,” he whispered, clasping his hand to the back of his neck. Nedzu seemed to read the look in Shouta’s eyes, easily coming to understand the situation.

“Maybe you should take a break for a little while,” he suggested gently. “I’ll send someone for you if anything happens.”

“Are you sure. If there’s anything I can do-”

“There’s not much to do right now besides wait. I know you’re worried, but I can tell that this is distressing for you.” Nedzu kept his voice low, not wanting to make things any more obvious to Tsukiko’s family members than they already were. “You should try to find something to take your mind off things for now.”

Shouta knew that the principal was right, but he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself. He wandered aimlessly down the hallway, ultimately winding up in the teachers’ office. Sinking down into his desk chair, he stared at the wall, his mind a thick fog. “Yo! I didn’t know you were here!”
Hizashi whizzed over in his own roly-poly chair. “There’s a sub covering your classes.”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I know.”

Hizashi seemed confused. “Shouta… is something going on?”

Shouta sighed. “Come with me. I don’t really want to discuss it here.” Out in the hallway, he folded his arms across his chest. “He’s back, Hizashi.”

“Who’s back?”

“You know who.”

Hizashi’s sunglasses slid down the bridge of his nose. “But… how?”

“I don’t know. All I know is… he wants me dead. And he wants Moriyama too.”

“Shouta…” Hizashi didn’t seem surprised by Ripper’s pursuit of Tsukiko. Had he already figured out Shouta’s feelings for her? Were they that blatantly obvious? “Where is she now? I can see that you’re here, and you’re safe, but…”

“She’s downstairs,” Shouta massaged the sides of his head. “With Recovery Girl and the principal. She’s in the sensory deprivation tank, trying to use her clairvoyance to figure out what’s going on with him.”

“You’re really worried about her.”

“I can’t do it, Hizashi.” Shouta’s voice cracked. “I can’t do it again.”

Hizashi was quiet for a minute, a rare and precious occurrence. “You really love her, don’t you.”
“More than anything.”

“More than Mariko?” Hizashi looked hurt.

“Of course not more than Mariko! I could never love one more than the other. Just...differently.” Shouta was offended that he would even ask such a question.

“Let me help you.”

“No…” Shouta shook his head. “This is my fight. This is the man who took my wife.”

“And he took my sister!” Hizashi snapped. “This isn’t just about you! It’s about you, and me, and Mariko, and Moriyama! It’s about everyone who ever cared about you, it’s about anyone who ever cared about any of us! It’s about every person who died by that monster’s hand!”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I understand. You’re really going through it right now, but everything’s gonna be alright. I promise.”

“I hope so. It’s hard to stay optimistic right now,” Shouta admitted.

“I know.” Hizashi got a mischievous look in his eye. “So, does she know yet how you feel?”

Shouta scoffed. “Absolutely not. I sincerely doubt she would want to be with me anyway, so there’s not a point in bothering her with it.”

“But what if she does want to be with you?”

“She doesn’t. I’m seven years older than her. I was her teacher.”
Genkiko cleared her throat behind them, making both men jump. Shouta had to wonder just how much she had heard. “Hey, you might wanna come downstairs. I think we’re gonna have to pull her out soon.”

With both Tsukiko’s kid sister and Hizashi hot on his heels, Shouta raced downstairs, terrified by the idea that something would happen to her, and he wouldn’t be there in that moment. Honestly, he should never have left her side in the first place. The three of them burst into the basement, and Shouta rushed over to the tank, where Tsukiko remained for now. Her facial expression had been serene before, but now she seemed troubled, eyes shut tight, face contorted into a disturbed scowl. Her hands and feet twitched wildly, head twisting from side to side, almost as if she were having a bad dream. On the EEG screen, the lines recording her brain waves thrashed up and down, a mountain range of consciousness. Seeing blood start to drip from her nose, Shouta wasn’t sure how much more she could take. He trusted Nedzu and Recovery Girl to not let things go too far, but he still felt tempted to pull Tsukiko back prematurely, dragging her out of the tank himself.

The blood drip became a steady stream, and the rhythm of the heart monitor moved into dangerous territory as Tsukiko began to thrash about in the water, clearly distressed. “Pull her out!” Genkiko yelled from behind Shouta, who was the first to jump into action. He swung his leg over the side of the tank, wading toward her as quickly as he could, speed inhibited by the water, which had been made dense by its salt content.

“Wake up,” Shouta whispered as he crouched down to lift Tsukiko out of the water, patting the side of her face to try and bring her back to reality. With a loud gasp as she inhaled suddenly, her eyes flew open, searching the room wildly. “Hey…” He almost had to chuckle with relief. “Hey…”

“We have to shut it down!” Tsukiko managed to string the words together. “The school…We need to lock it down! They’re coming here!” She clung to Shouta as if her life depended on it.

“W-When?! When are they coming?”

She let out a soft groan, pressing two fingers to her forehead. “Not yet. They’re not ready yet. But soon.”

Nedzu scrambled upstairs to start the lockdown protocol, with Hizashi following him to assist, while Shouta sat down in the pool of salty water, still holding on to Tsukiko, not caring if his clothes got wet. Right now, all that mattered was the fact that she was okay. Her body sagged against him; it was obvious that her psychic efforts had taken a heavy toll on her. Despite Tsukiko’s horrifying revelation, that they were all in danger, all Shouta wanted to do was stay here like this, with her resting comfortably against him. Right now, she was too tired to use her abilities, even passively, allowing him to let his guard down for now. He stroked her hair absently, an odd thought occurring to him. “Are you still high right now?” he whispered.
“I’m so fucking high,” Tsukiko mumbled in return, and they both had to laugh, her soft giggle punctuated by a pained groan. “My head…” Shouta pressed two fingers to her temple, massaging gently. “Oh, that’s nice...keep...doing…” her words faded off into silence, too tired to even speak.

Genkiko watched them from across the room, her eyes narrowed. Then, she smirked, rolling her eyes and shaking her head. *Your heart rate’s up, sensei.*

After a little while, Tsukiko stirred, joints popping. “I want to lie down.” Without another thought, Shouta slid an arm under her knees, lifting her easily. “I-I think I’m okay to walk,” she murmured, heat rushing into her face.

Mortified than he’d been so presumptuous, he lowered her down, letting her feet touch the floor. Tsukiko kept her arm around him to steady herself. She still seemed weak, legs trembling, movements slow, but it was clear that she didn’t want to be carried. *Stubborn as ever.* Slowly and carefully, Shouta led her back upstairs, both of them leaving a trail of water behind them. “You need to get into some dry clothes. It won’t be good for you to get too cold right now.”

“I brought some stuff with me,” Tsukiko whispered. “In the bag I left in the principal’s office.”

“I’ll get it for you in a few minutes.” Shouta came close to asking her if she needed help changing, since she was so weak right now, but luckily remembered *just* how improper that would be. Managing to get her to her office, he led her over to the couch, taking the blanket off the back and wrapping it around her. “I’ll be back soon.”

Because she normally had such a big personality, he sometimes forgot how petite Tsukiko really was. She had looked so small and weak just now as Shouta left her to go and fetch her things. *She only looks that way right now because of you,* that sneering voice echoed in the back of his head. Over the past few months, he had gotten good at blocking it out, but maybe right now he was feeling a little weak too. He had to wonder if Tsukiko was pushing herself too far, and all on his behalf. First, she had put herself in danger to confront ripper. Then, she stayed up all night to keep watch over him, and now, in her exhausted state, she was taking drugs and pushing her quirk to the point where it could physically harm her. *Hmm...that sounds familiar. And you’re just as reckless, Tsukiko.* To go so far for him, Shouta almost had to wonder… Or maybe she really was just that giving. He was her friend, and one of only a few people she trusted. Maybe she was terrified of losing that. Maybe she just didn’t want to lose the moments of silence he provided her.

Returning to her office, he opened the door quietly, seeing that she had slumped over on the couch, the demand for sleep overtaking her. Moving silently toward the couch, Shouta very nearly tripped on a pile of fabric dumped onto the floor. He reached down, alarmed to find the soggy garments
that Tsukiko had been wearing before. So that meant...under the blanket… He bit his lip to hold in a gasp. Wow, you really are disgusting if this excites you. He quickly banished the thought, setting the bag on the floor near her. As much as he wanted to wait with her, Shouta knew that it wouldn’t be appropriate, considering her nakedness. Besides, he’d all but abandoned his duties as a teacher, and he was sure his homeroom was wondering where he had gone. Before he closed the door, leaving Tsukiko to rest, he scribbled a quick note on a scrap of paper from her desk.

Moriyama-

I went to check on my students, and to assist with the lockdown. If you need me, please call my extension. I left your things by the couch. Please take care of yourself and rest well.

Shouta

It look every bit of willpower he possessed not to sign it, “I love you.”
“There’s a villain hunting you?!” Yaoyorozu’s voice jumped up a full octave as she processed what Shouta had just told the class. After leaving Tsukiko to rest in her office, he had returned to his teaching duties, even if his mind was in another place entirely. The homeroom students seemed surprised to see him back, but acted as though they were relieved. Certainly their wild teenage minds had jumped to all kinds of conclusions; especially if Iida had told all of them about the possible lockdown. Shouta figured he owed them an explanation after his sudden disappearance. Even with the school (discreetly) closed to the outside, lessons continued, considering the fact that no one was in immediate danger.

The way Yaoyorozu had worded the facts made things sound bad, but Shouta supposed that they were. “I guess that’s one way of putting it. I thought I had brought this man to justice years ago, before I even started teaching…” He declined to share with his students the gory details of his original encounter with Ripper. “...but he’s back now, and he wants me out of the way so that he can continue his crimes.”

“Is Miss Moriyama safe?” Iida asked suddenly. “She seemed worried earlier this morning, and she looked so tired, like she hadn’t gotten enough sleep.”
Shouta swallowed hard, remembering what Tsukiko had put herself through before. “She’ll be alright. She’s resting in her office now.”

Midoriya frowned. “Did something happen?”

“She’s just put herself through a lot since last night.” Shouta wasn’t sure how much he should share about Tsukiko’s sharing her bed with him, or her drug use. “She stayed up with me last night as kind of a ‘safety in numbers’ kind of thing, and this morning, the way she used her quirk-”

“She has a clairvoyant ability, right?”

“Yes. She pushed it further than she probably should have, and it really tired her out.”

“You must be worried about her.” The words seemed to slip out of Uraraka’s mouth before she could think about what she was saying.

She wasn’t wrong. “I am concerned for her, and for her health.” Shouta thought back to what he had seen earlier; the blood pouring down the lower half of Tsukiko’s face, the horrified look in her eyes when she finally came to. “She has given a lot of herself in the past fifteen hours.” He didn’t mention that she might be in danger, because it doing so would force him to reveal that the students could be in harm’s way as well. Anyone close to me…

Kirishima stood up at his desk. “Is there anything we can do to help?”

“No, none of you need to get involved in this. This time, you need to let the adults handle things.” Shouta knew that they would disregard this directive just like they always did, but he nonetheless had a responsibility to advise them otherwise. “It is far too dangerous for any of you to get involved. Besides, this villain is only concerned with me. I won’t have any of you risking your lives on my behalf.” He said this, but he had allowed Tsukiko to put herself in harm’s way. Though, she was an adult. She could make that kind of decision for herself. Then again, if Shouta really wanted to protect her, he’d find another way, wouldn’t he? Well…she could be rather stubborn.

His homeroom groaned at the prospect of being kept out of the action again. They were fifteen years old already! They could handle this, damn it! “Are there other things we could do to help?” Asui asked. “You know, things that don’t involve fighting?”
“You all can help by staying out of danger,” Shouta said to another collective groan. “If someone asks you to do something, then do it, but mostly, you just need to follow instructions, and stay out of trouble.”

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After hours of dreamless sleep, utterly unaware of the passage of time, Tsukiko began to stir, her eyes fluttering open. She immediately groaned, the pulsing pain in her head returning; maybe she had pushed herself too far. Luckily, she had packed some migraine medication in her bag. Tsukiko rolled over, seeing that Shouta had left it on the floor next to the couch. As she continued to regain consciousness, she remembered having stripped naked in her exhausted state, much to her own embarrassment. Hopefully, she had been well-covered by her blanket when he returned to the office with her things. She wouldn’t want to have made him uncomfortable. Much as she wanted to be naked with him, her desires required a much different context. As she dug through her bag for a fresh set of clothes, Tsukiko spotted a slip of paper left on the table in front of the couch. Shouta had left a note for her, letting her know that he would be with his students now, and that she should take her time recovering from her hyperconscious astral journey. With the school on lockdown, he would definitely be safe in her absence.

Part of Tsukiko wished that he had stayed there with her while she slept, but she knew that that was a selfish thing to wish for. Really, she was glad that he had gone to check on his students instead of focusing all of his attention on her; they needed him more than she did. Besides, if she had woken up to find Shouta there, she might have stood, letting the blanket fall to the floor, and… Tsukiko blushed as she banished the impure thought. However, she was glad that he had been considerate enough to leave a note. It made her feel cared for, even if the wording was oddly formal. Of course, he was like that a lot, in the interest of professionalism. She wished that he could be informal with her more often, rather than solely in his most vulnerable moments. Tsukiko grumbled to herself as she dressed, annoyed that she would be concerned with something so trivial right now.

Once she had dressed herself, and taken a couple of painkillers, she stepped out of her office, squinting at the glaring lights of the hallway. Tsukiko moved slowly, taking her time as she started down the corridor to Shouta’s classroom, where he’d been instructed to keep his students in the event of a lockdown. From outside, it wasn’t too noisy, for which Tsukiko and her migraine were grateful, though she could hear the dull roar inside the classroom. She slid the door open, distracting Shouta from the conversation he was having with the class. He almost looked... happy ...to see her, though she was sure she was imagining things.

The sound of the classroom door opening caught Shouta’s attention, and he was relieved to see that Tsukiko had returned to the land of the living. She still looked tired, but appeared to be in a much stronger state now. “You’re awake,” he commented, as his students, hearing the softness in his voice, collectively exchanged a glance.
“Mmhmm. I feel a lot better now.” She brushed a piece of hair behind her ear, her too-long sleeve falling down over her hand. *Cute.*

At that moment, Kaminari fell out of his chair with a loud crash, having turned around to say something to Jiro. The loud noise made Tsukiko wince, pinching the bridge of her nose between her fingers, and Shouta frowned. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Mmm. I’ve just got a little bit of a headache.” She managed a weak smile.

“Here.” Shouta went over to her, massaging the sides of her head with his fingertips, his students looking on in shock at the gesture of physical affection. “Better?”

“That’s-” Tsukiko looked up, getting caught in his intense gaze. “That’s much better,” she breathed.

“Much, much better,” Shinsou smirked knowingly.

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Even as UA’s student body began to grow restless, the lockdown continued. They had been permitted to briefly return to their dorms in order to retrieve bedding, toiletries, and extra clothes, but otherwise the protocol during a close-up of this caliber was to keep everyone together in the main building. Once the school day ended, the various classes had been divided between the auditorium, the cafeteria, and the main gymnasium. Generally, the classes were separated by year, but due to some meddling on the part of Recovery Girl and Genkiko, the third year support class had been placed with the first year students. Everyone was fed dinner, and the teachers did their damnedest to keep their squirrelly students from causing too much of a ruckus. Though Tsukiko still felt tired, she remained adamant about staying awake until bedtime. She’d already spent far too much of the day passed out on her couch. She supposed no one would complain if she retired to her office where it was quiet, but what she wanted was to stay with Shouta, even if it was under the guise of “helping with the students.”

Having never gotten the chance to wash off the previous night’s sweat, and disgusted by the gritty feeling of salt still in her hair, Tsukiko very much wanted a shower. She rifled through her bag for soap and shampoo before heading off toward the staff locker rooms. Hot water pouring down her face, trailing against her scalp, would feel absolutely heavenly for her still-pulsing head. The only thing that would cure the ache completely was a good night’s sleep, but until then, Tsukiko would do what she could. Swiping her staff ID and pushing open the locker room door, she could hear one of the showers already running. “Please excuse me,” she called out, alerting the other person to
her presence.

“Moriyama, is that you?”

Color flooded Tsukiko’s face at the sound of Shouta’s voice. To be in the same room with him while he was...while he was naked ... I don’t know how to deal with this!! “Oh, I’m sorry! I’ll wait.”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t mind.” Tsukiko’s sudden arrival surprised Shouta, but he wasn’t bothered by her being here, though he knew that he would have to be careful not to think too much about her taking a shower alongside him, albeit in a separate stall.

He could hear the rustling of her clothes as she stripped down; when the sound stopped, Shouta knew she was bare. He tried not to think about things too much as the spray of water started. It was bad enough that he let himself be aroused by her in his own private home, but to allow the same feelings, the same bodily response now, with Tsukiko in the same room... It felt like an invasion of her privacy, even if he didn’t do anything improper, even if she would never know. Shouta continued his own shower, reaching for the soap, directing his attention to literally anything else in the world.

Once she’d gotten the temperature right, Tsukiko stepped into the shower stall, sighing in satisfaction as the hot water hit the top of her head. She smoothed her hair back, closing her eyes, the scent of peppermint tickling her nose. It was Shouta’s soap, she figured; despite the stimulant nature of the smell, Tsukiko found it oddly soothing. In the quiet privacy of the locker room, lascivious images danced in her mind. The memories of what she had seen during the class trip aided her fantasy; she could practically picture what Shouta looked like under the spray of water, droplets trailing down his chest, getting caught in that thick patch of black hair.

A staticky jolt flashed between Tsukiko’s thighs. Uh-oh. She knew that feeling all too well. After a few minutes of considering whether she should ignore the feeling altogether, she dipped her hand down low to investigate. Slick fluid coated her fingers, a wetness that was not caused by her bathing. It certainly was a shame that they couldn’t share a shower, wet flesh brushing together, water dripping against a deep and heady kiss. Without thinking, Tsukiko bucked her hips forward against her fingers, a tingle of pleasure coursing through her.

In the next stall, Shouta continued his effort to remain chaste, focusing intensely on scrubbing himself clean. Tsukiko was naked and wet, with only a wall in between them, and he was absolutely not going to think about it. He was absolutely not going to think about the smooth, bare skin of her lean body, about the rivulets of water running over her full bottom, the bounce of flesh as she washed... Shit. As it turned out, Shouta had very little control over how his body reacted to this situation. Just a little slip of the mind, and he was already getting hard. He hadn’t yet reached
the point of no return, so if he could just alter his train of thought... Tsukiko chose this moment, of all moments, to give a happy little sigh, which only made everything worse. Shouta wondered what other kinds of fun sounds she could make. Oh...how badly he wanted to bury himself inside her...

Tsukiko knew better. God knows she knew better. But in her exhausted state, her self-control had waned and, just this once, she chose to indulge herself rather than following her better judgment. Bracing herself against the shower wall with one arm and widening her stance, she slipped her hand back between her thighs. Taking great pains to hold back her moans, she massaged herself, praying that Shouta couldn’t figure out what she was doing. It was utterly improper, entirely unprofessional, and completely inappropriate. At the same time, the pleasurable sensation made it difficult for Tsukiko to feel too bad about it.

Shouta knew that this was absolutely not the time or place for that; he didn’t even particularly want to, considering the context. He also knew that his present physical condition wasn’t going to remedy itself. If he ignored it, he’d be in for a lot of discomfort later on. Maybe...maybe he could take care of this quickly and quietly. The guilt would sit with him for a while, but as long as he could be discreet... Frowning and sighing, Shouta grasped himself, squeezing lightly and flicking his wrist quickly back and forth. He slid easily back into his fantasies, cringing as a low, growling groan slipped from his mouth.

Tsukiko sped up her movements, biting her lip. On some level, she wanted to step out of her own stall, ripping open the curtain to Shouta’s so that she might join him. If she’d had confirmation that he would be pleased to have her, she might have been just reckless enough to do it. As things were, however, to do such a thing would be far too presumptuous. After all, she wouldn’t want someone intruding on her shower. Thus, she would simply have to be satisfied with her own fantasy, thinking to herself about how Shouta might pick her up as she wrapped her legs around him. Tsukiko managed to stop a moan in her throat as she imagined him filling her up, mouths tangled messily together as he fucked her into the tile. A few words escaped her mouth in a hoarse whisper. “Mmm...do me against the wall...” Immediately she clasped her hand over her mouth, praying that Shouta hadn’t heard her lascivious plea.

Shouta froze momentarily, unable to believe what he could have sworn he had just heard. “Do me against the wall.” No...he had to be mistaken. There was no reason for Tsukiko to say something like that. Unless...she was presently engaging in the same depraved act as he. No way. Wishful thinking; that’s all it was. Still, he liked the thought of it, of Tsukiko all wet and needy, knees buckling in delight as she made herself come...

A few minutes later Shouta heard her gasp, a shuddering sort of noise, and he stopped his stroking. It almost sounded like she was... crying. It wouldn’t be too much of a surprise; the two of them had been through so much within the past twenty-four hours. Of course she’d be stressed out, her human emotions catching up with her in her overworked state. “Is everything alright, Moriyama?”
“Oh! Y-Yes! I’m fine,” she called back, her voice just a little bit strained. She didn’t sound like she’d been crying. Strange… Maybe she’d slipped, gasping as she scrambled to regain her balance.

It was a nice noise, Shouta decided once he’d determined that it wasn’t a sound of sorrow. Was that the kind of utterance she made in a state of ecstasy? Or would she get even louder than that? He still felt guilty speculating about her private moments; it was just another secret that he’d try to take to the grave. The sound echoed in Shouta’s mind, and he assigned to it a conjured image of Tsukiko’s face, cheeks painted a deep red, her jaw hanging slack. With a single sharp pant, his hips twitched forward, opaque fluids running down the tile.

Finished now, the guilt began to set in as it always did; a double dose this time around since Tsukiko had literally been only one stall away. After rinsing everything down the drain, Shouta shut off the water, annoyed with himself for being so lewd. She’d be disgusted if she knew what he had done; somehow this seemed even worse than everything else. Shouta quickly dried off and dressed himself, hoping to make it out of the locker room before Tsukiko left her stall. He didn’t think he could face her right now.

Tsukiko’s knees felt weak as she stood under the water, waiting for Shouta to leave. Surely her pupils were the size of dinner plates right now, and she didn’t know how much she could suppress her hot blush right now. She could always blame the steamy water, but she knew that she’d never been a very good liar. What Tsukiko had done was naughty, and inappropriate, and she felt like if Shouta saw her right now, he would figure her out right away. Just a little while longer… She could compose herself after she finished coming down from her high, and pretend that things were absolutely normal.

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In the gymnasium, where the first year students (and the third-year support class) had been assigned, things were beginning to settle down for the night. Many of the students had begun to make down their beds, and thus, the all-important task of deciding who would sleep next to whom weighed heavily on them. The teachers did their best to keep boys and girls on opposite sides of the room, but considering the sheer number of students, and the size of the room, there was some meeting in the middle, mostly with class 1A. To be fair, they had bonded quite a bit due to the multiple traumas the group had experienced over the course of the school year. Still, the adults would have to monitor things diligently to make sure no kind of shenanigans took place. All of the girls kept their distance from the Welch’s Reject, who had been bumped down once more to the General Studies class, but tonight, of all nights, he refrained from making trouble. It was strange; the room was full of girls running around in their pajamas, but Mineta seemed…distracted, like he had something more important on his mind. Every once in a while he’d turn, giving Tsukiko the stink eye, but she didn’t pay him any mind.

Kayama had chosen a spot next to the wall, leaving some space between herself and Shouta.
“Moriyama!” she called out, “You should come over here next to me!” Her play was very obvious, but Tsukiko didn’t mind. Sleeping next to Shouta was exactly what she wanted. Tsukiko nodded, taking her bedding and going to occupy the empty spot. Kayama winked, putting her thumb and forefinger together in the “ok!” gesture.

As always, Nemuri was playing the wingman, a role that amused her greatly. Those two really needed to just fuck and get it over with, always so damn dramatic, and so afraid to just confess their feelings already! If Nemuri could get them next to each other, and get them talking, maybe they’d eventually steal away in the dead of night to consummate their love somewhere private. With everything happening right now, Shouta and Moriyama really needed to hurry things up. There was no telling whether one of them would be hurt in the coming days, or worse! It would be better to bite the bullet and reveal the truth now than to go to the grave never knowing that those powerful feelings were returned.

Genkiko and Recovery Girl exchanged a glance before Genkiko turned to look at her older sister. “Tsukiko, don’t you think you should come and sleep next to your sister? Just to make sure that she’s safe?”

“Yes, I think that would be a good idea,” Recovery Girl echoed.

“Everyone in this room is perfectly safe, regardless of where they sleep,” Nemuri explained, keeping her voice calm. She knew that she couldn’t press the issue too much, lest she end up showing her hand.

Shit. They must know, and they don’t trust me at all, Shouta realized. He’d been glad when Nemuri called Tsukiko over, but her family members didn’t seem too pleased about the prospect of her sleeping next to him. As much as he wanted to ask Tsukiko to stay, he didn’t want to risk making it obvious that he wanted her there with him.

I see. They’re afraid that I’ll be corrupted by Kayama, that I’ll become a pervert. Tsukiko knew that her sister and grandmother were being silly, but if she resisted, then it might seem like she was desperate to stay next to Shouta. She was, of course, but no one else needed to know that!

Luckily, one of his students, Ashido, seemed to understand the situation, picking up her things and going to plop down in the empty spot by Genkiko. “Hi, I’m Mina! Nice to meet you!” She gave the teachers a thumbs-up that was just a little too obvious.

“I’m going to kick you in the shins,” Genkiko muttered through gritted teeth.
With that weirdness out of the way, students began to quiet down one by one, falling asleep, blissfully unaware of the danger that had caused the lockdown in the first place. In their eyes, it just seemed like an excuse for a school-wide slumber party. The teachers, on the other hand, wondered exactly how much sleep they would manage to get tonight. They still didn’t know exactly when Ripper and company would choose to strike, and it was entirely possible that everyone would awaken in the middle of the night to a surprise attack. Shouta hoped that Tsukiko would be able to sleep well, since it had been a good two days since she’d had a proper rest. Besides, she would need the energy when the time came to fight. Of course, he fully intended to protect her as much as possible, but if something were to happen to him… A part of Shouta considered letting her know how he felt, just in case, but in the end, he couldn’t bring himself to burden her with that information.

Even after most everyone else had fallen asleep, he lay awake, still too shaken up by everything that had happened, and by that which had yet to take place. Not knowing the future was the worst part, and his inevitable, final meeting with Ripper honestly terrified him. “Moriyama?” he whispered into the silence.

“Yes?” Her voice was soft.

Shouta frowned. “You’re still awake?”

“For now. I think I’ll be able to sleep okay; I was just thinking about some things.”

He wondered what was on her mind, but he didn’t pry. “Do you have any idea…how soon…?”

Tsukiko understood what he meant. “Tomorrow. Around the middle of the day. We should start preparations as soon as everyone wakes up.”

Shouta was quiet for a minute. Having this timeline just made everything that much more real. “Have you…have you had any flashes?” This question masked a much more severe one. “Am I going to die?”

“One or two, but there weren’t very many details. But I can assure you of one thing: Ripper will die tomorrow.”

“What about…?” “What about me? What about you?”
“I don’t know.” There was sorrow in Tsukiko’s voice.

“I won’t let… I won’t let anything happen to you.” I love you.

“I won’t let anything happen to you either.” I love you.
Though Shouta had somehow managed to get some decent sleep the night before, he now found himself restless, willing the minutes to pass just a little bit more slowly. Every passing hour found him a little bit more anxious than the one before as he, and the rest of UA’s faculty and staff, awaited the dreaded arrival of Ripper, and the villains he had recruited to do his bidding. The police had been informed that this would happen, but they could only spare so many resources to try and guard the school. Shouta worried that Ripper and the gang would be put off by the police presence, waiting for another time to strike unexpectedly. At the same time, it might make an arrest possible. He wouldn’t be difficult to detain, once captured, Tsukiko had explained to him, since his quirk was of a regenerative nature. That fact had given him some small amount of hope. If they could hold off the henchmen, and manage Ripper into custody, everything would turn out fine. That still seemed like a big “if.” Ripper was smart; he likely anticipated that Shouta would seek help from other professionals. He wasn’t about to pull up with some dinky little squad of useless villains. No. He’d always been the type to overdo things, not underdo them.

After the initial attack on USJ by the League of Villains, UA had made major upgrades to the school’s security system, for which Shouta was now especially grateful. Everyone had spent the morning setting up traps and barricades. If the villains were to storm the school, some of them might get caught up in the traps, and the others would have one hell of a time navigating the hallways. After great consideration, permission was given to any students who had their provisional licenses, and who had been working in the field for at least one year, to engage villains on sight. All of the others reported to one of UA’s indoor training facilities, where there were plenty of places to hide. Shouta took his own homeroom there himself, the group oddly silent as they went. Inside the facility, he sat them down, looking at them seriously.
“I don’t know what’s going to happen today, but I want all of you to know that I care about each and every one of you deeply, and I’m so proud of you all.” Half the class looked like they were about to start bawling any second.

“Sensei…” Asui looked at him with her big froggy eyes. “What do you think is going to happen to you?”

“I can’t say, but just in case something does happen to me, I don’t want to leave anything left unsaid. Promise me: no matter what happens, keep yourselves safe. Keep each other safe.”

Shouta knew how much it seemed like he was trying to say goodbye; he didn’t mean to sound that way, since he knew that it would frighten his students, but he had to acknowledge that it was a possibility. To be fair, there was always a possibility that he might be killed in his line of work. Being a hero was an incredibly dangerous career choice. On any given night Shouta could go out on patrol and never come home. It was just that this fight...had so much more finality to it. Maybe it was because it was such a long time coming. Maybe it was that deep down inside, he knew that this was the end. With danger approaching, he tried to make peace with the possibility of his own death. It had been so easy to make that peace at USJ, but not so much now. Maybe a person had to be staring death right in the face to feel that kind of calm, or maybe it was just that Shouta felt as though he had more to live for now.

A couple of times, over the course of the morning, Shouta had tried to work up the courage to tell Tsukiko how he felt about her. He didn’t have to tell her everything, but part of him wanted her to know that he loved her. If he were to die today, it would be good for her to know that someone had truly cared for her, had adored her. On the other hand, as much as Shouta didn’t necessarily want to take this secret to the grave, he still continued to hold himself back. On the off-chance that Tsukiko returned his feelings, and he did indeed die, it would be better for her to never know. To lose someone that she loved would be agonizing, and traumatic, but she would feel more like Shouta had on the night of her graduation, when he drank himself half to death, than like he did on the day that Mariko died. To love someone, and let them go was better than to finally be loved in return, and then lose everything. He knew the feeling all too well, and he would never want to put Tsukiko through it.

As the twelve-noon hour came and went, the school remained utterly peaceful, no sign of intrusion anywhere. The outdoor traffic wasn’t exactly bustling, but it wasn’t scarce, either. For all intents and purposes, everything seemed completely normal. Tsukiko continued to insist that the villains would come, but they sure appeared to be taking their sweet time. Honestly, most of the teachers found this peace unsettling, like the calm before the storm. Tsukiko paced around restlessly, her brow furrowed, and Shouta felt glad to not have burdened her with something as trivial as romance at a time like this. She already had enough to worry about without him making things about himself. Of course, he supposed that they already were about him, and the long-held animosity between himself and Ripper. Still, he’d already caused enough trouble as it was.
Tsukiko stopped her pacing then, freezing in her tracks and going wide-eyed. Her expression was one of sheer terror, and it made Shouta’s blood run cold. Had she experienced another flash of the future, of coming events so awful that she couldn’t even speak? Or… Had she sensed something? Maybe the time had finally come. “Moriyama, what is it?” Tsukiko didn’t respond, still as a statue. “Moriyama?” Still nothing. “…Tsukiko?”

“Something’s not right,” she whispered finally. Swallowing hard, she looked up at the ceiling vent overhead. “There.” Almost on cue, the metal crate swung open, and an unfamiliar man rolled out, crashing to the floor.

“Shit,” he mumbled as he looked up, faced with a significant number of pro heroes.

Tsukiko slammed her boot down on his throat. “Who are you?!?”

“I’m—”

“Are you one of Ripper’s?!” The man looked sheepish, realizing that telling the truth would probably not put him in a good situation. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

At that moment, Tsukiko’s whole body seemed to sag, a look of anguish crossing her face. Shouta knew that this meant without her even having to say a word. The time had come, whether they were ready for it or not. “They’re here,” she called out to everyone within earshot, the slight quiver in her tone betraying the brave face she tried to put on. With that, unfamiliar faces started to pop out everywhere, seemingly coming out of the woodwork. More villains descended from the vents, while others attempted to storm the hallways, noticeably hindered by the makeshift blockades. Shouta swept his gaze around, but Ripper was nowhere to be seen… for now. Surely he would turn up eventually, but for the time being, he and the other heroes needed to focus on protecting themselves from these more minor pests, even if they were intended to be a distraction. They could still be dangerous if underestimated. He pulled his goggles down over his eyes, even though he planned to avoid using his erasure until it was absolutely necessary.

“How did they get in?!” Nemuri demanded, though she didn’t really expect an answer, expressing her bafflement more than anything.

“There’s no way they could have broken through out security system!” Nedzu explained. “Everything about it is top secret. The only explanation is that they had someone on the inside! That there’s a traitor among us!”
Tsukiko had a horrible realization then, coming to the awful conclusion that she was somewhat to blame, considering her past actions. “Ripper fixates on women, right?” she asked solemnly. “I think their person on the inside is one of our students.”

“You mean…”

“Teaming up with Ripper would be a great way for a student to seek revenge on a woman that he feels did him wrong…by demoting him down from Class 1A. I knew that this kind of thing could happen and…” She shook her head, blaming herself for giving the villains an easy in. She had been so careful to do anything and everything to keep Shouta safe, only for a careless oversight to cause trouble now.

Not having the luxury of waiting any longer, the pro heroes of UA engaged the intruders in combat. For the most part, they didn’t give the heroes too much trouble, enduring more injuries than they gave in return. Shouta wasn’t unused to taking on several opponents at once, as he had done at USJ, and the other teachers easily used their abilities to restrain or defeat their enemies. However, some of them, like Nemuri and Hizashi, had to be careful with how they used their quirks, lest they take out their own people, bursting their eardrums or putting them to sleep. In the end, these more minor villains served only one purpose: tiring the heroes out, wearing them down to make things easier for the heavy hitters later on.

As Tsukiko threw one last punch, knocking her rival out cold, she stood up straight, her eyes widening. “Shit!” She took off down the hallway toward the indoor training facility, where Shouta’s class had been hidden.

“Where-?” He gave up on the question before even getting it out of his mouth, instead breaking into a sprint to follow her down the hallway. Besides, the answer was obvious: his students were in danger. Getting close, he could hear them shouting, followed by the defiant blast of an explosion. Obviously, Bakugou had chosen not to heed the prior warning not to get involved. However, if he and the others were in trouble, Shouta couldn’t very well be angry. Inside, the students had been surrounded by a number of intruders. He didn’t take the time to count them, but they outnumbered the children, Tsukiko, and himself.

“Well, well, look who’s here!” one man sneered. “I told you they’d come for their precious students!”

“Everyone! Go! Run” Shouta warned his students.

“Too late, sensei!” a familiar and annoying voice taunted him. The revolting diapered grape stood
next to the door, which he had sealed shut with vile purple ooze. “This ends here.”

Outnumbered and without means to escape, Shouta didn’t have any other choice. He turned to his students, brutality shining in his eyes. “Give ’em hell.”

Class 1A didn’t need to be told twice. Ripper’s villains had no idea what kind of hell had been unleashed on them. Some were taken down rather easily, blinded by acid or cloaked in sudden darkness the likes of which they had never seen before. While her ability wasn’t of the combative sort, Yaoyorozu easily assisted her classmates, distributing all kinds of weapons and restrictive devices. Fed up with all of the harassment she had endured at the beginning of the school year, she saved her favorite implement for herself: a rather loud and aggressive chainsaw. She had no intent of actually killing anyone, but it sure would be fun to make the piss-face rat baby poop his pampers before surrendering in a puddle of tears and urine.

Of course, other students practiced intimidation while also backing it up. For all the seriousness of the situation, Bakugou actually seemed to be having a great time. Even with the danger involved, this gave him the opportunity to really test his abilities, to go all out defeating his attackers. Really, all of the students had to admit that it honestly felt kind of good to push the limits of their powers, especially to help defend their teacher. He could be eccentric, but they all cared about him as much as he did them. Aizawa-sensei was a good man, and he always had his students’ best interests at heart. He had believed in them all year long, and now it was time to show him that his confidence had been well-placed.

Having trained up her fighting abilities out of necessity, Tsukiko was a better brawler than she looked to be. Despite her petite, lean build, she had built up significant muscle mass within, giving her the strength to pack one hell of a punch. And punch she did. Still dedicated to keeping Shouta safe, she pushed herself perhaps a little harder than she normally would. He could see blood starting to stain the tape wrapping her knuckles; though they were heavily scarred after years of combat, the flesh could still be torn open if placed under enough stress. While she was cute, and pretty, and very sweet, Tsukiko became absolutely brutal in a fight, and she seemed even more vicious today. Shouta chalked it up to her being just as defensive as she had been throughout this whole ordeal, but he had to wonder just how far she would go for him, and why . I don’t want you to die for me. I want you to live for me.

He himself relied on his physical abilities as much as possible, not wanting to use up erasure before finally facing off with Ripper. Certainly he would show up here eventually; he probably planned to slaughter Shouta’s students, and then Tsukiko, before turning his rage onto his main target. The mere thought made Shouta feel sick. Ever since the incident at USJ, his quirk had been deteriorating slowly. He could only use it for about half an hour at a time now, and his refractory period had gotten longer. If he couldn’t contain, or defeat Ripper before time ran out, everyone would be in danger. The whole thing hinged on Shouta being able to nullify Ripper’s regenerative abilities, delivering a fatal wound and then preventing his body from recovering. If only the villain had been alone that night; if Shouta had been able to keep his gaze set on him, instead of having to flee, those gunshot wounds would have been fatal.
Finally getting a chance to breathe after taking down one opponent after another, Tsukiko scanned the room, gathering as much information as she could from the remaining villains’ minds. Her telepathy lent itself well to reconnaissance, telling her who had what ability, who intended to strike where, and when Ripper would finally make his appearance. From what she could tell, the plan had been to flood the school with as many bodies as possible, keeping Shouta’s friends and coworkers occupied. Tsukiko’s psychic ability would make her the first to know when the villains found Shouta’s class (with location information supplied by the rehydrated raisin), and she of course would immediately head that way. Shouta, of course, would follow, and they would then be trapped in this room. Tsukiko took advantage of the brief window to make a lap around the facility, brushing her bare fingertips against anyone she could find, sharing what knowledge she had gathered with her touch-telepathy.

A cold feeling of dread coming over her, Tsukiko stopped dead in her tracks. “He’s here,” she breathed, turning to see him, lurking behind a large artificial rock and inching closer and closer to where Shouta was currently preoccupied fighting one of Ripper’s henchmen. Oh, no, you fucking don’t. Tsukiko picked up a piece of rubble and hurled it, bouncing it off the dent in the man’s head. “Over here, you son of a bitch.” Ripper looked absolutely giddy to see her, and more than happy to take her on first. He almost seemed to dance down to the floor, drawing his preferred weapon: two long knives, clearly hand-forged, if the rippling pattern on the blade-edge was any indication. He was a skilled fighter, Tsukiko could tell right away; it was all she could do to dodge each strike, the razor-sharp metal nearly missing her skin each time. Every once in a while she could get a hit in, but it was no matter; Ripper couldn’t feel pain, and even if he could, it wouldn’t last long. A pulled muscle or cracked rib would heal almost as quickly as it was damaged.

“How far will you go?” he implored Tsukiko as she dodged another attack. She didn’t answer, knowing that Ripper was just trying to get her riled up, hoping that she would make a mistake in her frustration. “Would you die for him? Would you let me tear you limb from limb if it meant that he might live?” Tsukiko stayed quiet, but the sneer on her face betrayed everything that she thought, everything that she felt inside. “Oh, that’s real love. That’s real dedication, my dear. But...why? Why him? He’s not really all that special. And he’s rather average-looking, don’t you think?”

A weakness... “And he’s still got more women looking his way than you do. That must really piss you off!” As she distracted Ripper with her taunting words, she managed to deliver one good kick to his right wrist, dislodging one of the knives and sending it skittering across the floor. Unfortunately, this gave him the opening that he needed to jab the other blade forward, cutting Tsukiko across the cheek. She hissed at the stinging pain, but could tell that the injury hadn’t gone too deep.

“Are you ready to give up yet?” Ripper brought the knife up to his mouth, lapping at the blood that coated its steel.
“Never, you nasty fuck.” She crouched and swept her leg around, knocking him off balance before sending him flying across the room in a burst of telekinetic energy, smashing into a large boulder. “You could slice me up piece by piece, and I wouldn’t give up even as I drew my last breath.” Tsukiko’s hair swirled around her face as she looked down, her eyes haunted with determination.

“It’s just as you said: this is real love.”

Chapter End Notes

Next Chapter: Every Secret that I've Kept

Revelations will be made.
Ripper bounced back from being thrown almost as quickly as Tsukiko had thrown him. Of course, that didn’t come as any great shock; he couldn’t be fatally injured, and he couldn’t be tired out. An opponent’s only hope was to cause a wound severe enough that it would take Ripper a few minutes to recover, and take that window of opportunity to make a break for it. As he ran at her, Tsukiko took the briefest moment to look deep into his consciousness, past all the hatred and bloodlust, searching for a weakness that she could really use. She scowled, baring her teeth as she found what she was looking for. *If you kill the head, the body will die.* Shouta had almost accomplished that once, but while he had wreaked havoc on the frontal and temporal lobes, the brain stem, which controlled all involuntary functions necessary to life, had been completely untouched. There lay the key to defeating Ripper once and for all. The process would be gruesome, and it would require a coordinated effort to contain him long enough to fatally damage or destroy the organ, but it was theoretically possible.

“What are you staring at, bitch?”

“Nothing,” Tsukiko answered him, her hatred apparent in her voice. “Nothing at all. It just becomes more and more clear to me, the more time I spend around you, that you aren’t *shit.*”
“Fuck you!” Ripper spat, lunging forward again to stab at her. Her words were starting to get at him, she could tell, and with that, he had started to get sloppy. At the beginning of this fight, it had been everything Tsukiko could do to dodge his attacks, maybe getting a hit in here and there. Now, she could land punches and kicks left and right, hoping to perhaps knock the remaining knife away, leaving him vulnerable. If she could manage that, taking away Ripper’s only means of harming her, she could jump him, and possibly wrestle him into submission.

“How delicious! To think I’ve been missing out my whole life!” He took the blade in his closed palm, dragging it through so that blood dripped down his arm. “Oh, to be truly human!”

“You’re insane,” Tsukiko muttered. It was no matter, however. She and Shouta together wouldn’t have too difficult a time taking him on, especially now that he couldn’t regenerate after being injured. They would, however, have to work quickly to take Ripper down before Shouta’s erasure ran out. The second he activated it, a thirty-minute clock started ticking, and they’d already used, what, five minutes? She couldn’t spend too much time thinking about it as the fight continued, and she had to kick things back into gear, dodging the knife once again only to spin back around, headbutting the villain in the nose. He shrieked in delight as blood spurted from his nostrils. As he too engaged Ripper in combat, Shouta searched for an opportunity to wrap him up in his straps, but it was difficult. Tsukiko took him on at such close range that it would be all too easy to get them tangled up together, putting her in danger. He growled, tackling Ripper from behind while he was...
distracted by Tsukiko. Shouta managed to pin him momentarily, but a long knife was quickly jabbed into his leg, and the villain wriggled free. “Sensei!” she shrieked, her face going pale in horror before unraveling one of the bandages from her upper arm and tossing it his way. She rushed back into the fight, keeping their nemesis occupied while Shouta quickly tended to the injury.

Ripper was one slippery fuck, and put up a better fight against two opponents than would be expected. The minutes ticked by, and Tsukiko had to console herself with the fact that as she started to get tired, her enemy had to be getting tired as well. She herself could go on fighting for quite a while longer, but she worried about Shouta. He wasn’t as young as he once had been, and the nasty, new gash on his leg only made things worse. He kept going, kicking and punching and even taking the chance to throw Ripper into a nearby wall, but it was clear that the years had taken a toll on his endurance. All the same, he was determined to take that awful man out once and for all, no matter how far he had to push himself, even if it killed him. Tsukiko steeled herself, intent on making things a little bit easier on him.

Though the UA heroes all assumed that Ripper’s compatriots were just low-level goons that had been paid to make things difficult, they really did give it their best effort. Seeing that his boss had gotten himself involved in a two-against-one match, one villain jumped into action, making an already-surprisingly-difficult fight even harder on Shouta and Tsukiko. They would dodge a hit from one attacker just to catch an injury from the other. In the interest of evening things out, Tsukiko drew this second rival away from where Ripper and Shouta continued to face off, taking him on herself. She hated not knowing how the other fight was going, but she couldn’t exactly take her eyes off the villain in front of her; she needed to defeat him as soon as possible, so that she could return to Shouta’s side. This new opponent didn’t move as quickly, which was a nice change of pace, but he was strong, and he was huge. There was only so much she could do to dodge, and each hit landed took more of a toll on her body than the average villain’s punch. Regardless, his physical form didn’t matter. All that mattered what that Tsukiko beat him. She needed to take him out of the fight even if her own body was destroyed in the process.

This villain wasn’t particularly threatening, other than being so large, and so strong, having the same weaknesses as the average person. The only thing that made him less vulnerable were the massive muscles that guarded his vital points. When he flexed, they created a hard shield, and if he took a hit, he wouldn’t sustain any kind of injury other than a little localized discomfort. Tsukiko’s best bet was to attack the face, or the groin. However, that required her to get nearer to this guy than was really safe. If she got too close, he could easily grab her. She would only have a split-second to come in hot, attack, then flee. She scrambled up the rock face behind this monster of a man, leaping onto the junction between his shoulder and neck, plucking at his eyes with her fingers. Managing to stab at the fleshy orb, she managed to cause him a great deal of pain, but it wasn’t quite enough. With one meaty claw, he snatched her by the back of her suit, clutching her to his chest like a doll.

“Is this the one you wanted, boss?”
Ripper flicked his eyes to the side. “Yes, that’s the girl. Please hold onto her for a bit. I’ll be ready for her soon.”

Shouta’s heart sank as he knew what had happened without even looking; Ripper’s sidekick had overpowered Tsukiko, taking her captive. If he couldn’t finish off his opponent now, who knew that would be done to her. Shouta wouldn’t let that happen. However, he needed to hurry things along if he wanted to make that happen. Even with the aid of his eye drops, and the motivation born of desperation to save his love, he only had maybe ten minutes left on his erasure. If he couldn’t continue to physically harm Ripper without the wounds rapidly healing... ugh. He didn’t want to believe that this would be the end, both for himself and Tsukiko, but the fear was really starting to set in now. He could only hope that his students were holding their own right now; Shouta himself was too busy with his own demons to help them. Though his abilities weren’t quite what they had been when he was a younger man, he didn’t have the luxury of getting tired. He had done well holding Ripper off for now, but things weren’t exactly going to get easier from here.

He heard the lesser villain shriek somewhere off to his right, and Shouta dared hope that maybe Tsukiko had been able to deliver some kind of attack even while captive.

The oversized villain made an irritated sound as he examined the spot on his hand where Tsukiko had bitten him. She’d barely broken the skin, but it had still created a decent distraction, and pissed off her captor. It was a desperate move, but she was in a desperate situation right now. The massive man had noticed the second knife that Tsukiko had managed to knock away before, and had started toward it. Immediately understanding his intent to use it to take Shouta as a second captive, she did everything in her power to fight the inevitable, trying to fight her way out of the villain’s grasp and ultimately sinking her teeth into him in hopes that he might be caught off guard, releasing his grasp just enough her her to wriggle away. No such luck. “Sen-!” she tried to warn her beloved, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, to no avail. A massive hand was clasped over her mouth, and, inadvertently, her eyes, preventing her from using her telepathy to toss it away. Still, Tsukiko didn’t give up. She couldn’t give up. No. She would not sit quietly as the man she loved was defeated so easily.

“Stop fighting! It’s not going to do you any good,” the man warned her as she struggled, her sounds of protest muffled by the hand over her mouth. Shouta tried not to pay it too much mind even as those sounds became those of distress; she wasn’t in immediate danger, but she would be if he wasn’t able to defeat his own opponent. Just as he prepared to strike once more, he could feel a sharp point against the back of his neck. “Just stop it right there.” A chill ran down Shouta’s spine as he realized his and Tsukiko’s previous error. Neither of them had collected Ripper’s discarded knife, and now it was being used against him. The sadist villain sighed, relaxing as he had both targets exactly where he wanted them.

Terror and helplessness washed over Shouta, not knowing exactly what would come next, but certain that it couldn’t be good. Tsukiko reached for his hand, and he clutched it tightly, his heart tearing itself in half at the thought of what might happen to her next. “If you get even the slightest chance, fight back. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be alright. Just stop him.” Shouta knew what she
meant by that. *Defeat Ripper at all costs, even if it kills me.* He kept his gaze fixed on the villain, giving his head the slightest shake. He could be okay with sacrificing himself, but not with resigning her to such a fate. Ripper made his way over to them, motioning for his sidekick to put Tsukiko down. He pulled her away, and she gave a little cry as her hand was ripped away from Shouta’s. She was afraid- she made no attempt to hide that fact- but she remained as self-sacrificing as ever.

Ripper gave a little chuckle as he stood next to her, his hand on her throat. “You see my friend there with the knife? Try anything funny, and Eraser…” He clicked his tongue, motioning his hand across his throat. “You’ve given me a lot of trouble today, but...you really are a pretty thing… Wouldn’t you agree, Eraser? Though, it is a shame to have damaged such a lovely face.” He leaned forward to examine the cut on her face, and she shrank away in disgust. Ripper grabbed it, forcing her to look at him. He was tormenting her to get at him, Shouta knew, but he knew better than to lash out. But...there was only so much he could take. “Now, let’s see…” His nemesis took the zipper pull of Tsukiko’s suit and dragged it downward. She wore a tank top underneath, but it was still disrespectful and inappropriate. She closed her eyes, chest heaving as a tear slid down her cheek. Ripper admired his gleaming knife a moment before reaching out to make a series of tiny cuts along her collarbone. They weren’t deep, but they clearly hurt her, as evidenced by the way she trembled, clenching her jaw to keep from crying out.

By this point, the other low-level punks hired by Ripper had either been defeated by the students, or had chosen to stop fighting. They had served their purpose as a distraction, and now their employer had his *real* targets right where he wanted them. The students, mostly unscathed save for a broken finger or bruised rib here and there, looked on in horror, knowing that there wasn’t really anything they could do without making things worse for their teacher. They huddled together, resting for a moment as they vowed to go all-out in the event that something happened to Aizawa-sensei. The villain, Ripper, had begun torturing Miss Moriyama with his knife, for no other reason than that he liked to hurt other people, and he knew that harming her would have as much of an effect on Aizawa-sensei as it did on Miss Moriyama. Ripper started to work his way downward, leaving little red marks on her flesh. He lingered a moment, hovering over her sternum; if he angled his knife just so, he could drive the blade right into her heart.

Tsukiko opened her eyes, meeting Shouta’s gaze. She felt the steel beginning to pierce through the top layer of flesh, but she stood firm, shaking her head as if to say *“Stay right where you are.”* The blade went a little deeper, and she knew: if they allowed Ripper to continue, this would be the end.

Shouta couldn’t bear this any longer. Maybe it made him weak. Maybe it was just an indicator of what Tsukiko meant to him, how far he was willing to go to protect her.

*“Stop.”* His voice was hollow, and he had a sort of resigned look in his eye. *“You can stop now.”*

Ripper pulled the blade away, amused. *“And why would I do that? You had the most wonderful*
look on your face! Just like the one you had on the night your wife died! Hmm… I wonder why that is…”

“Please just let her go. Just let them go.”

“Why would I do that?”

“Because I’ll let you kill me.”

“No!” Tsukiko’s voice rang out, tears pouring down her face.

“Tsukiko…” He couldn’t get the rest of the words out, turning back to Ripper instead. “If you let them go, you can have me.”

“My, what a proposition…” His mouth curled into a wicked grin. “Deal.” The villain led Tsukiko over to where Shouta was still held, trading one hostage for another. He pressed the cold steel, still marred with her blood, to his new captive’s throat. “I’m feeling generous, so…any last words, you miserable bastard?”

“Tsukiko…” Shouta stared deep into her eyes, begging her not to look away. Hearing him say her given name would normally have made her heart race, but right now, her head was spinning as she desperately tried to think of some kind of escape, some kind of plan to prevent her beloved from meeting this awful fate. “Tsukiko…” He uttered the name one last time as his eyes fluttered shut. *Just this once, I’ll let you in.*

She immediately understood what he meant, training her telepathic gaze on him for only the second time. In that moment, Tsukiko was overcome with the same melancholy adoration that she’d experienced only two nights before. This time, however, she did not mistake this love for a widower’s longing. *Tsukiko... you’re the one that I love.* The weakness in her knees, and the tears that poured down her face were scarcely noticeable as she surrendered fully to the depth of Shouta’s thoughts, his memories, his feelings. In just a brief period of a few seconds, she took a trip through the years, a detailed recollection of every moment he spent with her, or spent thinking about her.

He had been just as antagonistic toward her in the beginning as she had been toward him, frustrated by her attitude and her stubbornness. Though, over time, he became fond of her in a platonic sort of way, worrying about her when she was wounded at the sports festival, and proud of her progress
over time. “*There came a time when I realized that the vast majority of my thoughts revolved around you.*” Shouta shared with her the moment when he realized that his feelings for her were of a softer sort, the morning when he awoke disappointed that she was not by his side. He had been ashamed of these feelings, which Tsukiko could kind of understand, but she was not revolted by them as he had worried she would be. No, her heart sang, knowing now that Shouta returned her adoration. A hollow grief hit her right in the chest as he showed her his experience of her graduation day. He *had* stayed at the school for some time after she left, but she had been too late in her return, missing him by *maybe* ten or twenty minutes. After leaving the school and returning home, he too had drunk himself sick as he grieved a second lost love.

The following months hadn’t been any easier for him. Shouta *had* slept with Fukukado, but only in a state of extreme inebriation, and out of desperation to approximate what he had felt for Tsukiko. When she returned to UA as an employee, he hadn’t known how to feel, partially nervous that she would find out the truth about how he had felt before, partially afraid that he would fall in love with her all over again. “*Loving you, and then losing you took such a toll on me. I didn’t know if I could bear to do that to myself again.*” But he had. It had been a slow build up that suddenly exploded into full-bloom, starting with admiration for the person she had become in their time apart, and steadily growing until Shouta suddenly realized that he’d fallen, not having noticed before the slow descent. Before long, those feelings grew hot and heady, and Tsukiko occupied his thought once more, but in a decidedly different way. “*Yes, I thought of you in that way. I tried so hard to be better than that, but I’m not better. You may hate me for it, but it’s the truth.*” Tsukiko didn’t hate him for it; rather, she was delighted by this revelation, that Shouta desired her as she desired him. The only thing that fouled this was the very real possibility that they would never get the chance to have one another.

> “*Tsukiko, I love you so completely, so... recklessly. My heart, my body, my soul...they all belong to you. I love you, now and forever, in this world and the next. Please don’t hate me for giving in to my weaknesses, but remember me as someone who loved you madly.*”

Coming back into her own consciousness, Tsukiko could barely see, her flooded eyes impeded. To know now how Shouta *really* felt about her, she wouldn’t let him go, she *couldn’t* let go. He loved her...he *loved* her... *he loved her*. This would *not* be the end, she swore it. All the sadness and the fear washed away in a single moment, replaced by a furious kind of love, the kind of ferocity born of infinite tenderness. “Shouta!” she cried out, her voice a harsh scream. “*No!*”

For Tsukiko, everything went white.

From Shouta’s point of view, the next few minutes seemed to unravel in slow-motion. The knife at his throat was jerked away, Ripper’s arm twisting at an unnatural angle. He wasn’t being hurt anymore, since Shouta had closed his eyes, stopping the effects of his erasure. The villain staggered backward, almost as though he were being pushed back, while the man holding Tsukiko was thrown aside, hitting his head on a boulder and falling unconscious. In the heat of the moment, Tsukiko’s emotions had bubbled over, unleashing a burst of telekinetic power that shocked the whole room, making the very air feel almost staticky. She threw Ripper this way and that, almost
as if she was trying to tear him apart at the seams. Seeing the best-laid plans of their boss falling apart, the remaining villains did what little they could to try and retake control of the room, to no end. So few of them were left that they had little chance against Shouta’s students all working together.

Ripper scrambled to his feet, angry to have had such a cathartic moment stolen from him. “Now look here you little bit—”

“Ugly lil’ head ass bitch says what?” A teenage voice rang out through the massive room

“What did you say to me?” Ripper only seemed irritated for a moment before his arms snapped to his sides, dropping his weapon and walking obediently forward. Confused, Shouta searched the room, greeted by a shock of purplish hair and an amused expression staring down from an advantageous position high up on the training platform. Shinsou made Ripper kneel in front of the woman, who dug into one of her pockets for zip ties to bind the villain’s hands and feet. She could easily have left things to the police from here, but everyone in the room silently agreed that there was no such thing as being too careful when it came to Ripper.

While the villain lay seemingly-lifeless on the floor, still under Shinsou’s spell, Tsukiko stood, slowly padding over to where the knife had been dropped. She picked it up and admired it, her eyes still glowing a hot white, before returning to her enemy’s side. Grabbing a fistful of hair, she jerked his head up, exposing his neck. “You should look away, Shinsou.”

“But…” The student knew that as long as he kept his gaze trained on the villain, he wouldn’t give Miss Moriyama any trouble.

“You should look away now,” she repeated gently. Tsukiko put her full weight on Ripper’s torso to hold him in place as he began to struggle, pressing the blade to the back of his neck and slicing back and forth, through skin, fat, muscle, and then bone. A sickening crunch could be heard as she cracked the spinal column, separating head from body. Blood drenched her jumpsuit, the gleam of red just barely visible on the black fabric, and caked her hands, drying quickly then crumbling in chunks like clay. Ripper remained alive for now, even as she used the knife to tear at the back of his neck, searching for that vulnerable spot. There was something dark about the way she tucked the severed head under her arm as she searched her pockets, giving a sneer of eerie delight as she found one last shotgun shell, prying it open with stained hands and depositing the powder into the opening she had created. She had to work quickly to avoid having the wound close itself on her. Her voice was almost hollow as she turned her attention to Shouta. “Do you have any matches?”

He hurried over to her, digging the packet from his belt and holding it out. Tsukiko shook her head. “No, this was your fight from the beginning. You should be the one to finish it. Shouta took a deep breath and sighed. She was right, and he relished this second chance to finish off his greatest
nemesis once and for all. He lit a single match, dropping it into the powder-filled wound.

The gunpowder exploded into vibrant flame, inundating Shouta and Tsukiko with the odor of smoke and burnt flesh. All of the muscles in Ripper’s face went slack, and Shouta knew that look all too well.

The villain was finally, finally dead.

With the torment over, the head slipped from Tsukiko’s hands, and she fell to her knees as the glow in her eyes started to fade. For the first time, Shouta noticed the blood pouring down her face from her nose, pooling in the bow of her lips. Exhausted, she slumped forward, and he knelt down to catch her. Tsukiko slipped easily into unconsciousness, her energy completely drained from their ordeal. Her eyes were still red from crying, her skin marred with cuts from the fight. Who even knew how much she would remember when she woke up.

It didn’t matter. She was safe, and he was safe. She was alive, and he was alive. She knew the truth now, but it was the truth, for better or for worse. Shouta didn’t regret it, he just hoped that she could accept it, accept him, for everything that he was. He lifted her up, putting on a brave face for just a little while longer.

“Okay, everyone, show’s over, get back to class.”

Chapter End Notes

F I N A L L Y
Making sure that he had Tsukiko securely in his arms, Shouta followed his class to the door that had been sealed shut before. He would need to stay here for a few minutes as the other pros filtered in, apprehending the few villains that remained. Realizing that the police would want his statement as soon as possible, he grimaced. Shouta really wasn’t in any shape to do that right now, with her like this; maybe the principal could pull some strings, and get it put off until tomorrow, or at least until Tsukiko woke up. Ashido was able to get the door open within minutes, using her acid to melt Mineta’s revolting little balls. The students burst through the passageway, happy to be freed, and the proper authorities stormed in, taking over. Shouta silently took his leave, temporarily happy to let someone else take charge. Normally, not being in control made him anxious, but right now, all he cared about was Tsukiko. Now that she was safe, the only thing he wanted to do was keep her safe, get her cleaned up, and into a place that she could rest and recover under a caring, watchful eye.

Outside, Shouta was surprised to find that his class had waited for him, rather than running off to clean themselves up or check on students from other homerooms. “What are you all waiting around for?”

Midoriya’s eyes shifted to the side, nervous that they were all in trouble. “Well...we were waiting for you, sensei.”

“For me? Why?”

“We wanted to make sure that you were okay,” Yaoyorozu explained, her expression worried.
“Earlier, you seemed…” She couldn’t quite find the right words. Morose? Melancholy? Morbid?

Was it really that obvious? Shouta huffed. “I’m fine. It’s all fine now. Everyone’s safe now, so…” He looked down at Tsukiko as he said the last bit.

Bakugou folded his arms across his chest, looking disgruntled as he usually did. “Jeez, sensei, if you love her so damn much, you should just tell her already!”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Shouta knew that there was probably no use in playing dumb. His class clearly knew what was up as they exchanged a collective glance. “It’s really none of your concern, but she knows now. Like I said, it’s not anything any of you need to worry-”

“And? Does she feel the same way?” Ashido’s eyes were practically glittering with excitement.

“She didn’t get a chance to tell me anything in return. We’ll talk about it later.”

“Well, here’s hoping that everything turns out okay,” Iida said diplomatically. “Now, should we all start getting cleaned up?”

Shouta was very thankful to him for changing the subject. “Please. And if you have any injuries that require more attention than basic first aid, please go to Recovery Girl’s clinic.” He would be heading there himself, both to have his own stab wound treated, and to get help for Tsukiko. God only knows what she’ll say when she sees her granddaughter, Shouta thought, cringing. Whether or not he’d get a severe scolding, he couldn’t wait any longer, so he turned on his heel, heading down to the clinic, which was already buzzing with frequent fliers who seemed to think that a sprained ankle constituted a medical emergency.

“Get back to class, you big whiner!” Genkiko grumbled, almost-literally kicking a student out. She didn’t really seem all that surprised at the state of her older sister. “Let me guess; she did it again.”

“Yep.”

“Put her on that bed right there.” The third-year grabbed a fresh pair of gloves, unceremoniously ripping open the front of Tsukiko’s suit. Shouta had expected her to be more concerned about the massive amount of blood soaked into the fabric, but Genkiko seemed to know that it hadn’t come from her sister. She pulled over a chair, and a wheeled cart of first aid supplies, starting work on
the little cuts Ripper had made on Tsukiko’s chest. She gestured to the cotton balls and rubbing alcohol. “I’ll take care of this if you wanna start on her hands. I’m sure they’re busted all to hell again.”

“Sure.” Shouta did as he was told, washing his hands before pulling on a pair of his own nitrile gloves, reaching for the disinfectant. He slipped the fingerless gloves off Tsukiko’s hands, carefully unwinding the blood-stained tape wrapped around them. As he saw the torn, bruised, and swollen skin, he cringed, wondering why she always had to go so damn hard. Just getting the now-dry blood cleaned away was a task in and of itself, but Shouta took it seriously, finally getting the flesh back to a semi-pristine state. Even though Tsukiko’s knuckles were badly-scarred from all the times she’d done this before, she still had managed to destroy them once again. Maybe this was an indication of just how hard she’d pushed herself today. You’d go this far...for me? After getting them all bandaged up, he went to the sink for wet towels before setting to cleaning her face, gently wiping away the dried blood marring her lips and chin.

“Would you mind going to her office and getting a set of fresh clothes? I want to get her out of this mess.”

“O-Of course.” Walking alone down the hall gave Shouta a moment to think clearly, and the anxiety time to sink in. He really had gone and done it. He really had shared the whole truth with Tsukiko, all of the humiliating details. What would she say to him when she woke up? She hadn’t seemed angry, and she had still helped defeat Ripper, but it was still hard to tell. If anything, she’d seemed sad. Did she feel...betrayed? Like Shouta had abused her trust in him? God... Maybe...maybe she wouldn’t remember when she woke up. No...that wasn’t what he wanted. In some ways, he was glad to finally get it all off his chest. He didn’t want to have to live with these secrets anymore. It would be better to have Tsukiko know the real Shouta, and hate him, than have her stay friends with the fake, lying version. He grabbed her bag off the floor of her office, a scrap of fabric slipping out. Shouta raised an eyebrow as he reached down to pick it up. Examining it, the object turned out to be...a strip of his capture weapon? Wait... Was this the same piece that he’d given Tsukiko all those years ago? She still had this? Maybe she’d thought that it could be useful at some point. But then...why keep it with her personal effects, rather than on her person? Why treat it like it was some cherished keepsake?

Once Genkiko had gotten her cleaned up a little bit more, and changed her clothes, she left a chair next to Tsukiko’s bed, allowing Shouta to sit next to her, though she continued to steal quick glances out of the corner of her eye. He took one of Tsukiko’s bandaged hands in his own, lacing their fingers together. It briefly reminded him of the time they’d spent together, two nights before in her apartment, when she’d sat with him through the night, holding his hand as he slept. The memory made Shouta feel a little hot under the collar, even if the experience had been objectively chaste. After all of this, could he really deny the possibility that Tsukiko returned his feelings? It could be that she really was just that patient, and that good at understanding the best way to comfort a person, but Shouta wanted to believe that she regarded him a little different, offered him some level of special treatment. Why else would she go so far, push herself so hard, risking everything for him. Maybe it was simply that he was one of the few people Tsukiko could trust completely, and she was afraid to lose that. But maybe, just maybe, it was more than that.
Tsukiko’s lips parted ever so slightly as she rested; Shouta wanted to kiss her so badly. Though, he wouldn’t dare steal what might very well be her first kiss while she slept. So, he compromised, leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead, inhaling the delicate scent of her hair as he did.

“You really love her, huh?” Shouta nearly jumped back at the sound of Genkiko’s voice, not aware that she’d been actively watching him.

“I, ah…” He cleared his throat, not really able to deny it. Then again, he wasn’t really in the business of denying it now. “I do. I love her.”


“Maybe a little, but Tsukiko is just… She’s always been honest with me, you know? She never walked on eggshells around me. She’s never been one to exist in my life quietly. She just…”

“She fits with you.”

“Y-Yeah. And for me, that’s rare. Tsukiko is very special to me.” Shouta looked back over to her, no longer committed to masking the love in his eyes.

“Well, just…” Genkiko shrugged. “Just be good to her. That’s all I ask.”

“If she’ll have me, I’ll treasure her forever.”

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Though the hour grew late, Shouta never strayed from Tsukiko’s side, determined to be there when she finally awoke. Though, it was becoming increasingly apparent that that wouldn’t happen before the end of the school day. It occurred to him that he might should be with his students right now, but, considering the events of the past two days, the schedule of classes wouldn’t proceed as normal. Principal Nedzu had called a special assembly to debrief the students, and had then elected to show educational films for the rest of the day as certain students were called out one by one to give their account of the day’s events to the police. They wanted to talk to Shouta as well, but several of his coworkers had interceded on his behalf to have the interview postponed until the
next day. He cringed, remembering this; perhaps his adoration for Tsukiko was all too obvious after all. Well, to everyone except Tsukiko herself, apparently. She had seemed so surprised at the revelation. Shouta could only hope that she wouldn’t be too alarmed when she finally regained consciousness.

For now, however, she rested peacefully, her eyes shut tight, chest rising and falling steadily. For all the damage she had taken, she was still strong. Shouta forgot that sometimes- that Tsukiko was no delicate flower; she was a fighter. She’d been fighting for as long as he could remember, either for her goals, or for him. He scarcely noticed as the final bell droned, releasing the students back to their dorms where they’d been asked to stay until the police completed their investigation. Shouta had wondered if he should go and say something to his class, but All Might had volunteered to go in his place, leaving Shouta free to stay right here. Looking back over his shoulder, he could see the students noisily streaming through the hallway, still wired from today’s events. The main school building would be closing down soon, clearing everyone out so that the maintenance crews could come in, but Tsukiko still showed no sign of waking up any time soon. Would Recovery Girl insist on taking over from here; Shouta dreaded the thought.

Genkiko lingered in the doorway. “Hey, uh, I’ve got to go back to my room now, but...do you think you could stay with her until she wakes up?” The suggestion surprised Shouta. “It wouldn’t be good for her to be left all alone.”

“Yes, of course I’ll stay with her.” Would they be allowed to stay here in the clinic until she woke?

“It would be best for you to take her home,” Recovery Girl noted. “I need to close the clinic, and I imagine that Tsukiko will be much more comfortable there.”

“Right...”

It wasn’t until they had already left that Shouta remembered that he didn’t really know how to get back to Tsukiko’s apartment. He’d been so caught up with everything before that he hadn’t paid much mind to how they’d gotten to the train station, or what line to take. *Shit.* He stood up anyway, picking up her bag and hanging it on his shoulder before reaching down to scoop her up again, cradling her easily in his arms. Tsukiko seemed to fit there so perfectly; Shouta would be willing to hold her like this forever. Silently he carried her out to the waiting car, climbing into the back seat.

“Where to?”

Without thinking about it too much, Shouta gave the driver his own address.
Hoping that the sight of him carrying an unconscious woman wasn’t too suspicious, Shouta climbed the stairs up to his apartment, fumbling through his pockets to find his keys. He clutched her tightly with one arm as he used his free hand to undo the locks, kicking open the door to his darkened apartment. Hopefully Tsukiko wouldn’t be too alarmed when she woke up here, instead of in her own place. Of course, Shouta would be more than willing to take her straight home if that was what she wanted. More than anything, he didn’t want to make her any more uncomfortable than she might already be. He’d be happy to stay away from her, and find a new therapist if that was what Tsukiko wished, but he prayed that things wouldn’t have to be like that. If she didn’t love him in return, maybe they could at least stay friends. Shouta eyed the couch, wondering if it would be a proper place for her to finish her rest, but he knew that she would sleep much better in an actual bed.

He carried her into the back room, switching on a small lamp to avoid banging against the furniture. Not having been slept in for several days, the bed seemed pristine, the covers pulled straight and tidy. Shouta yanked them back unceremoniously, laying Tsukiko down in the spot that normally remained vacant. She seemed to get comfortable right away, turning over onto her side and nuzzling her face into that pillow. So cute… Careful to not disturb her, Shouta pulled the blanket back up and over her, just leaving her little face peeking out. How many times had he dreamed of having her in his bed? Not even in a vulgar way, but more like this. He almost had to pinch himself to make sure that he wasn’t asleep, that this was really real. Of course, the circumstances could be better, the nature of their relationship could be more certain, but Shouta certainly wasn’t one to complain.

At least she was (ostensibly) comfortable for now. Would she feel the same way when she eventually woke? Who even knew how long that would take? She’d probably be a little bit confused by her surroundings; she’d never been here before. Would it offend her, though, for Shouta to have brought her here, into his space? Would she find it presumptuous? Well, Tsukiko was a sensible sort of person. Surely he could easily explain things, and if she wanted to go home, he would take her home. She would likely want to talk about what Shouta had revealed to her, since it probably did have some bearing on his case. Truthfully he couldn’t see her being too upset about it. He’d probably just been paranoid before, thinking that she would hate him if she knew the truth. But it was still completely up in the air whether or not she held the same feelings.

Tsukiko shifted in her sleep again, rolling over onto her back and pushing back the covers. Stretched out like this, Shouta could see her numerous bandaged injuries- the gauze pad taped over the cut on her cheek, her re-wrapped shoulder peeking out from under the strap of her sleeveless top. He winced as he looked at the bandages covering her collarbone, where Ripper had tortured her, and at Tsukiko’s taped hands, a sobering reminder that she’d been willing to push far past her limits on Shouta’s behalf. It all made him feel so guilty. Of course it had been her choice to engage herself in this fight, but it ate at him all the same. If he’d only finished the villain off the first time, or had done a better job protecting her… Though, “if” carried little weight now. What had happened had happened, and all Shouta could do now was make sure that Tsukiko was comfortable as she healed. He pulled the blanket back up, leaning forward to kiss her forehead again. Tsukiko gave a little sigh of contentment as he did, and Shouta’s heart swelled. How could such a little thing affect him so? This woman…possessed him completely. She had full reign of his heart, his
Shouta stood up quickly, stepping away from the edge of the bed before he could get too emotional. There was no point in getting himself all worked up before Tsukiko even woke. He looked down at his own clothes, still lightly sprayed with blood. After such a strenuous day, he probably stank, and a hot shower would feel good anyway. Shouta grabbed some fresh clothes from a drawer, stepping quietly out of the bedroom and into the bathroom. Dropping his dirty clothes on the tile floor, he stripped down, feeling just a little bit tingly as he remembered his shower from the night before. He didn’t feel the urge to do the same thing tonight, after everything he and Tsukiko had been through today. Besides, if, when she woke up, she revealed that she felt the same way about Shouta… Well, that was a big “if,” but he still wanted to save all of his energy for that possibility. He washed quickly, but deliberately, wanting to be nice and clean for her when she returned to consciousness.

He grimaced to himself as he toweled off. God only knows what will happen when she wakes up.
Shouta chewed his bottom lip, staring over at the bed from the armchair in the corner. Maybe he shouldn’t be staring, he realized suddenly, since it would come across as creepy if Tsukiko were to wake up suddenly. He did, however, want to stay in the room so that when the time came, she wouldn’t be alone and afraid. Besides, what would he even do in the other room anyway? Sleep? There was no way Shouta would be able to sleep right now. He’d be a restless, nervous wreck up until things were resolved with the woman asleep in his bed. At least he was used to going long periods without sleep; either way, he’d be awake for quite a bit longer. Shouta could only hope and pray that when he finally laid down to rest, Tsukiko would be there next to him. Ha. If only he were so lucky. The best thing he could really hope for was that she’d be okay with everything she now knew, and that she would want to remain his friend. He could be okay with that. If Shouta lost her again, he didn’t know what he would do.

“Mmmf…” Across the room, Tsukiko shifted again, with more movement this time. It was clear that she was slowly returning to consciousness now. Shouta sat up straight, looking over at her, his heart rate picking up. Before, every possible outcome had been strictly theoretical, but he’d soon know with certainty how she felt. He didn’t know if he’d get the kind of answer that he wanted, but he’d be damned if he didn’t get an answer. Tsukiko sat up, sighing heavily and rubbing her face. She stayed like that for a few moments, her eyes closed, looking like someone waking up at the ass-crack of dawn when they were clearly not a morning person. Slowly she blinked her eyes open, gradually taking in her surroundings. She looked down at herself, her changed clothes, her wrapped chest, and bandaged hands. Suddenly something seemed to click inside her head, and it snapped up, her eyes wide as she frantically searched the room.

“Hey...hey…” Shouta scrambled across the room, sitting down on the edge of the bed. Seeing him,
she seemed to relax a bit. Had she been worried that something had happened to him?

“What...what happened?” Tsukiko pressed her fingers to her forehead, making a vaguely pained sound.

Shouta tilted his head, looking her in the eyes, so happy that he didn’t need to use his erasure on her anymore. “Everything’s okay now. Everyone is safe. You’ve been unconscious for...well, for quite a while.”

She nodded, satisfied with that. Vaguely confused, she glanced about the dark room. “Where...Is this your place?”

“Yes. I’m sorry. I couldn’t remember how to get back to your apartment, and I didn’t want you to be alone when you woke up. I-I can take you home right now if that’s what you want.” Shouta rambled, desperate to avoid offending her.

“No, no...this is fine. Fuck.”

“What is it?”

“I just...I really did it this time, huh?” Tsukiko gave a weak smile.

“Kind of.” Shouta returned the soft grin. “Listen...how much do you remember from before?” If she’d completely forgotten, he would have to go through the uncomfortable process of confessing his feelings all over again.

She thought for a minute. “Let’s see...” Tsukiko screwed up her face, ruminating on the memories buried deep in her consciousness. Very quickly, her expression changed, her eyes going wide and her mouth falling open a bit, cheeks flushing a deep pink. She remembered. Tsukiko recalled Shouta closing his eyes, allowing her to be consumed by the onslaught of feeling. He had shown her the very thing she’d always dreamed of, that he loved her, that he wanted her, as she loved and wanted him. He had adored her almost as long as she had him, and he too had fallen in love all over again upon their reunion. Shouta loved her deeply, infinitely, wanting her to stay by his side forever. Tsukiko said nothing, words escaping her as tears began to pour silently down her cheeks, so completely overcome with emotion that she couldn’t even bring herself to scream that “Yes! I love you too!”
Shouta’s heart sank as he watched her start to cry. “Oh god...I’m so sorry. I’m so, so sorry, Tsukiko…”

Finally she managed to utter a single word. “Why?”

“Why do you love me?” “Why would you do this to me?” Shouta clenched his jaw, swallowing the lump in his own throat. “Because I’m a weak man.”

Tsukiko shook her head. “No! Why are you sorry?”

“I never wanted to hurt you…”

“How could you hurt me by loving me?!” Her voice broke as she cried out the words, pounding her fists against the mattress.

Shouta looked away, finding it harder and harder to keep his composure. “I wanted to be better than that for you. I saw how much it hurt when other men desired you. I didn’t want to turn around and do the same thing.”

Her voice still trembled. “You can’t help the way you feel.”

“No. I can’t. I can’t help loving you. And I won’t stop, so…” He bowed himself low, forehead touching the bed. “Please accept my feelings.”

Tsukiko grit her teeth. She hated this, that Shouta felt so guilty about these feelings. For him to see something so beautiful as a negative thing… To think that he was disgusting for feeling this way… To think that she would hate him for it… How could he not see it, that he was perfect just the way he was, that she could never look at him with anything but adoration… How could such an intelligent man be so stupid?! “Accept my feelings…” He expected so little from her, desperate to merely be “acceptable” in her eyes. What kind of pedestal had he put her on?! Did he revere her as some kind of goddess?! Some delicate thing that needed to be handled with utmost care?! Had Shouta completely forgotten just who she was?!

“Stop…” Tsukiko mumbled, gripping his shoulder and shoving him hard to flip him over onto his back. Shouta watched in wide-eyed wonder as she moved to lean directly over him, her knees on either side of his hips, lowering herself down onto her elbows so that her forehead touched his, skin
All at once, Shouta understood.

With their heads pressed together like this, Tsukiko could share with him anything she liked, the way Shouta had done for her. "You don't need to apologize, and you don't need to be sorry, for any of this. I'm not upset with you at all. Truthfully, I'm so, so happy, because... I feel the same way."

Shouta gasped and blinked, almost convinced that this had to be a dream. Not able to hold back any longer, he let go of the emotions that he'd kept bottled up inside, tears pouring from his own eyes to match Tsukiko's.

"I hated you at first," she admitted. "I thought you were some asshole hot-shot who thought himself too good for everything. I was wrong about you, it goes without saying. I was only able to become the person that I am now because of you."

Tsukiko continued, not wanting to leave anything out, determined to make it crystal-fucking-clear that she was completely, and irreversibly in love with Shouta. "I remember that time you found me still in the school weight room after classes had ended, when you had me spar with you. By the way- I know that you let me win." Her tone was lighthearted as she conveyed this, but she quickly returned to things more serious. "I think that was the first time you ever touched me, my hair, I mean. Do you know how quickly I came to crave that? At the time, I didn't quite understand what I was feeling, but I think that's when I started thinking of you a little differently."

Her heart fluttered a bit at the cherished memory, and Shouta's did too, sharing her every feeling. "And then the sports festival..."

"Oh, the sports festival..." he murmured.

"Do you remember? I'll never forget how I felt when you embraced me like that, because it was the moment when I first started to fall..." Tsukiko paused, recalling the sensory memory; the sensation of closeness, the fragrance of her sensei's flesh, the tightness in her chest and heat pooling in her face. "I fell so hard, and so fast. You were always a safe place for me. It was so selfish of me, but I wanted more than anything to stay by your side forever."
She really had loved him for so long; it astounded Shouta. If they had known the truth about one another back then, who knows what could have happened. They very well could have been loving one another all this time! But truthfully, it was for the best. As much as Tsukiko had loved him then, she was still too young, even if she was an adult. The age difference between them had been too great back then, and they had been at such different places in their lives. Those same problems wouldn’t haunt any relationship they had now.

“It got to the point where I dreaded my graduation day. I had so looked forward to finally finishing school and going out into the real world, but I wasn’t ready to leave you behind.” This made Shouta feel sick. A student’s graduation day should be filled with nothing but joy, but because of him, Tsukiko’s was ruined by heartbreak. “I wanted to confess my feelings before I left, but I was too afraid. I was certain that you wouldn’t want to be with someone like me, still just a child in so many ways.”

“If only you had known the truth…”

“I suppose you couldn’t see that I was crying as I walked out of the schoolyard.” A deep ache hit Shouta right in the chest, a sobering recollection of how Tsukiko had felt then. “When I finally got outside the gates, I broke down completely.” His hand found the side of her face, stroking her wet cheek with his thumb, as if trying to comfort the pain from all those years ago. “It was the same when I got home, too. I spent hours in my room, crying off and on. And then I went back.”

“Back?”

“Back to the school. I thought there might be a possibility that you would still be there, that all hope wasn’t lost. But when I got there, you had already left. I was too late.”

“You went back… You…went…back… And I wasn’t there for you.” Shouta’s chest felt tight, like he almost couldn’t breathe. He had waited in the courtyard for some time, hoping that maybe, just maybe, Tsukiko might come back for some reason. She had, but by then it was too late. If only Shouta had stayed longer… Who knew how briefly they had missed one another? It pained him to think about it, about what could have been.

“I don’t want you to feel any kind of guilt over this, but I was never quite the same after that. Losing you… broke …me, in a way-” Shouta grabbed one of her hands, squeezing it tightly, telling her that he was here now, that everything was okay now. “I…I tried so hard to forget, but I never did. Things just got easier over time. I tried to date other people, but that never went much of anywhere. I rarely found anyone that I wanted to go on even a first date with, much less a second, or a third, or… I’ve never been with anyone, or even kissed anyone, for that matter. Honestly, the only person I have ever wanted to do those kinds of things with has been you.”
“Tsukiko…” Shouta’s voice was a low groan. Considering her profession of love, he wasn’t surprised to find that she desired him physically, but having her tell him directly affected him in a way that he wasn’t quite prepared for.

She continued quickly, not wanting the two of them to get hung up on that subject before she could share everything on her mind. “When I accepted the job at UA, I realized the possibility of seeing you again. It was something I was prepared for, because enough time had passed that I considered myself ‘over’ the whole thing.” Tsukiko paused, embarrassed by her previous miscalculation. “Deep down, I really wasn’t over it, as things turned out. When you started seeing me professionally, there were times when I found it hard to remain objective. I believe my run-in with Miss Fukukado is indicative of that. But I did my best there for a while, until I started to remember all of the reasons I fell in love with you in the first place.”

Shouta could remember one specific incident that might have contributed to her recollections. “On the class trip, the time you accidentally saw me after I’d left the bath… At the time, I thought you were just embarrassed, but... how did you really feel?”

“I was a bit embarrassed, but...I couldn’t get the image out of my head. And I didn’t mind having it there. Over time I started to realize that I never really had gotten over you; I’d only been distracting myself all this time. When you were in danger, it was all I could do to keep you safe, because I couldn’t bear the idea of losing you again.”

“I couldn’t bear it either.”

Tsukiko lifted her head back up, opening her eyes to look him in the face. “I love you Shouta. I loved you then, and I love you even more now. You are the only person who has ever had my heart. It’s yours, now and forever. So please, don’t ever feel bad for loving me, because you are so precious to me, as is your love.”

Overcome with emotion, Shouta sat up, taking her with him so that she sat on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her, holding her tighter than he ever had before on those rare occasions of embrace. Tsukiko squeezed him back, leaning fully into his chest as she rested her chin on his shoulder. It felt so right, for both of them, as if this was exactly where they were supposed to be, at long last. It almost seemed like this was how it was always supposed to be. Shouta had never been totally sure whether he believed in something like “destiny,” but for this single perfect moment, he was willing to set aside his reservations.

As much as he desired Tsukiko in the carnal sense, and as much as her straddling his lap had the potential to be exciting to him, he didn’t feel the drive to consummate their love just yet. For now,
Shouta just wanted a few minutes more like this, wrapped in silent certainty and her all-consuming love.

Overwhelmed by all of this, and so suddenly, Tsukiko’s head was swimming. She’d never before known the feeling of being loved in this way, and she wanted to drown in it. After all this time, she and Shouta could finally be together, and without threat. They didn’t need to worry about anything besides how to best go about loving one another. Her heart picked up again; it was very likely that things would move very quickly from here, not that she minded. However, being inexperienced with this sort of thing, Tsukiko worried about her ability to perform in that kind of scenario. She was very competent with most things, and she had a solid understanding of what to do, and what kinds of things she wanted to do, but any skills she did have were likely under-developed. Certainly Shouta would be willing to take the lead. Honestly, that didn’t sound so bad, being absolutely ravished by his love in every conceivable way.

He loosened his grip finally, and Tsukiko pulled away to look at him, her eyes searching his face. They had a primal sort of look, making at apparent to Shouta what she wanted him to do now. Heart racing, he reached out to caress her face, drawing out this moment of anticipation, almost a little bit nervous himself. He’d been waiting for this moment for such a long time; it seemed a shame to rush through it. His hand shifted around to rest under her chin, pressing his thumb against her lower lip. Tsukiko gave a shaky breath, frozen in suspense, her eyes locked with Shouta’s. Ever so slowly, they fluttered shut as he leaned in, torturing her as he took his time. His lips brushed delicately against hers, not a full kiss, but a teasing sort of contact that dared her to be the one to take things further. She whined as he pulled back, disappointed.

Tsukiko didn’t need to ask him what he meant by the act. Shouta wanted her to be the one to initiate, to show him just how badly she wanted him. So she did, lifting herself onto her knees to reach his face, cupping one hand against it as the other found a place to rest on his shoulder. Tsukiko pressed her mouth to his, lingering there for a few seconds. It was a chaste kiss, but a true one. Would it be her first, or her second now? She didn’t waste time thinking about it, preferring to savor the moment, finally getting to kiss the one person she’d wanted all of these years. Shouta took hold of the back of her neck, every nerve ending on fire. He’d waited far too long for this, and he surrendered to it fully. It only lasted for two or three seconds, but after years of pining, it satisfied a deep-seated hunger that was only realized once it had been sated.

She pulled back to look at him again, lavender eyes burning, dilated with desire. Shouta gazed at her for a second, and she at him, before the distance between them was closed once more. All of the love, all of the want within them had boiled over, and they crashed together, hands searching for places to hold, flesh burning all over. This kiss was desperate, and needy, and the sort that could only escalate.

It was the sort of embrace that could only lead to intimate union.
Yes, the next chapter is the smut chapter.
Union, Part I

Chapter Summary

Content warning for sex things. I had originally planned for their entire love scene to be contained in this chapter, but once I got to writing, I quickly realized that the scene will ultimately be at least twice as long as a typical chapter. Thus, I've decided to split it up into two so that y'all don't have to wait any longer for new content :3c

Though this was all so new for Shouta, and especially for Tsukiko, things continued in desperation, mouths and bodies tangled together. They were almost like two horny teenagers, given a brief period of time alone together. It all escalated rapidly, from dramatic confession to a first kiss, to what was starting to become foreplay. This intense embrace had continued for quite some time now; after so much time spent pining, a mere kiss was enough to sate the two for a while. However, biology had begun to override that now; everything about these new encounters was exciting, but that excitement left Shouta and Tsukiko wanting more. Hands crept away from their resting places on shoulders and necks, wandering into new territory. Shouta’s hands, for example, had found something new and fun to hold, lingering under Tsukiko’s bottom. She grinned into the kiss as she felt them there, very interested to find out what parts of her body he liked best.

“You like that?” she asked him telepathically, already knowing the answer but wanting to hear it from Shouta himself. He didn’t respond in words, but rather in a low growl as he nipped at her lower lip.

“What do you think?”

As one would expect, all of this feverish enthusiasm had stimulated certain bodily responses; Shouta knew that he had gotten hard, and, considering the way Tsukiko pressed her hips into his, he knew that she knew that he was hard. After so many years of suppressing his sexual feelings for her, it felt weird to be so... forward about it, and Shouta hoped that it didn’t make her feel embarrassed. He heard her groan in slight irritation. She’d spent so much time making it clear that she was attracted to Shouta, and that she wanted sex with him, and here he was all worried that she’d be offended by his arousal. “Sorry,” he muttered, “I’m just so used to, you know…”

“I know, I know. The shame doesn’t wear off that quickly.” Tsukiko paused a moment, smiling devilishly before grinding her hips roughly against Shouta’s, drawing a shaky breath. “Would it make you feel better if I told you that it turns me on?”

“Does it now?” Shouta let himself fall backward onto the mattress, taking her with him as she
yelped in surprise. The decadent embrace continued as he brushed his previous shame away and let himself revel in the delicious friction between the two of them. All the same, it wasn’t quite fair; Tsukiko had already gotten to feel certain parts of him, while Shouta had (sort of) been keeping his hands to himself. He moved them away from their resting place, sliding them up her sides and slipping them under her shirt. She gasped, not quite surprised at the action, but rather at how much it excited her.

Shouta took his time, teasing her by touching her chest over her bra, instead of reaching underneath to grab a handful of soft flesh. It was obvious, through their present mental connection, that he very badly wanted to do that, but he still moved slowly, drawing this encounter out as long as possible. It had taken them so long to get to this point; it would just be wrong to rush through it. Tsukiko could tell that he was struggling, of course, to be patient. The urgency of his arousal clouded his mind to a certain extent, the hot and heady energy surrounding them only serving to send them spiraling into hedonistic union.

“Hold on, hold on…” Shouta mumbled, breaking away momentarily. Tsukiko studied his face curiously as she finally got a good look at him, admiring the heat spread across his face. It made him look so... alive, eyes glowing hungrily as sweat beaded up on his forehead. It didn’t come as any shock, that she had such an effect on him, but it delighted Tsukiko all the same. She hardly noticed as he shifted her around, laying her head back down on a pillow as he leaned over her, large, sinewy hands resting on either side of her shoulders. Shouta leaned down to kiss her again, his long hair tickling her cheeks as his heat spread to her, enveloping both of them in a fog of passion and desire.

Too curious to resist any longer, Tsukiko reached for his shirt, her fingers gripping the fabric tightly and tugging it forward. Shouta realized quickly what she was trying to do, and relented, breaking contact to allow her to pull the garment up and over his head before whipping it clear across the room. Her eyes wandered, taking everything in. Yes, she’d seen this much of Shouta before, in Okinawa, but only for a few seconds, the image blurred by blind panic. Now, Tsukiko took her time, hands exploring this body that was now hers to enjoy. Shouta wasn’t all that old, so his fitness wasn’t any surprise, but she still marveled at just how much that baggy jumpsuit was able to hide. Despite being more on the lean side, strong muscles and cut arms still made themselves apparent. “Fuck…” she murmured, her voice low. Shouta’s mouth curled into a smirk, and she blushed. “D-Don’t go getting a big head now!”

“I don’t think you have to worry about that. I’m just glad that…” He made a vague gesture with his hand, unsure of how to put his exact feelings into words.

“That I’m as attracted to your body as I am to you?” Tsukiko frowned, tracing a prominent scar on Shouta’s chest with her index finger. “What happened here?”

He shrugged in response. “I don’t even remember where half of these came from. It’s the job, you
know?” Of course she knew. Tsukiko had probably collected a whole set of new scars just in the past two days. Shouta knew that it would take some time before he could look at them without wincing, knowing that she had received them while trying to protect him.

Tsukiko could see the far-off look in his eyes, and she reached up to stroke his face, trying to bring him back into the present. “What are you thinking about right now?” He had a vague aura of sadness, but Shouta had asked her so many times not to use her telepathy on him; it was just habit to keep respecting that.

“Oh...the scars that you’re going to have now. Because of me.”

That again? She gave an exasperated sigh. “You’re going to have to get over that. Everything I did these past couple of days, I did with full awareness of what could happen to me. It was a choice I made. If you must...think of them as physical evidence that I love you. You’re not allowed to ever question that fact again. I got these scars by being selfish, because I wanted to keep you around a while longer.”

Shouta relented finally, giving a faint smile. “If you say so.”

“I do say so.” Tsukiko placed her hand on the back of his neck, pulling him back in for another kiss. It didn’t take long for them to pick up where they had left off, Shouta breathing heavily into the embrace, punctuated by the occasional whimper from Tsukiko. Eventually she laughed softly against him. “If you want to take my top off so badly, then do it.”

Right... In the heat of the moment, Shouta had somehow forgotten that, right now, they had a total psychic connection. Anything one of them thought, or felt, the other would experience as well. It was a surprising perk to Tsukiko’s abilities, one that she too was encountering for the first time. Feeling very self-aware of every action he made, Shouta grasped the hem of her shirt, slowly lifting it. He could feel her eyes on him, studying him, his reaction to every inch of skin revealed to him. There was that old scar from her injury at the sports festival, the day that she’d supposedly begun to feel something for him. There was the edge of her bra, the final layer covering one of the more intimate parts of her body. Shouta removed the top completely, depositing it a little more gently than Tsukiko had done his. He sat back, just looking at her for a few minutes. She looked a little self-conscious as he did this, but she had no reason to be; Tsukiko was so beautiful, her skin smooth and creamy, hiding the strong muscles underneath. Her delicate collarbone jutted out, catching the moonlight filtering in through the window. Shouta could have spent hours just watching her chest rise and fall, the slightest sliver of cleavage peeking out from her bra.

“W-What are you looking at?” Shouta was the one man that Tsukiko didn’t mind looking at her, but this sudden, unbroken gaze caught her off-guard, making her feel slightly self-conscious.
“Do you know how beautiful you are to me?”

Tsukiko looked up at him, eyes half-lidded. “Would you like to see more?”

A broken-off moan escaped Shouta. “Ah- Do you even have to ask?”

Tsukiko slipped her thumbs under the waistband of her leggings, lowering them just enough to expose her hip bones. In a flash, her eyes glowed in the low light; if he was going to watch her as she stripped, then she was going to get the play-by-play on what kind of thoughts were running through Shouta’s mind.

“You can’t help yourself, can you?”

“Can you really blame me? I’m curious.”

“I’m curious too, you know.” Shouta raised an eyebrow.

“About what?” Tsukiko’s lips stretched into a wide grin. She had a few ideas.

“You know what.”

“About what I look like…” In one swift movement, she pulled the garment down to her knees, leaving herself covered by just a single layer. “...under here?”

Shouta covered his mouth with one hand, a low moan slipping from him. Obviously, Tsukiko knew exactly what kind of effect she had on him. And she was having a little too much fun with it. He wondered just how much longer he would be able to hold back; as much as Shouta wanted to yank those panties right off and have her right then, he didn’t really want it to be that way. Tsukiko deserved to be treated with more care than that; this first time together should be worth the wait. Shouta almost felt ashamed for what the more instinctive part of him wanted. Of course, all of that quickly faded away as he felt a light pressure at the front of his pants.
Tsukiko’s fingers, it seemed, had grown impatient, and they prodded him carefully, searching for something to stroke. *You are a curious girl…* Leaning over him, Shouta took her hand gently, guiding it to his hard cock. Finally finding it, she inhaled sharply, her eyes growing wide as a hot blush spread across her face. Determined, she continued, massaging him through the two layers of fabric. Shouta let his forehead fall into the pillow, groaning at the sensation.

He let his mind go fuzzy, his consciousness of all other things fading out, totally fixated on Tsukiko, and the overwhelming sensation of her fingertips on him. It had been so long since anyone else had touched Shouta like this, and for it to be the *one* person he wanted in this world? He exhaled sharply as she gripped him firmly with her whole hand now, stroking gently, but with enough firmness to make him ball up the sheets in his fist. If she did this for *too* long… Well, with her telepathy, she’d know to stop before reaching the point of no return. “*How are you so good at this?*” he mumbled against her hair. He could feel her shrug, returning to her prior teasing as she realized just how quickly she could get Shouta close. He sensed a wicked grin within her as she noticed another side-effect of his pleasure, and he tensed, slightly mortified. *Of course…* His body was reacting as it usually did to that kind of stimulation, with certain fluids starting to…accumulate. Would precum, and this much of it, be…embarrassing to Tsukiko? With Shouta, things could sometimes get…messy.

*Tch…* Tsukiko made the indignant noise, frustrated that *once again*, she had to remind Shouta that nothing about his desire offended her. What he looked like underneath his clothes…the way his body reacted to touch…she loved all of it because it was *him*. Besides, her inexperience didn’t necessarily make her a *prude*. Hearing her sound of irritation, he lifted his head up to look at her, and she crossed her arms. “I’m not nearly as innocent as you seem to think.”

Shouta blinked, thinking for a moment before raising an eyebrow. “Is that so?” Tsukiko just stared at him in response, waiting. “Then surely you won’t mind if I do this.” He maneuvered out of his pants, leaving everything hidden only by the thin fabric of his underwear. This left almost *nothing* to the imagination, the shape of his prominent erection clearly visible, a splotch of the cloth darkened by precum.

Tsukiko uncrossed her arms then, her eyes glued on what was being presented to her, slightly wide, mouth just barely agape. This was all for her, and before much longer, she’d be getting every inch.

“Can you see it? Can you see how badly I want you?” Shouta stared at her hungrily, making it clear that they were no longer just fooling around.

He leaned down to kiss her again, more forcefully this time, and Tsukiko responded just as he had hoped, trembling and moaning as she wrapped her arms around him, holding on tight. Shouta could feel her heart racing, hardly able to wait any longer for physical attention. Up until now, all of their exploration had been mostly visual, but both of them needed more than that now. Tsukiko slid her arms away just briefly, reaching behind her back to unhook her bra, slipping the straps off her
arms. She paused, however, suddenly shy, clasping the cups to her chest as the blush spread across her face darkened.

“What is it?” Shouta asked her, tilting his head in concern.

She chewed her lip. “It’s just...no one’s ever seen this much of me before. I didn’t expect to feel this nervous about it, but...”

“We don’t have to go any further if you’re not ready yet.” As much as he wanted to take things as far as they would go, the last thing Shouta wanted to do was force Tsukiko into something.

Tsukiko’s eyes widened. “No! I want to keep going.” She laughed nervously. “I guess I just needed a second.” Turning her head to the side and eyeing Shouta coyly, she tossed the garment aside, letting him see her full chest.

He inhaled sharply, not realizing just how much the sight would affect him even if he knew what to expect. Tsukiko’s bust wasn’t all that big, but beautifully shaped, two perfect handfuls flushed pink at the center. Shouta leaned down to pepper her collarbone with kisses as one hand gravitated to one breast, squeezing gently and rolling the nipple between his fingers. A sudden yelp escaped her, and he worried momentarily that he had hurt her. He snatched his hand away in shock, but Tsukiko quickly grabbed it back, wanting him to continue. “I was worried that I hurt you...” he whispered against her chest.

She shook her head. “No, it felt good...it just...surprised me.”

“Surprised you?”

“I didn’t know it could feel like that...” Tsukiko’s face flushed again, embarrassed by her own naivete.

“How do you want to feel something even better?” Shouta moved away from her collarbone, taking the tip of her breast into his mouth instead, sucking gently so as to not overstimulate her, teasing the other side with his fingers. She started to tremble as he had anticipated, moaning softly. He flicked the tip of his tongue against her nipple a few times, making her squeeze her thighs together, desperate for more. Shouta glanced up to admire Tsukiko’s face, her half-lidded eyes watching him lustfully, her lips pursed and swollen from so much attention. It was so obvious now that she wanted him in every sense; he’d been so stupid to ever question it. “Do you want more?” Shouta
knew the answer already, but he needed to hear her affirmative before he could feel okay slipping his fingers between her thighs.

“Yes... please ,” she groaned, and without hesitating a moment more, he slid his free hand away from her chest, teasingly dragging his fingertips across her midsection and hip before lingering for a second on her thigh. None too pleased with his teasing, Tsukiko reached for him again, brushing her own fingers against his thick cock, making Shouta exhale sharply.

“Oh, okay, I get the message…” he half-laughed, gently parting her thighs, surprised at the immense heat that had built between them. The warm scent of her reached him, and his mouth dropped open just slightly, an electric shiver running through him. Shouta finally returned his attention to the task at hand, his touch finding the gusset of her panties, the fabric so soaked with desire that it clung to her, not translucent, but fitted perfectly to her. He dragged his fingers across her lengthwise, starting low and moving up, gently prodding as he did, making Tsukiko lean her head back, mouthing vulgarities. Exploring, Shouta easily found her most sensitive spot, lazily pressing circles around it, and she grasped the sheets in her free hand, eyes already so hazy with desire that he knew she wouldn’t be able to wait much longer.

“Just take them off,” she muttered, her voice low.

“If you insist.”

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To be continued...
**Union, Part II**

Chapter Summary

Content warning for explicit sex.

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“Just take them off,” Tsukiko muttered, her voice low.

“If you insist.” Even as his treatment of her remained tender, a different side of Shouta had started to come through; something more primal, more dominant. There was a playfulness to it, but it was clear that he enjoyed teasing his partner, seeing just how desperate he could get them before finally indulging the desire. He gently grasped the waistband of Tsukiko’s panties, starting to slide them off. The controlled facade began to crack, however, the second the garment reached her thighs, revealing her to Shouta. His visage softened, and he let out a low moan as he gazed between her legs, the soft folds of flesh already slick and shiny.

Shouta’s head swam as he looked at her, naked in his bed, staring up at him with an expression of which he never could have dreamed. Tsukiko loved him; it was plain on her face and in the way her pussy had flushed hot and pink, flagrantly wet with desire. He reached down to explore this new part of her, making her eyes flutter shut, lips parting as a slight whimper escaped them. “You’re so beautiful,” he whispered, slipping a finger between her folds and stroking upward, making her whine. As Shouta’s fingertips brushed against the small patch of wispy blue-ish hair, Tsukiko’s eyes snapped open, color flooding her panicked face. “What’s wrong?” he asked her, worried that maybe he’d done something for which she wasn’t ready.
“I-I haven’t...shaved.”

Shouta had to suppress a laugh. *That’s* what bothered her? That he was seeing her body in its natural state? “So? What’s wrong with that?”

Tsukiko’s eyes darted back and forth, clearly self-conscious. “I just know...that a lot of men prefer-”

“Oh no,” Shouta reassured her quickly. “I’d rather my partner keep her body however she likes it. Frankly though...I like a little bit of hair. You’re a grown woman; you’re supposed to have it.” He looked a little bit sheepish then. “Considering our history...I like the reminder that you’re an adult now.”

Tsukiko seemed to relax hearing that, giving a cautious smile. “If that’s the case, then show me how much you like it.” She didn’t know how to anticipate what Shouta would do next, and even with her telepathy, he still managed to surprise her. He simply gave her his classic wicked smile, starting to scoot backward, lowering himself down onto his elbows and wrapping his arms around her parted thighs as he leaned his face toward her. Her eyes went wide, cheeks darkening even further. “Y-You’re going to...?!”

Shouta looked up at her, eyes dark with lust. “Of course. Do you know how I’ve fantasized about doing just this?”

Hearing that he truly wanted to do this, that he *longed* to put his mouth on her, Tsukiko couldn’t help but moan. “You really want to?”

“As long as you’re okay with that?”

“I’m okay with that,” she whispered breathlessly, and without another moment of hesitation, Shouta lowered his face down, covering her with his mouth and groaning as he did so. Tsukiko tensed at the sensation of his hot breath against her, but quickly melted into the sheets as his tongue began to explore her body. She felt herself clench as he pressed ever so slightly inside her, humming as he delighted at the taste of her, and at the sudden flash of pleasure in his own lower body as he shared her sensation.

“You taste *so good*,” Shouta mumbled as he gripped her thighs just a little tighter, fingers sinking into her flesh. He continued his work, moving upward to lick right where he knew she would
enjoy it the most. After all, it wasn’t so much the act itself that aroused him as it was his ability to make Tsukiko scream. As erotic as the concept of using his mouth on her was to him, Shouta’s primary interest was making her feel good. He pressed against her, easily using her shared telepathy to find the right amount of pressure to use.

“Mmm...ah!~ Sh-Shouta…” Tsukiko balled up the sheets in her fists, her legs starting to shake as he sped up his ministrations. Other people clearly found her taste in men strange, but to her, there was nothing sexier than Aizawa Shouta with his face buried in her lap, making her shudder with every pass of his tongue.

Even without the shared sensation of pleasure between them, he could still discern that she was getting close. He’d only been doing this for maybe five minutes and Tsukiko was already about to come. Much as Shouta wanted to hear her scream as she shuddered underneath him, he wasn’t going to let her get off that easily. When he finally finished her off, he wanted it to be from something more. Before she could reach the point of no return, he stopped abruptly, moving his mouth away. “Wait...wha…” She looked distraught, slightly worried that something wasn’t right. “I was close…”

“I know.”

“But why…?”

“Because I want to give you more.” Shouta shifted his position again, kneeling between her legs and grabbing her by the hips to pull her toward him. “Are you ready?” he asked softly, leaning forward to brush his still-clothed erection against her.

Tsukiko nodded vigorously, her heart rate beginning to pick up. She had dreamed of this moment so many times, and now it was finally happening. It made her feel all fluttery, and...maybe just a little bit nervous. It wasn’t uncommon for her to use toys on herself, so it wasn’t like she’d never felt penetration before, but...the toys in question...were significantly more narrow than Shouta. Even with Tsukiko all worked up like this, the intrusion still might hurt. Her partner seemed to take notice of her anticipation, his eyebrows knitting together. “Are you sure you’re ready? I’m not going to pressure you, and I don’t want you to feel like you have to, just because we’ve gone as far as we have.”

“Oh! Of course I want to!” Tsukiko responded enthusiastically. “I just haven’t had anything as...big as you before.”

Shouta looked just slightly proud of himself at that comment, but he tried not to get too cocky,
reaching out to stroke her cheek. “I’ll be as gentle as I can with you. I promise. The last thing I have ever wanted is to hurt you.”

“I want to see you,” she breathed, the words coming out almost involuntarily.

They took Shouta by surprise, and his breath hitched in his throat. He swallowed hard, keeping his eyes locked with Tsukiko’s as he hooked his thumbs into the waistband of his underwear, starting to lower them. His lover’s lavender gaze followed their descent, widening as his thick cock sprung free. It darted back and forth between his arousal and his face, and made him feel faintly nervous, as he could not quite interpret it. Did Tsukiko like what she saw? Was seeing him fully naked overwhelming to her?

As if she sensed his concern, she looked him dead in the eyes as her hand reached out to touch him once again, letting the base of his cock fall between her index and middle fingers and ghosting them up, the slightest whisper of flesh on flesh. Tsukiko gazed at him amorously, letting her head fall back on the pillow.

“Ruin me, Shouta.”

Those three lascivious words were all he needed to hear as he readjusted, spreading her legs a bit further so he could position himself flush against her. Both gasped in surprise as his cock brushed against her pussy, a foreseeable, but still unexpected sensation. Ever so gently, Shouta spread her, positioning himself but hesitating for just a moment, eyes asking a question that didn’t need verbalization. Tsukiko nodded shyly, and he began his slow descent into her, a low sigh slipping out as his head was swallowed by her heat.

Shouta pressed a hand against the headboard to steady himself, not wanting to shove himself all the way in at once. He took great pains to control the situation, keeping his promise that he would be gentle. As he began to sink deeper inside her, Tsukiko tensed suddenly, whimpering and grasping the hand that tenderly brushed against her face, her eyes squeezed shut. “Does it-” He didn’t need to finish the question as the light burn of discomfort flashed through him, making him clench his jaw. “Shit…” Shouta stopped moving then, searching her face.

“Why did you stop?” Tsukiko asked him, confused. Yes, this first time was mildly painful, but she didn’t see much way of getting around it, and truthfully, she’d experienced much, much worse as of late.

“I’m hurting you,” he explained, the conflict apparent in his voice.
Tsukiko laced her fingers through Shouta’s. “I still want you to keep going. It won’t hurt for much longer, and even if it does now, I still want you.”

“Well...if you’re sure.” He continued his intrusion, his own pleasure of being sheathed within her starting to override the pain, for both of them.

“It feels good for you.” It wasn’t quite a question, but Tsukiko still seemed to be seeking some sort of confirmation that Shouta liked the feeling of being inside her.

He wasn’t even in all the way yet, but the look on his face made the answer quite obvious, his jaw hanging slack, an absent look in his eyes. “You’re...pretty tight.” Though he still tried to be patient, it was becoming increasingly difficult. Shouta wanted to be inside Tsukiko fully, but he knew that he needed to be careful. Before he could think too much about it, however, he could feel her legs wrapping around him, her heels ramming into his lower back as she jerked him forward. She hissed at the jolt of discomfort, but looked up at Shouta with a satisfied smile.

Taking just a brief moment to fully process this situation, he stared down into Tsukiko’s eyes, which quickly softened as they gazed at one another. For so long, they had wanted this, to be so intimately connected with one another; words escaped them, having difficulty believing that this was all real.

Shouta leaned down, slipping his arms under Tsukiko’s shoulders to cradle her protectively, eyes fluttering shut as he kissed her again. She sighed softly into it, clinging to him tightly as her body adjusted to this new feeling. Shouta filled her up so perfectly; it was almost like they were made for one another. She knew that his eventual withdrawal would leave her feeling empty and wanting, but at least she could have him again and again, now that he was hers. His hips started to roll forward then in a slow, but steady rhythm. Despite the fact that he barely moved back and forth for now, the shared sensation between them was intense, more wonderful than either of them could have ever imagined. “Ts-Tsuki…” The moaning whisper escaped Shouta rather suddenly and without permission. “You feel…” He didn’t finish the sentence, a whimper of Tsukiko’s own interrupting him.

Spurred on by her sounds of enjoyment, it didn’t take long for him to speed up his movements, thrusting into her more powerfully, hips slamming together forcefully as he used his grip on her as leverage to bury his cock within her, earning one loud, high-pitched moan after another. Shouta could feel her fingernails digging into his back, but he didn’t mind it; he simply leaned down to press his lips to the side of her neck, sucking hard enough to leave a mark of his own. Tsukiko clenched around him at the pleasurable pain, making his mind go blank for a few seconds. Their lovemaking clearly didn’t hurt her anymore, if the way she gazed up at him blissfully was any indication. Just how badly can I fuck you up? Using their mental connection, Shouta changed his
angle, grinning broadly as he found the spot that made her eyes widen, a cracked-off yelp slipping past her swollen lips.

“Hah...Ah!~” He was certain that if anyone in the adjacent apartment units were still awake, Tsukiko’s moans would be audible to them, but he didn’t care. It didn’t matter right now who heard them. Shouta had waited so damn long for this; he didn’t give a shit if the whole city heard him pleasing the one woman he loved in this world.

He continued to pound into her, pace increasing again, almost forgetting his previous promise to be gentle. At some point, that had gone out the window, not that Tsukiko seemed to mind. The harder Shouta fucked her, the louder she moaned. She was loving every minute of this as much as he was, the two of them clinging to one another desperately, caught up in a moment that had been so many years in the making. “Fuck...” The obscenity snuck out as Shouta leaned back slightly to gaze at the woman underneath him, her whole body hot and trembling. His hips bucked forward sharply in response to the visual, and Tsukiko lost all control. Shouta could feel her tensing within as she squeezed her eyes shut tight, her mouth falling open and an unraveled sort of scream tumbling from it. He repeated this forceful motion again and again, watching in delight as she came undone, shivering and screaming his name over and over.

Hearing Tsukiko make those kinds of noises, he quickly realized that, if he wanted to, he could finish this up rather quickly. Making her come was the most important thing to him, and that had been accomplished now. Shouta settled back into their affectionate positioning from before, holding her as she started to calm down, eyes cloudy and content. Rather deliberately, he slowed his rhythm, knowing that if he continued to go as hard as he had been, he himself would cum very quickly. Her completion seemed to make her even hotter and wetter than before, stimulating him in a way that was just a little bit too effective. The thing was, he wasn’t ready for this to be over yet; Shouta wanted to hold Tsukiko like this for a while longer, to keep enjoying this first time together for as long as possible. Of course, there would come a time when he couldn’t resist any longer, but for now, he held back.

As she started to come down from her high, Tsukiko could see a funny sort of look on Shouta’s face. The way she had looked, the way she had sounded as she clench around him, body trembling as she cried out in bliss, affected him deeply. Already he was close enough that he had to control himself to keep from coming completely unraveled inside her. Even now, he kept a firm grip on the situation, refusing to let go and let things happen as they would. Tsukiko exhaled sharply through her nose, growing impatient with this attitude. In one swift movement, she tightened her thighs around him and twisted, shoving one hand hard against his shoulder. Shouta made a sound of shock as she flipped him onto his back, keeping him deep inside her the whole time. Now, she stared down at him, taking control and forcing him into a more passive position. He didn’t protest it.

Though she had made the decision on her own to change their position, Tsukiko hadn’t taken the time to think about the implications here, the fact that she would be the one doing most of the
moving now. She knew that she needed to ride him, but the actual physics of doing that...escaped her. Her confused panic must have been apparent on her face, because Shouta simply placed his hands on her hips, gently manipulating her body to demonstrate the movement. “Like this,” he whispered, making her blush. Tsukiko couldn’t help feeling a little embarrassed by her own naivete and inexperience, but she knew that her partner was more than happy to let her learn in her own time. He moved his hands away then, letting her continue on her own. She rested her hands on his chest, sitting up straight as she rolled her hips onto him, lifting up onto her knees just a little as she slipped back again before rolling forward once more. The subtle movements did so much to make Shouta dip in and out of her, and Tsukiko mastered it easily, the strength in her legs doing most of the work. She didn’t mind taking the reins for a while, letting him lay back and enjoy the sensation of being ridden, of being desired like this.

With a heavy sigh, Shouta let his hands slip away from her hips as he felt her figuring things out, staring down at him as she took over for him. He hadn’t expected her to become so assertive; he would have been perfectly content to take the lead this first time. This was all so new to Tsukiko, but it seemed that she was a quick learner, easily riding him as if she’d done it a million times. Quite honestly, he loved this position, lying comfortably on his back with his beloved on top of him; it was one of the few times he preferred a passive approach. As much as Shouta loved being the one to make her tremble with only his own movements, seeing her in a more active role was a constant reminder that she did want this. Watching Tsukiko panting steadily as she bucked her hips in perfect rhythm, her face painted deep red, was very well one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen. Each day it seemed he found a new reason to be in awe of her.

As titillating as it was to watch her doing this, he wasn’t exactly inclined to lay here and let her do all the work. Shouta grabbed her by the hips again, making her gasp, and started thrusting upward into her. It disrupted the pace she had going, certainly, but Tsukiko didn’t seem to mind the way this felt at all, a ragged moan hanging in the air as he put one hand on her back, pulling her forward so that he could kiss her again as he desperately buried his cock inside her. Her sounds of delight continued through the kiss; she wasn’t coming again just yet, but Shouta could tell that it wouldn’t take too much longer. After all the pain, after everything the two of them had been through, the fact that he could make her feel like this...elated him. It wasn’t an elegant sort of movement, ramming his hips upward like this, but it certainly seemed to be effective.

Tsukiko moaned into the kiss, the only sort of expression she could muster at the moment. The sensation of being pounded like this made her head go fuzzy in a way that was unlike anything she had ever experienced before in her life. Of course, the feeling of sexual pleasure was familiar to her, but to have it with a partner, rather than on her own, was somehow...more. Shouta had somehow managed to clear her mind in a whole new way. No cogent thought occupied her now, but it didn’t matter; primal instinct would take care of everything up until the end.

Between the sweat, and the precum, and her own secretions, all of this had gotten very messy very quickly. Something about it was vulgar, but in the loveliest way; physical evidence of how much she and Shouta loved each other. The insides of Tsukiko’s thighs had grown slick with one type of moisture or another, only serving to aid in the furious movement between them. Shouta broke away from her momentarily to catch his breath, and she took this one brief moment of cognizance to sit
up, reclaiming the dominant role. She wanted him to feel as breathless and fucked-out as he’d made her. Tsukiko rocked her hips roughly, jarringly, panting in time with her pace, a look of concentration and intent setting into her visage.

Shouta’s prior movements quickly slowed to a stop as he let out a rough sigh. He was starting to lose control now, losing himself in the moment as Tsukiko did to him exactly what he’d done to her. He knew what she was trying to do, and at this point, he was okay with it. Everything they had done together up until now had felt amazing, but this was...beyond. The way she rolled her hips left him breathless and lightheaded; as much as he loved her, he’d never imagined that it could be like this. “Tsu...ki... hahh ...” From the look on her face, this was doing things to Tsukiko too. Shouta’s hands slipped away from her sides again, all of his energy focused on how damn good it felt for her to ride his cock. It wouldn’t be much longer now, for either of them, and that was probably for the best. This kind of lovemaking left a person deliriously ecstatic, utterly spent and at a loss for words.

“Tsukiko...I’m...I’m going to…”

“I know.”

Without another word, Shouta reached for her, holding her tight against him as he exhaled sharply, twitching inside her. He continued to buck into her forcefully, allowing Tsukiko to find her own bliss. She trembled and whimpered just as she had before as she felt herself filled up, her heart racing as the ecstasy of it all clouded her mind. As he sensed her completion, Shouta slowed to a stop, too tired and sensitive to continue, though he continued to hold her close. They lay there for just a few moments, words escaping them as he brushed his fingertips up and down her bare back, and she wound her fingers in his hair absently. Finally Tsukiko lifted her head, swollen lips pulling into a shaky smile, her eyes tired, but full of affection. Shouta could only gaze at her in wonder, brushing his hand against her cheek and earning a soft sigh in return. She took his hand and pressed a soft kiss to the back of it, never taking her eyes off his.

Overcome with love for this incredible woman, he sat up, wrapping his arms around her. “I love you so much,” he whispered against her hair, voice hoarse.

“I love you too.” Tsukiko nuzzled her face into the junction between his neck and shoulder, closing her eyes in contentment.

“I’m never letting go of you again.”
Even though she had already spent so many hours sleeping as she recovered from the overexertion caused by her telekinesis, Tsukiko still found herself slipping easily into a deep slumber as she lay in Shouta’s bed, his strong arm wrapped around her, holding her close to him. He had already managed to fall asleep, which wasn’t surprising after everything that had happened today, after staying up late to watch over her, after loving one another so powerfully, so desperately. Tsukiko’s mind went hazy as she herself descended into unconsciousness. The darkness enveloped her as it always did, but tonight, it was a little bit kinder. There was a safety here that she’d never known before. However, the velvety blackness usually gave way to vivid dreams that eclipsed her conscious ego. Tonight, the active part of her brain seemed to hang around, letting her explore this place deep inside.

After a while, Tsukiko managed to forget that this was all just a dream, exploring diligently as though everything around her was very real, and required close examination. In the distance she could see a golden haze of light, and it intrigued her. She wandered toward it, confused and a little bit nervous, as though she were taking a peek beyond some forbidden veil. Slowly a lone adult figure came into focus; a woman. “Hello?” Tsukiko called out to her. The woman, petite and yellow-haired, only smiled at her, reaching out a hand to beckon her closer. As she neared, Tsukiko could see that this woman held a chunky, gurgling baby in her arms, its round face framed by black curls. Both unfamiliar faces held the newcomer in their identical emerald gaze, a look that was benevolent, endearing. They seemed to regard Tsukiko positively, the blonde woman still smiling as the baby reached out its little hand.

Though she smiled, she seemed sad, in a way, as if her projected happiness were tempered by a deep longing. She looked up at Tsukiko, a look of relief crossing her face. “I wondered what you were like,” she said finally, her voice soft and melodic. She seemed to know who Tsukiko was, and welcomed her to... wherever this was. “He did tell me about you, that you were so determined, so
stubborn, so kind.”

He?

“I’m glad. I’m glad that you gave him a reason to keep moving forward.” Finally it dawned on Tsukiko just who she saw before her.

“You’re…”

Mariko nodded. “I was worried for a while, but…Shouta is stronger than he realizes. We both know that.” She looked at Tsukiko intently. “And you gave him that strength when he needed it most. You saved him. More than once.”

Tsukiko blinked. “I-I’m not sure I did that much…”

“You gave him everything he needed. You have given him your kindness, your support, your guidance, your protection…but most of all, you gave him your love. Thank you, Tsukiko, for loving him.”

Mariko’s baby squealed then, reaching out its hand again and babbling enthusiastically. Its mother giggled softly, smiling again. “He says he’ll see you again in a few years.”

Tsukiko’s eyes snapped open, and she sat up violently, her heart racing. She searched the dark room, wondering where Mariko had disappeared to. She was gone, of course, merely a figment of Tsukiko’s unconscious state. The only one here with her now was Shouta, who still slept soundly despite her activity. Her heart began to slow again as she looked at him lovingly, his late wife’s words still ringing in her ears. How real had that dream been? Of course Tsukiko had certain psychic abilities, but she wasn’t a medium. She couldn’t really contact those who had passed on to the other side, right? Settling back into a comfortable position, she tried not to think about it too much. Fortunately, Tsukiko found a satisfying distraction as Shouta turned in his sleep, laying his arm across her midsection and sighing contentedly. He was happy now, and Tsukiko was happy, and, if her dream was to be taken with any amount of seriousness, Mariko was at peace too. Finally, for the first time in a long time, they all could rest easy.

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Slowly starting to come out of a deep sleep, Shouta’s eyes flickered open, the room around him blurry for the first few moments. Gradually everything began to come into view; the wrinkled bed linens, the faint rays of sunlight streaming in through the closed blinds, the specks of dust dancing in those warm beams. It was late in the year now, but the east-facing room still felt warm and fuzzy. Shouta couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt this comfortable. Then again, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been this well-rested, either. He didn’t have any idea of what time it was, but he felt as though he’d slept thoroughly, and for longer than the usual three or four hours.

Of course, he began to remember now, that this had been the first night he’d laid down without a single worry in his mind. Ripper was finally defeated once and for all, and everyone was safe. His students were okay. He was alive. Tsukiko was safe. And she loved him. That love had become tangible the night before, and when Shouta finally allowed himself to rest, she had been right there with him. Everything really had worked out for the best, and yet...something felt off. Something was missing here in this moment.

Shouta turned back to look over his shoulder, and then back at the side of the bed in front of him. Both sides were equally empty, covers turned back, the mattress still a little warm where a body had been not long before. Tsukiko seemed to have awakened before him, slipping out of bed without creating a disturbance. Why though? Why wouldn’t she wake Shouta up too? Where had she gone? Surely she wouldn’t leave the apartment without telling him where she was going.

Unless...

Was it possible...that Tsukiko regretted what had happened the night before? It didn’t make sense, considering how she felt, her telepathic abilities allowing her to share the true depth of her love with Shouta. Could it be that she’d given some real thought to his reservations from before, ultimately deciding that he was right? That his desire for her was as vulgar and predatory as he’d worried?

Even though he knew he was being paranoid on some level, his heart skipped a beat as he tore out of bed. Hastily Shouta grabbed the nearest clothing articles he could find, his mind running through every possible horrible scenario, no matter how unlikely. The rational part of him realized that she might just have gone into the bathroom, but sticking his head inside the open door, he saw that it was sadly empty. Shouta threw open his bedroom door, scrambling out into the hallway in his desperate search for Tsukiko, looking even in the most unlikely places for her. To his relief, he heard the muffled sound of running water coming from the kitchen, and he hurried off in that direction, finally finding her heating water in the electric kettle.

Two ceramic cups and a tin of tea leaves were laid out on the counter in front of Tsukiko as she set about making a morning beverage for the two of them. She’d borrowed a t-shirt from Shouta’s closet, and it hung loosely on her like a very short nightgown; there was something endearing about it. Seeing this, his panic eased. He’d been to quick to assume the worst of the situation.
Tsukiko looked up as he came into the room, smiling. “Sorry, did I wake you up?”

Shouta could only throw his arms around her, hugging her tightly. One hand snaked around to rest on the back of her head, its fingers tangling themselves in her hair. She returned the embrace, sighing contentedly, but she could tell that something wasn’t quite right. “Is everything okay?”

“I woke up, and you weren’t there. I...got worried,” Shouta admitted sheepishly.

“Worried? About what?” Tsukiko knew what. It was the same old thing that had always bothered him. Still, she asked anyway, to let him express his feelings.

He made a sound of embarrassment. “I was worried that you had left. I thought maybe you regretted what happened last night.”

Tsukiko frowned. “What makes you think that I would regret it?”

“I don’t know…” Shouta shook his head. “Same old paranoia, I guess. Maybe I’m just not used to the idea of you actually loving me. I was being stupid.”

She took his face in her hands, locking eyes with him. “You’re not stupid; just wrong. I know it might take some time for you to get out of your old, negative thought patterns, but I do love you. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know.” Shouta gave a serene, almost dopey smile as the warmth of her affection washed over him. “I guess I’m just worried that I’ll lose you again.”

Tsukiko sighed. “I know. But here’s the thing: there’s no way to know how much time we’ll have together, but you can’t waste what time we do have worrying about it. We’ve waited so long for this, so let’s just enjoy it, okay?”

“Okay.” He embraced her once again, kissing the crown of her head. It was a strange feeling; to want for nothing after so many years of missing a piece of his heart. At the same time it was pleasant, a kind of safety and elation that swelled in his chest. Still, Shouta had to wonder what was next for himself and Tsukiko. Should they date just like any other couple? In a lot of ways, their situation was unique: they had a long history, and had come to know each other very intimately these last few months- even more so in the last twenty-four hours. Surely they wouldn’t be starting
from the same point as anyone else. Finally he gave voice to his thoughts. “Where do we go from here? I love you, and you love me, but…”

“But you want to figure out what’s next for us,” Tsukiko clarified.

“R-Right. Like, are you my... girlfriend?” Shouta cringed inwardly; something about it sounded so juvenile.

Tsukiko smirked. “Do you want me to be?”

“Of course,” he muttered, laying his hand on the back of his neck as he always did when he was uncomfortable. Shouta paused for a moment, face warming just a little. “Obviously I want to be committed to you. You’re the only one I want.”

“I think that settles it then.” Tsukiko smiled reassuringly, pleased with the stability of this decision.

“It sounds crazy, but I’d marry you today if you really wanted,” Shouta confessed, concerned that this revelation might make him seem clingy. At the same time, he wanted to be completely honest, after hiding his true feelings for such a long time.

It did sound crazy, but Tsukiko did understand his sentiment. Shouta had been married before, and at the age he was, he wasn’t one for the whole dating scene. Once he was sure about committing to someone, he was ready to make things permanent. “I do want to be with you with the intention of getting married eventually,” she said, explaining her own point of view, “But I’m not ready to do that yet.”

“Oh, I know,” Shouta reassured her. “It wouldn’t be a good idea yet. There are still so many things we need to learn about each other. I know so much about you...and I don’t, at the same time.”

“Exactly. I mean, I only want to be with you, and I want to spend as much time with you as I can, but I want us to take our time. We don’t have to rush things. I know we’ve both been waiting for this for so long, but choosing to be together doesn’t mean that everything has to change right away.”

Shouta nodded in agreement, putting his arm around Tsukiko again. “We’ll figure it out as we go.” He smiled, just looking at her, their struggle to find happiness finally over.
“I’m just happy to be with you.”

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